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THE MUSIC, WITH SYLVIE

The Guy with all the Gifts

August 29, 2020 August 29, 2020 Sylvie Louise Woods

Featured Image: *Woolworths Carols in the Domain*

Meet Ryan. He has won awards during a career in film-making, sung lead roles with our national opera company, and is now the recipient of the N.C.W Beadle scholarship in botany from the University of New England.

To receive a prestigious scholarship to study botany, after singing a lead role with our national opera company: how does one even achieve that?

Yeah, it is really exciting and really humbling, and I'm honoured that people have trusted me with delivering an output. Honestly, science has captured me like nothing else has captured me.

Is botany something you've always been interested in?

I was always a really science-ey kid. Growing up, I was obsessed with science and all things nature. I didn't want to do anything else. However, I got to school and there wasn't a great science department. I started to struggle and lose interest because the sciences just weren't encouraged.

By the time high school came around, the thing that was capturing my attention was playing bass and jazz, then I did the school musical, which was just so much fun and so exciting.

Where do you see yourself working within botany, after your studies?

I'd like to work in academia. However, of course academia is subject to the same precarious conditions that music is! It's cutthroat, the pay isn't tremendous. I'm well aware of the fact that academia is not necessarily where I'll wind up long-term. I could also be a consultant botanist.

When were you made aware of the precarity of being a musician?

My parents really didn't want me to go into the arts as a profession. They said, we've been there. It's hard. It's exhausting. Art changes when you have to rely on it to eat.

However one of the best things my parents did was encouraging whatever I was 'obsessed' with. They would then make whatever information I needed accessible to me. They nurtured my curiosities; I have a tendency to become fascinated by things.

Being a classical musician is a fundamentally precarious career: the competition is fierce, obviously stability is not something that you have. It really played with my head. My mum told me she would support me whatever I chose, but I have had to say to my mum – you know what, you were right. Art does change when you rely on it to eat!

I had an existential crisis when my wife and I were trying to buy a house, and they just wouldn't give us a loan. They said, can you just get another contract? And I was in the position where I just had to say, I'm sorry, that's just not how things work.

That said, I worked with possibly the best team ever at OA, and it was the most fun I've ever had, but it's an exhausting lifestyle, being a musician.

How do you see yourself as a multi-hyphenate? Will you 'juggle professions' and continue being a musician in the way you were?

Music is not necessarily my full-time thing anymore, no.

So I'm two weeks short of my 29th birthday, and I've had three careers, and I've had to start from scratch twice. With me, something will click and I'll become fixated on something else.

I think if music was still my main thing, I'd be a lot more stressed. My relationship with music is a lot better, because I'm free to make the music I want to make. So many things will come up in the vein of, 'hello, we've got this four-hour piece, we'll pay you \$150 dollars for it', and there has to come a point when you say no, I can't live like that.

However, whatever I've been working on previously becomes useful in something else.

Honestly, it's all accumulative: for instance, I did film and I made a decent living from that with corporate videos. I became used to how to run a business, and how to develop effective marketing content.

If you can have your time again, would you choose more 'sensible' ways of making a living?

No, I don't think I would. I've had some ridiculous experiences, done things I never thought I could achieve. I've sung around the world, solo at the Sydney Opera House, at Hamer Hall, and in front of hundreds of thousands of people on television. I never thought that could be my life. I've got great stories and incredible experiences that have all shaped me and my worldview. I don't think I would have this kind of work ethic and drive if I hadn't pursued a music career. Trying to pursue a classical music career certainly instills a sense of discipline.

As Samuel Beckett said, *fail better*.

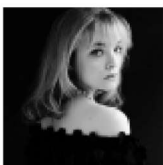
It's that idea of failure being a good thing. You have to fail and fail again to get any better.

If you could go back and give yourself a piece of advice at 18, what would it be?

When I was a younger person, I struggled with the idea of not getting it perfect the first time. I think a lot of kids who wind up at selective schools or labelled as 'gifted' become terrified of doing anything because they want it to be perfect.

I would tell my younger self to be happy with something less than perfect, happy with progress, and be content in the work and in the improvement.

You don't need to make your opus now.



Published by Sylvie Louise Woods

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