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PROFILE : MONIQUE SASSON WAKELIN



MONIQUE SASSON WAKELIN

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IRREGULAR W

Advocate for the coexistence of a commercial and artistic life

Wakelin Property Advisory sits within the blue chip suburb of Kew. This is the thick of suburbia, birthplace of Barry Humphries and part inspiration for his parodies that scarified suburban smugness and complacency. An older Melbourne is evident here in graceful properties and plane trees lining the streets, their wintry bones extending into the air, evincing an elegant kind of stasis. The offices are located in a nondescript concrete building, reassuringly devoid of the ostentation usually associated with its industry. Melburnians are preoccupied with property, along with sport and food; the theatre of the auction is more frequented than traditional theatre spaces. But the intent behind this business is to provide a rational voice of independence and assessment to cut out the hype generated by real estate agents. At the heart of the organisation is Monique Sasson Wakelin, an energy force whose uncompromising standard for hard work and excellence counters any ideas of complacency. As a new corporate sponsor, she has recently engineered a relationship with the Victorian Opera and her own company, something which took several years to cultivate, and which speaks of her devotion to opera, cultural expression and her belief in the significance of the arts to society.

Sasson Wakelin greets me in her office, early afternoon light streaming in, on one of those winter days that descend in a blue blaze but leave those outside breathless with the air's fridity. She is as petite and poised as one would expect of an ex-ballerina but any sense of fragility suggested by her size is dispelled by the handshake she offers. It is strong and direct with businesslike brevity. She is at ease in the limelight and tells, with great proficiency, the story of how she came to be where she is professionally. It is a polished performance but one is left with the impression that she is reticent when it comes to the directly personal.

To understand Sasson Wakelin's fascination for the opera in particular and the arts in general, one would have to excavate an earlier life, one never far from the surface, of a girl who trained to be a ballerina with diligence and commitment, always aspiring to succeed only to be thwarted by an injury in her early twenties. Animated with purposefulness, she tells of her dedication to her company and a lifelong engagement with the arts.

The formidable Maria Callas once declaimed, 'You are born an artist or you are not. And you stay an artist, dear, even if your voice is less of a fireworks. The artist is always there.' It is an assertion, with its fierce truth and undertones of determination, which might be ascribed to Sasson Wakelin. It is certainly a statement with which she concurs.

For although she has lived a successful professional life over the past three decades, she has continued a very corporeal engagement with the arts. It took "a significant illness" for her to arrive at the realisation that if she "did not re-establish some kind of creative, artistic pursuit to balance up the hard work . . . that is required to establish and run a business and do it successfully and do it well, that I was going to be in serious trouble." This second artistic endeavour, the study of voice, has revealed itself to be not wholly unconnected from her former *métier* as dancer, for it too relies upon strength and fortitude of body, albeit in a different capacity.

Under the guidance of soprano Merlyn Quaife, referred to by critics as 'fearless' and 'adventurous' – two adjectives which could very well be transferred to her student – Sasson Wakelin has been "nourishing her soul" with singing lessons. Her admiration of her tutor extends beyond her being an 'international star'; she refers to her as "extraordinary, not just as a teacher, but



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as a mentor and a friend". It was under Quaife's invitation, then a Board member of Victorian Opera, that Sasson Wakelin found herself part of the audience for their *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (*The Coronation of Poppea*) in 2008. Green eyes alight, she recounts the experience as being both 'beautiful' and 'restrained'.

It was early days then for the Victorian Opera, established in 2006 by conductor and operatic adventurer Richard Gill. Part of Gill's mission has been to make opera accessible, from ticket prices to the audiences he has courted, including those of small children for *Cinderella*, a pantomime he wrote earlier this year. Under his guidance, the company has fostered strong connections with the world of theatre often attracting acclaimed directors. New work has been commissioned, including the controversial but largely well-received *Midnight Sun*, written by Louis Nowra and based on the Maria Korp case. It would be justified to perceive the state opera company as disregarding the status quo.

