

Forties sweetheart

Fiona Harrison promises to 'wow' her Liberation audiences with a unique brand of wartime entertainment that really does capture the spirit of the 1940s. 24SE7EN's Martyn Tolcher catches up with the multi-talented performer as she prepares for her Channel Islands tour

FIONA Harrison has been waiting and hoping for 10 years to take centre stage for the Liberation Celebrations, and for the chance to belt out all the old wartime favourites, like 'We'll Meet Again' and 'White Cliffs of Dover', to an appreciative island audience.

"I saw an artist doing 40s songs in Blackpool, and she was absolutely thrilled because she'd been booked to perform in the Channel Islands for the 50th anniversary," says Fiona.

"I thought to myself 'wow, what a wonderful opportunity - I don't suppose anyone would ever ask me to that?' Now, 10 years on, here I am in her shoes, so it's really wonderful that the wheel of fortune has turned in my favour."

A classically trained soprano singer, actress, dancer and comedienne, Fiona puts heart and soul into her performances. And as well as sounding the part, she has gone that extra mile to look and feel the part too.

"I sculpture my figure so that it's right for that period," Fiona explains. "I do lots of exercises to try and highlight the curves of my waist, rather than going for the 'skinny mini' look which has been quite fashionable for quite a long time. I go much more for a curvaceous figure."

Fiona even has the look that is just right for the wartime era. "If you put me in a 40s uniform my face works with it," she says. "I just seem to fit very well in that particular era and I've always felt more at home in nostalgic roles. I'm much more at home in long dresses than Reebok trainers and track suit bottoms!"

And when it comes to singing? "When it comes to singing, I don't actually try to sound like anyone else. I've got a voice of my own and I try and stamp my own identity on the songs that I sing, but I do spend a lot of time trying to get the image and the look right."

You can tell straight away from the way she wears her hair that Fiona is a perfectionist. "I've got shoulder length hair and, of course, when one's in uniform, you always roll it up off the neck. It took a bit of practice to try to get it right but hopefully I've got it right now."

Fiona has a vast wardrobe of authentic looking uniforms from which to choose at her home in Bedfordshire. "I don't really model myself on any particular singer as such, but I do spend a lot of time looking through old books and at pictures of old film stars of the time."

Asked whether she prefers performing in uniform to performing in beautiful dresses, Fiona replies: "I enjoy them all really because I'm able to express myself in different ways. The 40s uniform ones are great fun because they really encourage the audience to join in with the music, so I enjoy that, but I also enjoy the glamour side because every girl likes to wear a pretty frock."

"I can do more sophisticated music, which is lovely to do, because it shows both sides of me, and I can also throw in the

odd operatic aria as well."

Fiona embarked on her classical singing training at the age of 16 at London's Royal Academy of Music, and at that time she had no idea that she would develop into a 'forties sweetheart'.

"When I first started out I really didn't know anything about the music of that particular period. I was born on 'Planet Operetta' so I didn't know a lot of the popular music of the 40s."

It all began for Fiona in 1995 when the country was marking the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two. "My agent suggested I learned a few songs to coincide with the 50th anniversary so I went away and went through some old copies of sheet music. The more I looked at the music of the period the more I started to fall in love with it. It just seemed to work for me and, really, what the whole entertainment business is about is finding a niche in the market that works for you."

Having found her niche, Fiona says she was amazed at how the whole wartime nostalgia thing took off throughout the land. "What did surprise me was how many people of my own age group are interested in the 1940s, but equally, when you start to delve into the history of the musical side, it doesn't surprise me, because the music is so rich and so full of great tunes and great lyrics. They are also great 'sing a long' numbers that you don't really get in today's world and society, sadly," Fiona adds. "They just don't seem to write them like that any more, to coin a phrase."

Apart from the music, though, Fiona has plenty more to offer to her nostalgia hungry audiences. As well as her fine and powerful soprano voice, she has a rare gift for dance and comedy, which she uses to great effect in her one-woman shows.

"I got my Equity card through performing Joyce Grenfell sketches, because it was something I could go out and do on my own," Fiona explains, adding that her hit theatre show 'We'll Meet Again' started off as a cabaret show, before it was developed for the theatre.

For her island performances, Fiona is singing cabaret style, and she is looking forward to playing to a very mixed audience.

"I started by performing for Women's Institutes, and I really set out to play for the 55 plus age group, but this year in particular I am playing to a much younger age group. People of my own age and younger people, who want to hear me sing because the 40s are really very 'cool' nowadays."

With her meticulous preparation and her ability to capture the spirit of the times, Fiona is eager to deliver an extra special show for islanders as they celebrate Liberation 60, whatever their ages.

"When I perform, I like to be able to take people back to the 1940s, and what I try to recreate is the way people were at that time," she says. "I try to be youthful on stage, and an uplifting performance is what I try to give to my audience, so I hope they'll feel truly uplifted and happy."

Fiona Harrison stars in the Specsavers Liberation Dance in the Sir John Loveridge Hall at Beau Sejour, on Friday, May 6 from 8pm to midnight. For further information or to enquire about reservations, please call the Specsavers Optical Group on 231709 by midday, Friday May 6.

