

arts

# 'Apparently nuns wouldn't have long nails. I have to cut them next week'

Alexandra Burke still has the X factor: now she's in *Sister Act*. By **Lisa Verrico**

Alexandra Burke is rummaging through her handbag, searching for her phone, eager to show me a photo. "Oh, babe, you gotta see this," she squeals. "I'm so glad you asked." What I had asked Burke is how hot does she look in a habit. The *X Factor* winner, best known of late for her leading role in the hit musical *The Bodyguard*, has a huge new job on her (fabulously manicured) hands. As of next week she will be Deloris Van Cartier, aka Sister Mary Clarence, the fake nun made famous by Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*, the 1990s film comedy since turned into a stage musical.

A new touring production by the Curve theatre, Leicester, has bagged Burke straight from a wildly successful two-year stage stint as Rachel Marron in *The Bodyguard* (a role synonymous with Whitney Houston). In musicals, if no longer pop, the 27-year-old Londoner is hot property.

As a nun, she doesn't let the temperature drop. In the selfies she took the previous evening, when she tried on her habit, she's much more naughty than nice, a winking, up-for-anything nun who will have husbands insisting that their wives are in need of a night at the theatre.

"You're the first person to see these," says Burke, which is borne out by her manager, sitting with us in a café opposite the theatre, who explodes into laughter at the photos, and Curve's company manager, who asks to be sent a few for promotional purposes. Hang on, though, we're ten days away from previews and Burke has only just got the habit?

"I only had my first fitting yesterday," she says. "My first outfit's not even started, but they work fast here, hand-making all of the costumes. Next week we do dress rehearsals. So I've not tried dancing in the habit, but I know I'm gonna sweat so much."

Bright-eyed, fresh-faced and talking 19 to the dozen even at 10am on a blisteringly hot day, Burke seems to be taking the challenge in her stride. The same certainly can't be said of the production's director and choreographer, *Strictly Come Dancing*'s Mr Nasty, Craig Revel Horwood, whom I spot while waiting for Burke to arrive. He looks, well, crumpled — unkempt, exhausted, slouching outside the theatre smoking a fag. When I

approach and introduce myself, he practically bolts, waving away my request for a two-minute chat by telling me to contact the PR.

A veteran choreographer whose credits include *Miss Saigon* and *Sunset Boulevard*, Revel Horwood has overhauled *Sister Act* for Curve, having the Broadway book tweaked and the score updated and hiring a cast of actor-musicians who will play instruments on stage. As for Sister Mary, she's gone "ghetto".

"When I first met Craig, he told me he wanted my role to be ghetto," says Burke. "I said, 'Whoopi wasn't ghetto' and he said, 'I know, but I want you to be'. So I watched half of the film and stopped because that isn't my part. I also saw some clips of the Broadway production on YouTube and

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even that looked very different. Our nuns really can dance. I told Craig they're not meant to be amazing dancers and he said: 'Well, mine will be. All of them, darling! That man, I'm telling you, he's gold!'

Burke isn't as enamoured when I mention that in a recent interview Revel Horwood revealed that she would be playing the triangle and a mini-banjo on stage.

"What, Craig said that?" she shrieks. "He needs to calm down. If he thinks I'm playing them, he's got another think coming. He did ask me to play the piano, but when I tried..."

Burke holds out her hands and wiggles her fingers, at the tips of which are talons painted shocking pink. "He told me to cut my nails first. Apparently nuns wouldn't have long nails. I said, 'Dolores would — she's ghetto!' Yeah, I'm having them cut — next week."

As a child, Burke quit piano to grow her nails — "Awful excuse, I know," she sighs — and although she took up lessons again recently, she admits her skills are basic. On stage she also plays what she



describes as "one of them shaky-shaky things". A shaker? "Nah, it's round." A tambourine? "Right, a tambourine!" She laughs.

What Burke won't have an issue with is the singing. She is a powerhouse vocalist who still ranks as one of *The X Factor*'s most successful contestants.

Her Christmas 2008 single, a controversial cover of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*, sold more than 1 million copies, her debut album, *Overcome*, was a Brits-nominated, double-platinum-seller that spawned six hit singles, and her rendition of *I Will Always Love You*, *The Bodyguard*'s roof-raising finale, was widely hailed as being as good as Houston's. Nor should she struggle with the comedy — she's a hoot. Revel Horwood has said that she's more like Sister Mary —



"A wannabe diva who comes from the street," as he puts it — than Marron, and he's right. Far from being a stage-school brat, Burke was one of four siblings brought up by her mostly single mum, the singer Melissa Bell, who fleetingly fronted a past-their-peak Soul II Soul and sang backing vocals for artists including Houston.

Bell craved fame for Burke, entering her in competitions and taking her to auditions. Aged 12, Burke appeared on the BBC talent show *Star For a Night*, losing to Joss Stone. Her mum got Stevie Wonder to call her and took her to meet Richard Branson, a label boss at the time.

"He turned me down!" says Burke of Branson. "At 16 I was taken to play him some demos. He sent me this handwritten letter, bless him, saying he thought I was great, but I needed development. I said: 'Mummy, if he believed in me, he'd give me a development deal.' She told me that's not how it works."

## “Overnight I went from singing in pubs to having the biggest single

The *X Factor* saved her and because of this Burke won't say a word against it. "I've had people come up and say, 'The *X Factor*'s so over, you're past it now.' I say, 'Past what? That show gave me my life. I'm my own person, but if it wasn't for *The X Factor* I would never have got a record deal. Darling, I knocked on doors for years and was told to go away."

Yet sudden fame came at a price that Burke still appears to be paying. The assumption that she moved into musicals because her pop career was on the slide after her second album bombed isn't quite right. In fact she turned the role down when it was first offered to her, believing she couldn't do it justice, and moved to New York for a year, where she

took a life-coaching course to rebuild her confidence.

"I'm not saying I couldn't handle success," insists Burke, "but it was a lot to take on. I went from singing in pubs in Romford to having the biggest single of the year overnight. I was shipped off to LA by myself, aged 20, to record 100 songs in two months. I didn't know who anyone was. I'm such a family person, I wanted my mum or my sister around. Life coaching was remarkable for me. It helped me accept my self-worth. I returned a changed person, ready to take on the world."

So Burke joined *The Bodyguard*, first in the West End, then on tour, missing only two performances in two years. However, when she was offered *Sister Act* last autumn, she turned that down too, thinking the role wouldn't suit her. Hearing the soundtrack changed her mind. "Straight away," she says, "I called the producer and said it would be a privilege to sing these songs."

Yet still she talks of her terror at meeting the other cast members, of how often she's been told by the team to believe in herself more, and of the promise she elicited from the producer, whom she instructed: "If I make your show crap, you have to let me go." Shrugging, she says: "I struggle when I'm out of my comfort zone. It's not like my own tour when I'm in charge."

Music, she insists, remains her priority and she is working on a third album, songs for which she has been road-testing on the private-party circuit on which she still plays. Yet she is well aware that *Sister Mary* is the role that took the Londoner Cynthia Erivo to Broadway, where she recently won a Tony award for *The Color Purple*.

"Oh. My. God. Do you know how much I love her!" squeals Burke. "She is a massive inspiration, even though she's younger than me."

In fact, Erivo is 18 months older.

So would Burke do Broadway? "In a heartbeat," she says, and you hope she means it.



Alexandra Burke as Sister Mary Clarence in *Sister Act* and, far left, in *The X Factor* in 2008

*Sister Act* is at Curve, Leicester (0116 242 3595), until August 13. Then touring until November 26. Details: [sisteractuktour.co.uk](http://sisteractuktour.co.uk)