Not that the popular is always rejected. The inclusion of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* in this year's programme is recognition of the joy inherent in traditional comic opera. As Sasson Wakelin genially claims, "everyone knows it. It's popular, it's accessible. Who can't sit through an evening of Mozart?" It is therefore fitting that her company will be lending its support primarily to this production.

Captivated by the Victorian Opera's earlier production of Monteverdi, she then thought, "this is something I'd love to be a part of somehow or other" but it took some time for it to crystallise. Other than appearing on stage, "I mean obviously I'm nowhere near good enough to audition for a company like that", discussions with Managing Director Lucy Shorrocks led to the discovery that "their audiences and our clients have a very similar profile. So I thought, OK, here is a lovely way to honour the creative and the artistic and for both organisations to benefit from each other's contacts". And yet, to understand this sponsorship solely in terms of commercial benefits would be to belie a fundamentally more nuanced motivation.

For although Sasson Wakelin is committed to being 'commercially realistic' and only doing what is 'viable', her mindset is akin to that of patrons of old. "I think when we look back in history, how do we chart the progress of society, what is the legacy that different societies, cultures, eras, leave behind? We leave it behind in our music, in our art, in our political history. Those are the things that ultimately give us an insight into what life was like."

Such terminology renders the arts as integral to a society's future as well as to its present. It is a heady argument for supporting the arts, for it entices with the possibility of casting oneself as a shaper of history – a role not generally to be found articulated in the mission statement of a small business.

Being rendered ineffective as a dancer, Sasson Wakelin recast herself as a teacher of English Literature and Drama. A highlight of this time was introducing her class to Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. Even then she had an instinct for phrasing things to her benefit, selling this dense highly poetic radio play to the teenage girls as being 'about sex and drinking'.

But teaching was not for her; she felt constricted by a 'systemic straightjacket'. Her independent spirit searched for something else and found it in public relations. In 1995 she embarked upon a major turning point, having decided with Richard Wakelin to mark out a more entrepreneurial path by starting up their own property investment advisory firm. It was a risky move, as are all beginnings of new businesses, and it's obvious that the words 'audacity' and 'guts' are highly valued in Sasson Wakelin's personal narrative. Since then,

they have been joined by a third director, Paul Nugent, and the company, with its current staff of ten, has cultivated a public profile that extends considerably beyond their size.

Perhaps not immediately recognisable to passersby, her name has become familiar to a large Australian demographic searching for independent and sound property advice. She is contributor to a plethora of national news sources. Behind this industriousness lies a belief in the attainment of success through creative adaptation. "If you don't embrace change and you don't look forward to it," Sasson Wakelin says, "I think you're in deep trouble both as an individual and as a business. You've got to have a number of different strings to your bow."

To consider Sasson Wakelin's singing as a mere dalliance would be foolish, for anything she takes on is approached with a potent mix of seriousness and determination. Arduousness seems to be a necessary inducement for her to engage with a project. She attributes this disposition to her childhood past of rigorous ballet training and to being a 'vilified' redhead in the dance studio, her fellow dancers obviously not devotees of Moira Shearer. This strength of character has certainly shaped her professional life and coloured choices in her artistic one. A love for the Baroque has led her to approach the songs of Monteverdi and the challenging Handel.

Exposed to Handel's music from a young age by her father, a classical music enthusiast, she cites listening to a recording of his *Music for the Royal Fireworks* as "cementing a love for classical music". The composer and Sasson Wakelin share something other than their veneration for music. English conductor Harry Christophers terms Handel as 'ever the businessman . . . he saw the opportunity in England, a country bereft of opera . . . and he never stopped being a man of opera, even when he started writing *oratorios*'. One senses that commitment to her company and to that of its new partner, Victorian Opera, is steadfast and that both have done well to find such an ardent proponent and ambassador.

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