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Playbill for Further Mo'

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FROM ELIZA TO DESIREE
by Sheryl Flatow

[[image - black & white photograph of actress Sally Ann Howes]]
[[photographer credit: Carole Latimer]]
[[caption]] Howes finds her new role "fascinating"[/caption]]

When Sally Ann Howes made her unofficial American stage debut in *My Fair Lady* more than 30 years ago, the audience that had come expecting to see Julie Andrews was audibly disappointed at the announcement that this newcomer would be going on in her place. Howes, already a star in her native England, was scheduled to take over the role of Eliza Doolittle two nights later, and director Moss Hart felt it was important that she perform the part once before the critics came to see her.

"I did Julie's last matinee," recalls Howes, speaking by phone from London, "and the audience did not want to see me. I was totally unknown to them. I will remember that afternoon all my life, because the audience discovered me. The reception was thrilling, and I've been in love with New York ever since."

Howes has been absent from the New York theatre for 25 years, but she returns this month as Desiree Armfeldt in the New York City Opera production of Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's *A Little Night Music*. She considers the role "one of the best ever written," although it took her a few years to reach that conclusion.

"I saw Glynis Johns in the original New York production, and Jean Simmons in London," she relates, "but I didn't understand the woman (Desiree) and didn't feel I had any rapport with her. I enjoyed watching her, and I thought the show was wonderful, but I never saw myself doing it. Now I find her fascinating. She's gone along in her life and done what she's wanted without thinking about the future. And suddenly she realizes that what she's doing is quite empty. She meets this man she's loved for so long and thinks, 'This is what I want. Why do we always throw good things away?' Only maturity brings that kind of insight."

Howes believes that her own enlightenment was precipitated, in part, by the death of writer Christopher Adler, her adopted son. That tragedy prompted Howes to take a closer look at her life. "It's been six years, and I'm only just able to talk about his death," reflects Howes, who was married to Christopher's father, composer/lyricist Richard Adler (The *Pajama Game*, *Damn Yankees*). "When you have a tremendous personal blow in your life, it makes you look at things differently. I decided to take time off and examine everything. Although I've done some charity shows and a record (the cast album of Richard Rodgers' last musical, *I Remember Mama*, and *An Evening with Alan Jay Lerner*), I really haven't slogged in the theatre for the past six years. But when I perform now I'm aware that, in an extraordinary way, Christopher has given me a gift of going much deeper into the emotions of songs that I did before."

Until her self-imposed exile, Howes had worked virtually non-stop since the age of 12. She became a star in her first movie,



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Sally Ann Howes, who was Eliza 30 years ago in *My Fair Lady*, is now Desiree in NYC Opera's *A Little Night Music*.

[[image - black & white photograph of actress Sally Ann Howes in costume]]
[[photograph credit]] FRIEDMAN-ABELES
[[caption]] The actress as Eliza in *My Fair Lady* (1957) [[/caption]]

Thursday's Child, and continued to work in film throughout her teens. She wasn't sure that she wanted to pursue acting as a career until she was cast in a stage musical, Sandy Wilson's *Caprice*. "I got my first taste of applause, which absolutely astounded me," Howes remembers. "It made acting come alive. I never really went back to films, other than to make a couple of them when I was older.

One of her happiest theatre memories is her performance of Jennifer Rumson in the West End production of Lerner and Loewe's *Paint Your Wagon*. She co-starred with her father, Bobby Howes, who was well known in London as a "romantic star of light musical comedies, a matinee idol." Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe came to see the show, and it was at their suggestion that she was offered *My Fair Lady* on Broadway.

"It's the most glorious show ever," Howes asserts, "and Eliza is one of the greatest roles for a woman on the stage. Lerner and Loewe wrote wonderful women characters: strong and smart, but terribly feminine and romantic - and slightly on a pedestal. They respected women and made them beautiful."

Howes has appeared in four Lerner and Loewe shows. In 1963 she played Fiona in the City Center production of *Brigadoon* and was the first performer ever nominated for a Tony Award in a revival. (She also appeared in a telecast of the show opposite Robert Goulet.) And she later took on Guenevere in a Saint Louis Municipal Opera production of *Camelot*. "My life wouldn't be the same without Lerner and Loewe," she says.

Among Howe's other Broadway credits is *Kwamina* (1961), which is notable for the fact that she received hate mail and death threats for performing with an otherwise all-black cast. She last appeared in New York in *What Makes Sammy Run* and was also seen at the Los Angeles Music Center in *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*, before settling permanently in her native land.

"I'm very happily married to a Scot, and he lives and works in England," says Howes. "And I found that I also had interesting work to do here. I've done a little Shakespeare and a little Shaw, and I wasn't offered anything particularly exciting in New York. There aren't many wonderful parts for women my age."

A dearth of roles hasn't stopped Howes: this month she will unveil her one-woman show, *"From this Moment On."* at the Edinburgh Festival.

It's an evening comprised of songs and a few anecdotes that "express my feelings at this particular moment." On August 20, she will offer a preview at the John Drew Theater in the Hamptons, with the proceeds going to the Long Island AIDS Association.

"I perform out of sheer enjoyment now," says Howes. "I'm freer onstage, I take more chances, and I'm much closer to the audience. I don't have any barriers up. What I have done, what I have lived, what I have experienced - I don't hide behind anymore. I bring it all onstage."

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