

CHOIRSPOTLIGHT

The UK's Euphoria



Euphoria began with two little girls who first met in the choir for “Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat,” then met again as teens with a different troupe performing the same show. Over ten years later, Emma Tobitt was cleaning out office space and found a pile of forgotten letters from her old friend, Rachel Walker.

Emma's partner, Rich, encouraged her to try to reconnect with her old friend, and with a little Internet sleuthing, she found Rachel, and they arranged to meet; Rachel was still living locally and working as a singing teacher. All that was left then was ten years of catching up to do. At that time, dance teacher Tina Kelly had been working with Emma for over 14 years, and they had also developed a fast friendship. In fact, they were running “Footlights Performance Academy,” a stage school focused on performance. Emma asked Tina if her friend Rachel might join the team, and soon all three women were working together.

Then, “Glee” fever hit the UK, and young people were inspired to join a similar group, so Rachel, Tina, and Emma created one and called it “Euphoria.” When they held their first auditions, only six people came. Because the ladies had already booked a Christmas show to give the group something to work toward, Emma and Rachel joined as members as well. Both of Tina's children joined, and Emma's partner, Rich, even sang with the boys.

Three months later, the choir had grown and was ready for a debut at Colston Hall. Crowded on balconies to view the choir, the audience showed their support through cheers and continuous applause. Just one week later, the group was invited to perform with “Spelbound” (2010 winners of Britain's Got Talent). Twelve weeks passed, and the “Glee” set Euphoria had prepared was ready to go.

Videos from the performance—which were uploaded on YouTube—led to Euphoria being seen across the ocean, and the organizers of the US National Show Choir Championships invited Euphoria as guest stars. Though a prior commitment made the first suggested date in 2012 impossible, they were added to the schedule of the 2013 competition in New York City, where they were shocked and delighted to receive the FAME award.

THE AUDITION PROCESS AND FINANCIAL COMMITMENT

Though the group isn't connected to a particular school, which is fairly standard in the US, there is a local school that has supported Euphoria in their fundraising efforts and assisted with performance space. Additionally, Rachel is the voice teacher at two local schools, and many of her students learn about Euphoria in that fashion. Emma adds, “We do have the

advantage of being part of a theatre academy which is run by Tina and is very successful in the local area.”

Students rehearse for three hours each Saturday morning, and they are charged £15 per week to cover most costume expenses, directors' pay, administrative costs, and rehearsal venues. For any other expenses—travel, equipment, and additional costuming—the group engages in directed fundraising efforts.

According to Emma, group members start at 12 and, since there's no upper age limit, they currently have a performer who is 33. They hold auditions two or three times each year, where each participant performs as a solo. In a group dance audition, they are taught a short routine, and then they are asked to sing harmony against two other parts. Tina notes, “Obviously when auditioning we are looking for good voices to supplement the sound of the choir. However, from a choreographer's perspective, ensuring that there is a dance element to the audition is very important.” Because most of the Euphoria members haven't had dance training, Tina looks for “general dance ability and a sense of performance,” so she can help them develop those talents.

As the vocal coach and musical director, Rachel looks for evidence of “good, secure vocal technique, excellent tuning, and a “high performance standard.” Finally for the “harmony” test during the audition, the directors teach potential Euphoria members a short musical piece and then ask them “to maintain the middle harmony part against two other singers who are singing a part above and below them.” Rachel adds that she creates complex harmonies for Euphoria—where members are asked to sing up to twelve-part harmony—so they need to be certain any potential member is up to the challenge.

GLEEFUL INSPIRATION AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Emma credits the popularity of the TV series “Glee” for inspiring their creation of Euphoria, since there were very few show choirs in the UK before that series. In fact, before “Glee” and Euphoria, there were no show choirs in their area that were open to the public; the few that existed were connected to specific schools and colleges. Emma notes, “Euphoria has grown to 30 members in just over two years, which is a huge achievement for us, and we are finding more and more that people are asking us to perform at their event, rather than us having to find occasions to perform. Hopefully the general public will become more aware of show choirs so that the demand will increase, in terms of both performances and the number of people wanting to audition.”



In their future planning, Emma would also love to take the show on tour across the UK, as most of the shows she has seen in the theatres are focused primarily on the singing rather than offering “full choreography.” Recognizing that funding will be the biggest impediment to that dream, she hopes the next years will bring financial growth as the group expands. Similarly, Rachel would also like to see a tour in Euphoria's future, which seems like a natural step based on their accomplishments thus far. Rachel adds, “By their fun, upbeat nature, show choirs are a perfect addition to a variety show,” and as Euphoria is deemed “The UK's top Show Choir,” they are staying quite busy handling their many bookings.

