

The Susan Boyle Story

Susan Boyle's story is a parable of our age. She is a singer of enormous talent, who cared for her widowed mother until she died two years ago. Susan's is a combination of ability and virtue that deserves congratulation.

So how come she was treated as a laughing stock when she walked on stage for the opening heat of Britain's Got Talent 2009 on Saturday night?

The moment the reality show's audience and judging panel saw the small, shy, middle-aged woman, they started to smirk. When she said she wanted a professional singing career to equal that of Elaine Paige, the camera showed audience members rolling their eyes in disbelief. They scoffed when she told Simon Cowell, one of the judges, how she'd reached her forties without managing to develop a singing career because she hadn't had the opportunity. Another judge, Piers Morgan, later wrote on his blog that, just before she launched into I Dreamed a Dream, the 3000-strong audience in Glasgow was laughing and the three judges were suppressing chuckles.

It was rude and cruel and arrogant. Susan Boyle from Blackburn, West Lothian, was presumed to be a buffoon. But why?

Britain's Got Talent isn't a beauty pageant. It isn't a youth opportunity scheme. It is surely about discovering untapped and unrecognised raw talent from all sections of society.

And Susan Boyle has talent to burn. Such is the beauty of her voice that she had barely sung the opening bars when the applause started. She rounded off to a standing ovation and - in her naivety - began walking off the stage and had to be recalled.

Susan, now a bankable discovery, was then roundly patronised by such mega-talents as Amanda Holden and the aforementioned Morgan, who told her: "Everyone laughed at you but no-one is laughing now. I'm reeling with shock." Holden added: "It's the biggest wake-up call ever."

Again, why?

The answer is that only the pretty are expected to achieve. Not only do you have to be physically appealing to deserve fame; it seems you now have to be good-looking to merit everyday common respect. If, like Susan (and like millions more), you are plump, middle-aged and too poor or too unworlly to follow fashion or have a good hairdresser, you are a non-person.

I dread to think of how Susan would have left the stage if her voice had been less than exceptional. She would have been humiliated in front of 11 million viewers. It's the equivalent of being put in the stocks in front of the nation instead of the village. It used to be a punishment handed out to criminals. Now it is the fate of anyone without obvious sexual allure who dares seek opportunity.

This small, brave soul took her courage in her hands to pitch at her one hope of having her singing talent recognised, and was greeted with a communal sneer. Courage could so easily have failed her.

Yet why shouldn't she sound wonderful? Not every great singer looks like Katherine Jenkins. Edith Piaf would never have been chosen to go on a catwalk, nor would Nina Simone, or Ella Fitzgerald. As for Pavarotti, but then ridicule is nothing new in Susan Boyle's life. She is a veteran of abuse. She was starved of oxygen at birth and has learning difficulties as a result. At school she was slow and had frizzy hair. She was bullied mostly verbally. She told one newspaper that her classmates' jibes left behind the kind of scars that don't heal.

She didn't have boyfriends, is a stranger to romance and has never been kissed. "Shame," she said. Singing was her life-raft.

She lived with her parents in a four-bedroom council house and, when her father died a decade ago, she cared for her mother and sang in the church choir.

It was an unglamorous existence. She wasn't the glamorous type - and being a carer isn't a glamorous life, as the hundreds of thousands who do that most valuable of jobs will testify. Even those who start out with a beauty routine and an interest in clothes find themselves reverting to the practicality of a tracksuit and trainers. Fitness plans get interrupted and then abandoned. Weight creeps on. Carers don't often get invited to sparkling dinner parties or glitzy receptions, so smart clothes rarely make it off the hanger.

Then, when a special occasion comes along, they might reach, as Susan did, for the frock they bought for a nephew's wedding. They might, as she did, compound the felony of choosing a colour at odds with her skin tone and an unflattering shape with home-chopped hair, bushy eyebrows and a face without a hint of make-up. But it is often evidence of a life lived selflessly; of a person so focused on the needs of another that they have lost sight of themselves. Is that a cause for derision or a reason for congratulation? Would her time have been better spent slimming and exercising, plucking and waxing? Would that have made her voice any sweeter?

Susan Boyle's mother encouraged her to sing. She wanted her to enter Britain's Got Talent. But the shy Susan hasn't been able to sing at all since her mother's death two years ago. She wasn't sure how her voice would emerge after so long a silence. Happily, it survived its rest.

She is a gift to reality television. Her story is the stuff of Hans Christian Andersen: the woman plucked from obscurity, the buried talent uncovered, the transformation waiting to be wrought.

It is wonderful for her, too, that her stunning voice is now recognised. A bright future beckons. Her dream is becoming reality.

Susan is a reminder that it's time we all looked a little deeper. She has lived an obscure but important life. She has been a companionable and caring daughter. It's people like her who are the unseen glue in society; the ones who day in and day out put themselves last. They make this country civilised and they deserve acknowledgement and respect.

Susan has been given respect because of her talent. She should always have received it because of the calibre of her character.