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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**DAME JOAN SUTHERLAND**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 19 October 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Owens, Julie, MP

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**Ms OWENS** (Parramatta) (9.02 pm)—On indulgence: It is with some sadness that I rise to acknowledge the life of Joan Sutherland and record my deepest regret at her death on 11 October 2010. Joan Sutherland was one of the world's best singers, and it is appropriate that we in this place record our appreciation of her long career at the highest level and tender our profound sympathy to her family in their bereavement.

For Australians, Joan Sutherland is the central figure in the performance of opera. She was central to its development in Australia. She raised the profile of opera and was instrumental in the development of our own opera company. She changed the view of a nation with her extraordinary voice, skill and talent. She well and truly entranced the world. She was in every sense a remarkable artist.

I want to talk a little bit about opera itself in the context of talking about Joan. There probably are not that many people who know the form very well. I was lucky enough to work with the Queensland opera company as its production manager for about six years. My first introduction to that company was as a repetiteur, training singers in their roles. I did not get to work with Joan Sutherland but I did work with a number of other Australians. It is an amazing form, and I want people to understand this about what they see when they see Joan performing on television or on video.

Opera is performed in some of the largest theatres in the world, and they are not amplified. Our Sydney Opera House is quite small. Most of our opera houses in Brisbane and Melbourne seat about 2,000 people. The big ones seat 3,500 or more—even up to 5,000. Opera houses are huge cavernous spaces. A singer stands on the stage, 'unamplified', and sings over the top of a chorus of maybe 60 or more singers and an orchestra of anywhere between 60 and 100 players. It is a phenomenal feat for anyone. Because of the size of these opera houses, over many centuries the standard of performance has become incredibly high. Yet every now and again you get a singer like Joan Sutherland who creates another level in that form.

Opera is an incredibly physical form. If you are ever lucky enough to stand close to an opera singer in full flight, when they are filling a 3,500-seat auditorium, you will see that their entire body is involved in the performance. It is incredibly physical. Operas are 2½, three, four or five hours long. They are physical marathons in every sense. The singers with the biggest voices in the world, singing the big roles, usually perform only twice a week because it is so physically demanding. It is not physically possible to perform those roles any more than that. It is an incredible achievement at the best of times.

Joan Sutherland took the form to another level altogether. Singing for anyone requires a natural physical talent. If you want to be good at it, it requires a combination of bone structure and body type, and Joan Sutherland had that. She probably inherited it from her mother, who was also a singer. It is a great advantage but it is, of course, just a start. Then there is the commitment and focus over many years to develop the technique, the facility and the strength in this incredibly physical form to avoid injury from overuse. Most singers with this kind of large voice, again, as I said, perform around only twice a week. It is incredibly demanding. Joan Sutherland did that work. Her technique was miraculous. She had an inhuman capacity to control this phenomenal voice. It was an unusually large and full voice for a coloratura soprano, with great power and warmth and remarkable agility, given its strength and size. She had a trill that other singers would die for, exceptional intonation and pinpoint accuracy in the upper register. She could do all that—and that is technique; and very few will ever match her technical capacity.

More than having the physical talent and the technique, Joan Sutherland knew what to do with it. She is unmatched as a musician, as an interpreter. She had the technique to deliver what was in her mind, but the technique was absolutely her servant. You never saw it; you were never aware of it; it was invisible. It disappeared beneath the phrase. You could not see or hear her think. You could just hear the music. For performers seeking to perform at their best, that ability not to distract, that ability to support the performance itself is what you strive for, and this woman, Joan Sutherland, was the master at it. It was quite remarkable to hear her perform. Her live

performance was, for me, the most amazing. She had the extraordinary ability when performing live to take all the time in the world, to give herself space in the phrasing just when the voice needed it and to carry an audience to the absolute limit of their capacity. She did so in a way that was so much a part of a performance that those around her went with her with great ease.

I can only imagine that performances like Joan's required great courage. I do not mean courage to go on the stage. Stage fright is not the most frightening thing about performance. The Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, who is here, knows that recently I performed the Rachmaninov second piano concerto with one of my local orchestras. It is a hard piece and I had not performed it for about four years, and probably not for about 10 years before that, so I was doing something I had done when I was young but not for many years. I realised the single thing that I had forgotten about performance is how much courage it takes. Again, I am not talking about courage to go on the stage; I am talking about courage in the moment—to take the leap, to put yourself aside and do what needs to be done in the moment, and to do that minute after minute, second after second, and to move on to the next point. It is a learned skill, this courage.

When I listen to Joan perform and watch her live performances on DVD, I can see the remarkable ability she had to reach beyond the limit of what she was capable of. She was an extraordinarily courageous performer. I doubt that any of us will know what was really going on in her head and I doubt that many of us could understand it. For an artist to achieve that level—the level of discipline and skill and commitment in her daily life—is probably already beyond what most of us can imagine. I would hope that Joan, when she gave a performance that she was proud of and happy with—and I suspect like most performers she found something to be unhappy with—walked off stage and had people around her who were capable of sharing the high five moment with her on a level of genuine understanding. I believe that she found that in her partner, Richard Bonyngé; that they were together able to share the heights of Joan's achievements. It would be a very lonely life to achieve something so much greater than her colleagues if she did not have someone who could truly understand what she achieved in her greatest moments.

