

From Shields boy to Jersey boy

After leaving school with one O-level, North Shields-born Ryan Molloy is now a musical star who has just sung with Barbra Streisand and is about to meet Frankie Valli, the icon he's playing on stage in a record-breaking West End run. But, as he tells BARBARA HODGSON, he hasn't forgotten his roots and would snap up a chance to work up North

AS Frankie Valli flies into London for a gig tonight – the first of two at the Royal Albert Hall – his alter ego will be ready to meet him.

Ryan Molloy, from North Shields, performs as the American legend six times a week on stage in award-winning musical *The Jersey Boys* and, now in his sixth year, is awaiting official confirmation that he's set the record as the longest-ever lead in a West End show.

"We're checking on it now," he tells me. "Some people have been in shows longer, in ensembles and supporting roles, but I've done over 2,000 shows now as a lead."

The figure is actually 212 higher than that, and climbing all the time. So you

could say Ryan knows the frontman of 60s sensation *The Four Seasons* – whose life story is the subject of the musical – better than most and he's looking forward to catching up with the 79-year-old singer at the concert.

"We met before, when he came to see the show for the first time, but this will be the first time hearing his voice live," he says.

Valli's powerful falsetto is something that Ryan, now living in the capital, has mastered, winning him an Olivier Award nomination.

He learned it first-hand in Nashville where *The Four Seasons'* Bob Gaudio "told me all the old stories and put me through my paces to get that old sound. It's not just about

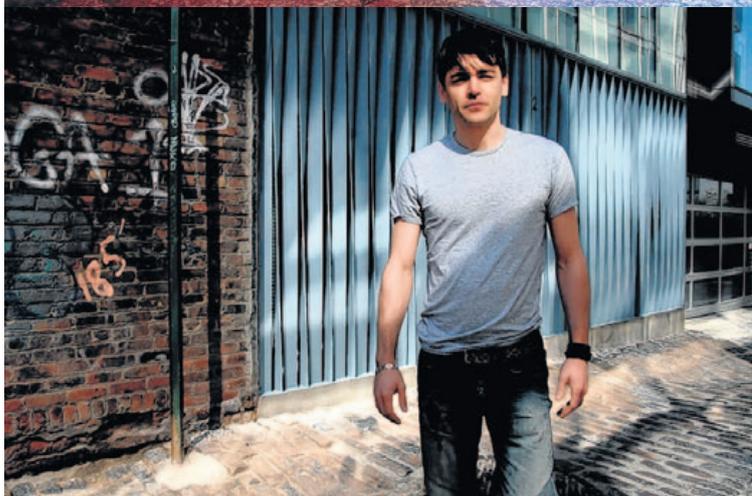
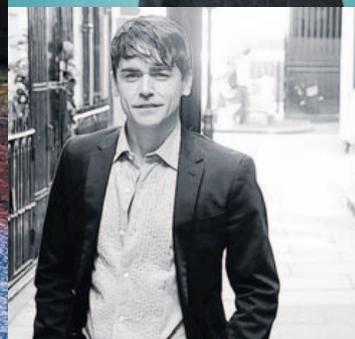
Continued
 16 >>



STAGE SHOW Ryan starring in The Jersey Boys



LEGEND
Frankie



FACE TO FACE Ryan, left, meets Frankie Valli



From **«15**

copying but my interpretation of it". Ryan knew he'd got it right when he first met the main man and received what he calls the "face touch".

"He touched my face in the Italian way - a bit like a Mafia seal of approval! My brother got a great photo."

But he's still "quite nervous" about seeing him again.

"You always are when you're meeting a living legend like that. I've just met my hero, Barbra Streisand, which was incredible."

That came about earlier in the month, just hours before the London date of Streisand's European tour when her stage manager - a friend of Ryan's - learned that supporting singers due to join her finale could not perform.

"It was a spur of the moment thing," Ryan said. "He called me up and said they needed a tenor to fill in at the end of the show."

