



Picture: Jamie Hanson

LADY IN WAITING

Emily Burke couldn't turn down the opportunity of singing with opera greats, even if it meant being on stage just after giving birth, writes **Lizzie Stafford**

By the time that you read this, opera singer Emily Burke may very well have given birth to her first child. And in two weeks – just a fortnight after her due date – she'll be on stage performing in Opera Queensland's production of *Macbeth*.

"I'll manage," she says, perched on a stool in her kitchen in the house she shares with her husband Nick Richards at Murarrie, on Brisbane's east.

"I'm not under any illusion that it's going to be how it would be if I was singing it now. But I've got a really supportive partner, got a really supportive family and, of course, it will be hard – of course I'll be exhausted, but it's not impossible.

"Everybody chooses how they want to manage themselves after that event and this is what I want to do, so I'll make it happen."

Part of her resolve to push through and perform so soon after the arrival of her baby comes from the chance to perform alongside big names in the opera world, including award-winning opera singers Michael Lewis and Elizabeth Whitehouse, who play the leading roles.

"Just to be alongside them is to me such a big deal," Burke says. "And actually ideal, because I have this manageable part (she plays Lady Macbeth's lady-in-waiting), but I get to be standing right next to them and

singing. It's not a significant part at all, if anything it's just fractionally bigger than something in the chorus, but it's sort of what it represents for me."

A part of her is also very aware of the trouble that plagues some female performers at the "baby age" – difficulty landing jobs, and then keeping them, for one.

"Because the work is in short supply, there are plenty of people that could replace you quite quickly," she says. "I don't begrudge them that because I've replaced people. That's the way it works.

"But I suppose there's a part of me that wants to . . . I don't want to say make a statement because it's everyone's individual choice how they handle it . . . but I guess there is a part of me that's determined to do it.

"I'm sure when I'm up at three o'clock in the morning and I've got to sing the next day I will be thinking, why didn't I choose to be that person?"

Burke got her start in opera on the ABC reality television show *Operatunity Oz* in 2006 after finishing a degree in music and working

in the publicity department at the Melbourne Theatre Company. The show allowed her to perform at the Sydney Opera House after she was one of three winners and prompted her to apply for Opera Queensland's Young Artist program, of which she was a part for two years.

"I feel like up here (in Brisbane) what I hoped for happened, which was that there was time . . . to learn lots of things. Whereas maybe if you were in a massive city and a big program with lots of people you wouldn't get that level of detail and opportunity."

After several understudy roles – "you're lucky to even get that in the beginning" – Burke began landing bigger roles, including the part of Despinna in *Così fan tutte* last year.

This year, as well as her role in *Macbeth*, she'll be playing Pitti-Sing in a new production of *The Mikado* and Frasquita in *Carmen*, both for Opera Queensland.

"Hopefully I'll have a bit more of a routine by the time those things come along," she laughs.

And what does the baby think of *Macbeth*?

"It's funny, people have said to play music to the baby and then, when it comes out, if it's feeling distressed . . . it will calm down if it hears that

music. But the problem is, I don't know if you know what the music in *Macbeth* is like, but it's not really soothing.

"I won't be surprised if (the baby) comes out and it hears all of that blood-curdling music and goes, 'Aahh now I can relax'.

"There are some top Cs in *Macbeth* that are high and loud and I half expect to give birth in that moment. But it seems freaked out, panicking, holding on for dear life," she jokes. "No, it doesn't seem to react, so maybe it'll be smart and be an engineer or something."

Macbeth, QPAC, April 13 and 14

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THEATRE & VISUAL ARTS

CHAMBER TUNES

Tickets go on sale April 10 for the prestigious Australian Festival of Chamber Music. To be staged in Townsville in July, this year it salutes the anniversaries of some remarkable classical composers. World-renowned pianist Piers Lane returns as artistic director and has added to the program two concerts in Cairns plus an excursion by boat for a beach concert on the uninhabited end of Orpheus Island. Get in fast for the popular Chefs in the North Dinner, hosted by Maggie Beer, which always sells out early on. afc.com.au

HOME VIDEO

Home 2 might look like a handycam-video diary or amateur travel documentary, but Swiss artist Olaf Breuning is just trying to make a statement against global presumptions in the art world. The film, which follows Breuning's pal Brian Keretter to Japan, Papua New Guinea, Switzerland and Ghana, will show in IMA's satellite space at Ksubi on James St in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley until April 18. ima.org.au

DRAGON TAMERS

Arena spectacular *How to Train Your Dragon* arrives in Brisbane on Wednesday. The show, inspired by the smash hit animated Dreamworks film *How to Train Your Dragon*, runs until April 1. ticketek.com.au

NOTHING LIKE A DAME

Barry Humphries has announced his alter ego Dame Edna Everage will hang up her sparkly boots in 2012 with a series of farewell shows around the country, including the Gold Coast from August 25 to 29. Tickets available now via pre-sale before general tickets go on sale Friday. showbiz.com.au

ARTIST INITIATIVE

Robyn Kirk chose three young artists to exhibit alongside her for her latest exhibition *White Canvas Select*, which runs until April 3. Among them are Gus Eagleton, who paints street scenes using aerosol and oil on canvas; and Simon Massey di Vallazza, who paints abstract figures with a primal energy on to paper and canvas. whitecanvas.tv

NORDIC CINEMA

GoMA is screening a selection of Scandinavian films, for free, until April 18. The program highlights some engaging and unconventional works from Nordic filmmakers and artists over the past decade. qaggoma.qld.gov.au