Emma explains that “Glee” has offered the UK an “up-to-date twist that could be added to choirs,” though she also points out that the TV show often suggests songs and dances come effortlessly. Emma notes, “We knew what lengths we needed to go to produce a high standard. I think any TV programme can be misleading, as they have to appeal to an audience, and let's face it, who really wants to watch the second sopranos going over their line 17 times until they get it right?” So, while “Glee” viewers who aren't show choir members may have a simplified view of the work involved, she's just glad they have the interest in show choir they may not have had before.

Similarly, Tina adds that while “Glee” is excellent for inspiring interest, the TV program makes show choir production look “far too easy” when the reality of show choir is that both hard work and dedication are needed to “achieve the intricate harmonies and choreography that seems to appear from nowhere on Glee.” Tina adds that while “Glee” inspired many to start programs, most school choirs “failed to establish themselves due to the hard work and commitment required by all involved.” She believes the continuous growth of Euphoria, even while other start-up choirs were waning, is due to their “high standards of performance.”

Finally, Rachel adds that they are indebted to Ryan Murphy, the creator of “Glee,” for more than just the show. She believes Murphy works to create “diverse and complex characters,”

which is part of what Euphoria intends to support. She and her fellow directors work to celebrate each student's strengths, skills, and flaws—and Rachel believes this celebration is what makes Euphoria so special. She believes the Euphoria ethos can be summed up in one line: "Be who you were meant to be, and you will set the world on fire."

On that same note, Rachel praises "Glee" for teaching acceptance of self and others. She states, "Just like the characters on Glee, each member of Euphoria has become a better, stronger performer as they accept themselves for who they are rather than trying to be a replica of someone else. Glee is one of the very first mainstream entertainment shows to address this and celebrate the fact that it's ok to be who you are. After all, an original is always better than a copy!" Tina adds that, as part of her

vision for Euphoria's future, she would like to see a youth choir evolve that not only works to "harness each member's abilities from a younger age" but also focuses on combating "negative views of performance."

PEER PRESSURE, BULLYING, AND SELF-IMAGE

Obviously, bullying comes in any number of forms, but it seems show choir girls are most often plagued by comments about their weight, and show choir boys are teased about their sexuality or presumed sexuality.

One female Euphoria member credits Euphoria for changing her life. She shares that she's always wanted to perform but because she was a "bigger girl," she was constantly "teased and bullied for being larger than my tiny friends." Each time she managed to build up some shred of confidence, she notes, "Harsh words

would quickly drag me back down, and I found myself pulling more and more away from my dream of performing".

She shares that it took a great deal of courage, and a sixty-pound weight loss, before she would even audition for Euphoria, but she adds that since she became part of the group that she found an amazing group of "supportive, talented people, each with their own unique story to tell." She can now proudly present herself to an audience of thousands, feeling like she can be herself. "I'm not ostracised for being bigger than the others, because they encourage my talent to be bigger than that!"

Male show choir members who face bullying are more commonly facing name calling connected to sexuality.

One Euphoria member shares that he has liked Musical Theatre and the arts for four years, and now at 16, he's had his share of insults for "doing something that stereotypically, only girls would do." He adds that when playing soccer he managed to hide that he enjoyed acting, singing, and dancing because he "could see guys getting picked on for it and didn't want that to happen to me."

He believes that when people learned that he was involved in performing arts that they would stop respecting him. He adds, "I was sometimes laughed at, and the names 'gay' and 'fag' were thrown at me numerous times. Even some of my closest friends made me the butt of their jokes. It really did get me down and make me think about quitting, but I decided that I just had to ignore it, as I knew that performing was what I loved doing."

Another Euphoria member has a similar story, though one even more distressing. He shares that he's loved performing since he was 13 and has always been given a tough time about his joy in performing and for his sexuality as well. Though he decided he was "used to it" at one point, when he had the chance

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“There were times when I felt so lonely I even thought about killing myself; the school bullies didn't help.” Luckily, that year he met two Euphoria members who encouraged him to join, and his outlook is very different. “Now whenever I feel low I think about all the good times I have with the show choir, singing and dancing with a group of friends that like me for who I am.”

Rachel acknowledges this dark side of performance arts, but she believes the show choir experience helps in two ways. First of all, students have a safe and nurturing place to be themselves and be accepted. Rachel notes, “Within Euphoria, there is no bullying at all, and all members are very caring and supportive of each other. This has created a wonderful, nurturing environment in which each member of the group feel they can be themselves without fear of

ridicule.” Secondly, they can learn to take that self-confidence and carry it into the outside world that may not be as kind.

In response to the Euphoria members who have shared their stories of being bullied, Rachel created an original song, “Body on Mute,” that Euphoria performed this month in New York at the National Show Choir Championships, a song based on someone feeling too afraid to be the unique person he or she was intended to be and instead became “a ghost of all they could be.”

The song ends with these words:
 You cut me open to drain my creativity,
 But I've awoken to the truth of my reality.
 I need to live how I'm designed,
 I'm frailty and strength entwined.
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 Wondrously made, am I. 🎵

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