It was a Saturday and Ryan just had time to arrange for his understudy to cover for him in Jersey Boys - "When Barbra calls you've got to go!" he jokes - then a quick rehearsal before he found himself on stage at the O2 accompanying the star, her son and sister in singing Make Our Garden Grow from Candide, backed by an orchestra and choir.

"The beauty and sincerity of Barbra's voice is incredible," he says and again he got "the touch" - which can be seen in the video clip on his website ryanmolloy.com

"She touched my shoulder in the middle of the song and I'm thinking, 'Am I in a dream world?'"

They'd shared a few words at rehearsal, too, he says, impersonating her accent: "Hey Ryan, thanks for doing this'. I was like, 'Any time! Is there anything I can do? A cup of tea or coffee?'"

With a second concert to follow on

the Monday and given free tickets as a thank you for helping out, he was able to arrange for his proud 75-year-old mother Winnie to come down from North Tyneside to see it. It was hugely exciting for them both.

"I was raised by my mother on a strict

“You're going out on stage and baring your soul. That has to be nurtured. The benefits are massive.**”**

diet of Barbra Streisand and musicals and she's supported me all these years.

"It was great to get her down and see me walk out on stage.

"She was sitting there in fantastic seats - a couple of chairs away from Adele and behind was Gwyneth Paltrow. She's worked hard all her life and here she was in the elite set."

It was his mother who gave him "her last £250 in travellers' cheques" when at 19 he decided to join his sister who was in LA.

There he furthered his theatre and arts training.

A creative peg in a square hole, he'd left school at 16 with one O-level and recalls: "School was very difficult for me.

"If I'd had more art and drama in my life it would have given me more confidence to stick with things like maths and science.

"I was quite hyperactive. My energy

was all over the place and it's basically down to channeling."

From primary school in North Shields he attended Marden Bridge Middle School where he discovered drama.

"I felt good about myself, full of enthusiasm. But when I got to high school I wasted all this energy.

"There were not that many opportunities. Or maybe there were some and they were hush-hush. It's got to be made easy for you and available.

"You're going out on stage and baring your soul. That has to be nurtured. The benefits are massive. It gives an outlet for surplus energy and the confidence to do all sorts of things, whether or not you want to be an actor or a singer."

It's something he feels so strongly about he'd like to help out in the North East.

"I come back as much as I can," he says, "and I'm interested in coming



**LEADING
ROLE**
Ryan Molloy

back and going to some schools, meeting some kids, doing some talks. I'd love to.

"It would be great to give something back to my community."

It was in South Gosforth that Ryan had his first vocal training, which stood him in good stead during periods when he struggled to find work.

Such a time came when he returned from America to take up a record deal in London.

"It lasted four years. I had a great record company and a great manager, but it just didn't work out. I had to go back on the dole - after all that achievement."

That's when relying on training is vital in keeping vocally and mentally strong, he says.

"You really need to be mentally tough and believe in yourself - going back to the basics and picking up the pieces. You need those building blocks. If you haven't got them, it's kind of over."

While his CV covers other hit musicals such as Jerry Springer: The Opera and Godspell, plus support singer for such names as Pussycat Dolls and Frankie Goes to Hollywood, Ryan is under no illusions.

Now 40, he says: "In this industry you get lost a lot. Nothing is an overnight success. There's nothing like back-to-back success. You just go from job to job. After Jersey Boys, who knows what's next?"

But that massively successful run at the Prince Edward Theatre shows no sign of letting up yet.

The role is a privilege to play, he says, but it's intense and hard on both mind and body.

"People say it must be like being on auto-pilot now, but it's not at all. My brain is always alive to everything."

"It's such an unnatural thing to pretend to be somebody else for that amount of time. Daniel Day Lewis does it 24 hours a day! I've got to have those

moments in my life when I leave at night and get back to myself. I keep my interests going - my music, my vocal training, which I do every night.

