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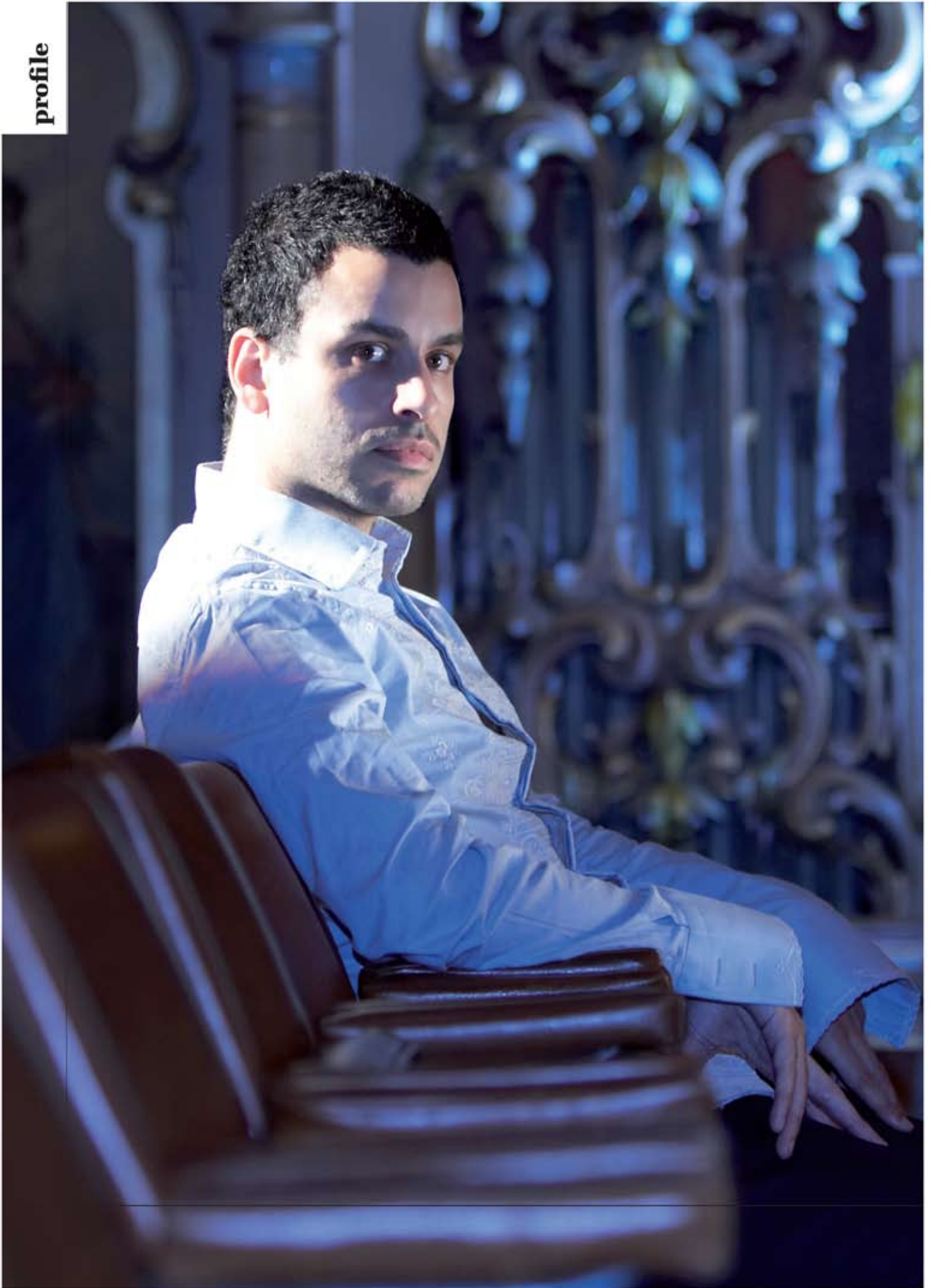
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profile



Troy Banarzi

Sarah Berry talks to the offbeat artist about sex dolls, corpses and frozen chocolate bars

Your work has been performed everywhere from London Zoo to the Tate Britain. How did your career start?

I started out as a classical pianist, but years and years of practising in a small room on my own really got me down, so I went travelling, and when I got back I decided to start writing music. My ambition was to get some of my music on TV, so I started working for a production company, making off-the-shelf music in a load of styles, from Bollywood to Classical Minimalism. This was my training, and it led to writing music for adverts, but after a while, the novelty of hearing my music on TV wore off, and I decided to take a new direction. My passion was always for contemporary art, and as my studio was in the middle of Hoxton, I decided to collaborate with some of the local artists, creating the music and sound for their performance art shows. One collaboration which really took off was with the artist Jonathan Allen, who dresses up as a gospel magician, and performs illusions which highlight the relationship between religion and stage magic. We were asked to perform at Zoo Art Fair, where I played my toy piano, and that landed us a gig at Tate Britain.

Tell us a bit about the concepts behind *Euphonika*...