I worked in opera in the 1980s. It is a very difficult form. It is almost impossible to get right. It requires so many people's input at the highest level. I can well and truly tell you that Joan was the pinnacle for us in the opera world as a voice, as an interpreter and for her extraordinary ability to perform. But she was also the pinnacle for what a human being could achieve and strive for. I still wonder how a human being can get to be that good. I have known many great singers. I have worked with Joan Carden, for example, and quite a number of very well known Australian singers and I can imagine the level of work that is required, but with Joan I cannot imagine how a person can actually get to be that good.

I know that the Australian opera would simply have not grown in the way that it did without the presence in our lives of Joan Sutherland. She lifted expectations and she convinced many in our nation that they loved opera—as they should; it is a fine form. Her outstanding contribution was recognised in honours, including a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1975, the Dame of the British Empire in 1979 and the Order of Merit in 1991. She had a career that lasted more than 30 years at the top—and that is 30 years of hours of technical work every day, hours of scales and work to improve her strength and her stamina. In that 30 years she mastered opera's most demanding roles in *Norma*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, in the most important opera houses of the world. Her most famous role was the lead in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which she performed 233 times. In one performance in the role in 1959 she was acknowledged with a 19-minute standing ovation.

Joan Sutherland said that her mother was a great influence in her life. Her mother was a very good singer in her own right and, while she was not singing professionally when she was raising Joan, she still used to practise. She kept up her scales and exercises and Joan sat at her knee and learned those from about the age of three. So Joan was well versed in the voice very early. She says that she was not trained by her mother but she acknowledges the extraordinary influence that her mother had on her life.

She also acknowledges the incredible influence of Richard Bonyngé, her husband, who encouraged her to develop the upper part of her voice. In fact, he said of her voice that the voice at the top just did not want to stop; it was effortless. It was his influence, working with Joan, that encouraged her to develop that upper repertoire. The extent of her repertoire was immense. She learned 54 leading roles, from Handel to Mozart and Puccini and Verdi. If you have never tried to learn something that complex, the job of even learning the role—it can take several months and it has to be done on time; you have to be ready; you cannot fake it—is one of the extraordinary talents that performers at this level need to have. She had 54 leading roles, which is an extraordinary repertoire for any singer.

She ended her career with final performances at the Sydney Opera House and at Covent Garden in 1990 where she sang, as Nellie Melba did, 'There is no place like home'. For those who have not heard that performance, it is quite an extraordinary performance.

**Mr Murphy**—A magnificent performance.

**Ms OWENS**—It is a magnificent performance. There were many tributes to Joan, as you would expect at this time. The opera director John Copley was one of her many friends and admirers. They had known each other as they grew in the early days, so he knew her quite well. He said—and I suspect that he is absolutely right—that people did not realise just how hard she actually did work to achieve this extraordinary standard.

Again, the thing about Joan Sutherland is, in this unassuming person and this voice that just appeared as if it came from heaven, you did not see the evidence. You did not see the signs of the technique. It was so well hidden in her mastery—an extraordinary thing. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, who by the way is not a bad singer in her own right—not bad at all, Dame Kiri, a quite extraordinary performer—says that Joan was an inspiration to a generation of performers. One of my favourite quotes about Joan Sutherland comes from Kiri. She says:

She was a bit like the Pied Piper. We followed her to the top of the hill and hopefully we got there too.

It is an amazing thing that artists of the calibre of Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Pavarotti, and Joan Carden admired this woman so greatly and aspired to a standard that they freely acknowledged they would probably never reach.

It is hard to imagine another Joan. It is hard to imagine another artist emerging with the natural physical talent, the capacity to work, the musicality and the partnerships, and the opportunities that generate the greatest work. It is hard to imagine another one. I hope we get many more so that we can experience the extraordinary magic that was Joan Sutherland. She will, of course, live on. Her voice lives on in the many recordings that she made although I am aware that she did not make an official recording of the *Queen of the Night*. There is a pirate copy, apparently, but I will not be going into that one. She did not make an official recording of the *Queen of the Night* and I am very sad about that because that is one that I would love to hear.

She will live on also in the many voices that were inspired by her and in those who marvel at her capacity to strive for standards that most of us cannot imagine. She will also live on forever in the hearts of those who heard her.

Dame Joan is survived by her husband, Richard Bonyng, her son, Adam, and two grandchildren. I thank them for sharing their wife, mother and grandmother with us for a time and I wish them well in this difficult time.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. Peter Slipper)**—I thank the member for Parramatta for her very insightful and substantial contribution to this debate. We are enormously privileged that the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government has graced us with his presence in the Main Committee and I call him.