"It's really important I remember where I'm coming from and keep my feet on the ground."

With that in mind, Ryan would welcome a chance to use his local accent again if work comes up back home.

"There is a real passion up there for the arts," he says. "Everyone's experience can educate another. I could bring what I've got to the party and they could educate me back. That's what art is."

"I love strong drama and Northern drama is great. I'd love an opportunity to do that and use my real accent once in a while."

"I've used an American accent for so many years, but I can still do it. It's down a couple of octaves and people say how sexy it is. I feel like Sean Bean - all of a sudden I sound like a real man! - so I'd like an opportunity to do Geordie."

Columnist

A journey into hell with a party bag at the end of it

I AM writing this in a state of shock unlikely to be matched unless I witness my own house burn down, or my new car disappear over a cliff without my mother-in-law inside it.

It all started innocently enough at 6.30 last Tuesday morning, when my son Charlie joined me at the breakfast table. I wished him a happy birthday, but he apparently felt no interest in that.

"Daddy," he announced, "I need to tidy up the conservatory and I need you to help me."

I was astonished. Hitherto, Charlie's commitment to doing the reverse of tidying up any room he enters has been pretty much total.

I finally persuaded him to open his cards and presents instead, but then he started banging on about the conservatory again.

So his mother and I naturally asked him the reasons for his sudden conversion.

"So it's tidy for when all my friends come round for my party."

"But that's not until Sunday," we pointed out.

Cue floods of tears. Charlie's, not ours.

The party continued to dominate conversation for the remainder of last week, during which it grew in my mind from a vague and distant warning in the long-range weather forecast to an imminent destructive tornado.

We had decided, foolishly, to operate on the assumption of decent weather and rely on the kids to make their own entertainment running around the garden. To assist, I laid out an old battery-powered ride-on train, kindly donated by a cousin, which proved no longer to work.

We also hired a small bouncy castle, delivered by a large man in a Citroen Picasso who insisted on taking his instructions from my wife and referred to me dismissively as "Grandad".

Usually this not uncommon faux pas at least secures me an apology and discount from the trader concerned, though on this occasion only the former proved to be forthcoming.

When my contemporaries started breeding 30 or more years ago I often remarked that I had no plans to follow their example as I did not

like children. This invariably elicited the shiny-eyed response, "Ah, but your own are different!"

I will now concede that this is true, up to a point. I can just about bear to take my two out in public together, and I do not glare and tut anything like as much as I used to do when I find myself next to other people's noisy brats on a train or in a pub.

However, I can also report that a room full of four-year-olds is, without doubt, completely unbearable. Give me a chanting mob of bloodthirsty fanatics any day.

After numerous cancellations I think that only about eight of them actually turned up, but it might as well have been 800. And they were in my house for less than three hours, but it seemed more like three months.

I had been enjoined to put Charlie's Hornby train set into full working order for their entertainment and they descended on it like a plague of locusts, snapping signals, ripping off couplings and testing the track to literal destruction.

Worst of all, their own parents just beamed indulgently throughout.

By the time they had sung "Happy birthday", eaten their cake and sloped off with their party bags, I was a broken man. I slept for a solid 12 hours afterwards.

I recalled my elderly mother's reaction when a nephew came round to show off his new son. She seemed distracted throughout, and after my cousin left I asked what had been on her mind.

"All I could think," she replied, "was that if that child broke something, I would scream!"

I found that amusing at the time. Now I know just how she felt.

We are supposed to be looking for a new home nearer Charlie's first school, but I am beginning to think that we should actually look for two of them, including a nice little flat in sheltered accommodation for me.

Failing that, perhaps we could run to something with a granny annex.

Given stout locks, soundproofing and an ample supply of bookshelves, that might just about do for "Grandad" until the men in white coats come to take me away once and for all.

www.blokeinthenorth.com

Keith Hann

