

EMMANUEL, IVOR LEWIS (1927-2007), singer and actor

Name: Ivor Lewis Emmanuel
Date of birth: 1927
Date of death: 2007
Spouse: Malinee Samakarn Emmanuel (née Oppenborn)
Spouse: Patricia Anne Emmanuel (née Bredin)
Spouse: Jean Dorothy Emmanuel (née Beazleigh)
Child: Emily Margareta Emmanuel
Child: Siân Emmanuel
Child: Simon F. Emmanuel
Parent: Ivy Margareta Emmanuel (née Lewis)
Parent: Stephen John Emmanuel
Gender: Male
Occupation: singer and actor
Area of activity: Music; Performing Arts
Author: Trevor Herbert

Ivor Emmanuel was born at 3 Prince Street, Margam on November 7 1927, the son of Stephen John Emmanuel (1905-1941), a steelworker, and his wife Ivy Margareta (née Lewis, 1908-1941). He had a younger sister and brother, Mair and John. When he was less than a year old the family moved to Pontrhydyfen, the village in which the actor **Richard Burton** was born, and the two became friends. On May 11 1941 the Emmanuel family home was destroyed by a German bomb, presumably intended for one of the nearby large industrial sites. The entire family other than Ivor and his brother were killed; the two boys were then raised separately, Ivor by his Aunt Flossie.

On leaving school he worked in the Port Talbot steel works and in a coalmine, but his love of music and the stage had been ignited at an early age. He claimed he was inspired by the recordings of the great Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, which he listened to repeatedly on a wind-up gramophone. He won prizes in minor eisteddfodau, and joined the Port Talbot Amateur Operatic Society. It was there that he was initiated into the genre in which he was to excel.

Before his twenty-first birthday he left south Wales for London, lodged briefly with **Richard Burton** and auditioned for parts in musical theatre. He secured a place in the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company and spent a year performing the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. In October 1950 he travelled to New York on the *Mauretania*, describing himself in the passenger list as a singer. The trip was presumably aimed at securing parts on Broadway, but it was back in London's West End that he launched his career in musical theatre with major roles in Rodgers and Hammerstein shows including Oklahoma! and South Pacific in 1951 and The King and I in 1953. His good looks, easy-going stage presence and lyrical high-baritone voice soon made him a favourite with London audiences.

His eventual appearance on Broadway was brief and less remarkable. He was cast in a leading role in A Time for Singing (1966), an ill-judged musical adaptation of Richard Llewellyn's *How Green was My Valley*. Emmanuel's performances were praised and the show attracted some critical approval, but it closed after just 41 performances.

By this time Emmanuel's national celebrity in the UK was assured through his regular appearances in the weekly bilingual television show *Land of Song* (*Gwlad y Gân*) which ran from 1958. It was produced in Cardiff by the independent television company TWW and ran in direct competition to the BBC's *The Black and White Minstrel Show* on Sunday evenings. *Land of Song* was broadcast on the ITV network and was one of the first Welsh light entertainment television shows to attract a massive nationwide audience; much of its success was attributed to Emmanuel's personal popularity.

His career in movies was more limited, but one performance became famous. He was cast in a minor role as Private James Owen in the 1964 film *Zulu*. The film presented a somewhat ornamented version of how fewer than 150 British soldiers defended the Rorke's Drift mission station against four thousand Zulus in the South African Wars of 1879. It was co-produced by his friend and fellow Welshman **Stanley Baker**, who also played the leading role. In a memorable scene, Private Owen answered the chants of the Zulus by leading the exhausted British contingent in an impressively well-disciplined chorus of 'Men of Harlech'. The scene owed more to fiction than actuality, but it captured movie audiences, and Peter Stead, in his article on Emmanuel in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, has made the interesting point that this romanticised sequence contributed prominently to the popular place that *Zulu* came to occupy in Welsh cultural mythology.

Emmanuel married three times: Jean Dorothy Beazleigh, a fellow chorister with the D'Oyly Carte, in 1951; Patricia Anne Bredin in 1963; and finally in 1978 to Malinee Samakarn Oppenborn, who was 28 years his junior. There were two children from the first marriage (Siân and Simon), none from the second and one (Emily) from the third.

By the time of his third marriage he had retired to a hill-top house near the town of Malaga in Spain. His tranquillity was disturbed in 1991 when the Bank of Credit and Commerce collapsed and he was revealed as one of the Bank's highest profile clients: almost his entire life savings were invested in a single deposit. Friends rallied to his aid and a collection raised about half of his original investment. This sustained him, albeit in more modest terms, for the remainder of his life.

Ivor Emmanuel was ideally placed to be a musical theatre star. His voice was lyrical and characterful, but it did not have the natural power and range of expression for the operatic stage. His acting was convincing if limited in scope, but in musicals and operetta qualities of a different type, such as sweetness of tone and stage presence, take precedence. He possessed these in abundance.

He died of a stroke in Malaga, Spain on 20 July 2007 and was interred in the village of Benelmadena near his home.

Author

Trevor Herbert

Sources

Official biographical records

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Trevor Herbert and Peter Stead (eds), *Hymns and Arias: Great Welsh Voices* (Cardiff 2001)

The Times, 29 August 2007

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Ivor Emmanuel](#)

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