It's an exploration of people's relationships with dolls, and the belief dolls can be imbued with life. There are examples throughout history of these Pygmalion-like statues, which were considered to be living beings. And they were often held in higher regard than humans. Some followers of the Hindu faith believe that their religious statues are real manifestations of God — and they give them daily baths, feed them and buy them new clothes. Then there's the Roman Catholic religion, with all the stories of Virgin Mary statues weeping tears of blood, or speaking and moving. There are also, of course, the sex doll owners, who see their dolls as real friends and partners. And not to forget Dennis Nilsen, the British serial killer from the Eighties, who shared the comparable fantasy of his dead victims being alive. He'd sometimes talk to them for hours, or exhume their corpses from underneath the floorboards, so they could watch television together.

Do you consider yourself an artist, a musician, a supermodel or a hybrid of all of the above?

When I create a piece, I start with a concept,

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The voices are actors reading the replies I got, all encouraging me to indulge in my fantasies

an idea, and then I think about how to express that idea most efficiently. Although it often involves music, it doesn't always, so I suppose I'd see myself primarily as an artist, with musical skills that I can draw upon if needed.

If you weren't doing this, what would you be doing to pay the bills?

I'd probably be an antiques dealer, or some sort of entrepreneur.

You base some of the music on Victorian freak shows. What freaks you out?

The things that freak most people out tend to fascinate me. My latest obsession is false glass eyes, which I've noticed you can get on eBay for a few pounds each. When I was young I used to wish I had a glass eye — I thought it would look beautiful.

You use testimonials from sex doll users. Where did you get these, and are they genuine?

I spent a lot of time looking for people who had what they considered to be real relationships with dolls. I advertised in the paper, and sent e-mails to everyone I knew, asking them to ask around. Eventually I stumbled upon a website forum, which was run by doll lovers and dedicated to their very realistic sex dolls. Here I found a bunch of men who were absolutely devoted to their dolls, living with them and caring for them as real lovers. Unfortunately, when I introduced myself to the forum, explaining that I wanted to do

some interviews, they were very defensive and I was eventually banned. So I rejoined, posing as a new doll lover, confused with my feelings, and asked for everyone else's opinions. The recorded voices in *Euphonika* are actors reading the replies I got, all encouraging me to indulge in my fantasies, and ensuring me that we were right and the rest of the world was definitely wrong.

What inspired you to write about sex dolls?

It was the relationship that certain people had with their sex dolls, relationships that went much further than just sex — these men actually believed their dolls were alive.

Have you/would you ever use a sex doll?

I've never used a sex doll, or thought of buying one.

What makes you feel sexy?

A good night's sleep.

Do you have any interesting or obscure fetishes?

Do frozen Time Out bars count?

Who do you admire?

Anyone who does their own thing, and follows what they believe in. I tend to admire people's attitudes more than what they do.

In *Mother Machine* a monkey's mother is replaced with a machine. Do you think

**machines will one day replace parents?
Or take over the world?**

I hope not. The words in *Mother Machine* are from Dr Harry Harlow, a prominent 1950s psychologist. Before all of his research, it was considered that showing too much affection to children would be detrimental to their mental health. So, although his experiments were cruel and unethical, they did at least show that it's better to be loving when it comes to childcare.

You use a passage from Dennis Nilsen's journals where he undresses his dead victim. If you could kill anyone in the world and never get caught, who would be your victim?

I can't think of anyone I'd want to kill, apart from maybe British singers who sing in an American accent...

Do you believe in life after death?

I don't know what happens when we die — I don't believe in life after death, but I'm always hoping someone will prove me wrong. It's one of the themes of the piece I'm working on at the moment, *The Missing*.

Did you learn anything interesting about yourself whilst making this album?

I learned that the line between fantasy and reality is always blurred — for me, for the subjects of *Euphonika* and for everyone else. I'd say that as a species we're firmly rooted in fantasy.

What's the strangest thing that you've come across in your research?

I came across some very dark stuff while researching this project. One of the most

intriguing subjects was men who dress up as dolls. They spend hours wrapping themselves in full body latex suits and applying immaculate make-up.

Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions and if so what are they?

Yes, many — to live in a church, to organise the world's longest Chinese whisper, to write the score for a Tim Burton movie, to record a solo piano album... Where do I stop?

What's the most extreme thing you have ever done?

I'm not saying — but it was a lot of fun and the door was locked!

What's the most extreme thing you would like to do, but haven't yet?

Hmmm, that's something to think about...

What's next for Troy Banarzi?

I'm currently working on *The Missing*, a multimedia piece for the East Wing Collection at the Courtauld Institute of Art. It's my most ambitious work to date, and will be performed in the courtyard of London's Somerset House. It explores the themes of missing people, death, spiritual mediums and the afterlife. The performance will start with a slow marching choir of robed monks singing a requiem for London, and will include giant ethereal projections of a woman floating in space and a surround sound audio installation, which I'm creating with sound artist, Scanner.

Euphonika is available from itunes.com and selected record shops. For more information about *Troy* visit www.banarzi.com.