



'I wish people would stop thinking that I'm Simon Cowell – or that he's me!'

# The DEFINITE ARTICLE

*We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week: actor and writer Simon Callow*

**The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity...** I am fascinated by rubbish bins – their size, shape, efficiency, colour, and their maintenance.

**The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again...** My grandmother's gold lorgnette [a pair of spectacles mounted on a handle]. As a child I used to play with it endlessly, pretending to be various marquises and marchionesses. I have absolutely no idea what became of it.

**The unending quest that drives you on...** To give a really good performance, to write a perfect sentence, to direct a superb production. None has been achieved so far.

**The poem that touches your soul...** Shakespeare's sonnet No. 49, about the anguish of love. The last couplet – 'To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws, Since why to love I can allege no cause' – is the most devastating in the English language. I've been there.

**The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase...** That I am Simon Cowell. Or that he is me.

**The event that altered the course of your life and character...** My father leaving my mother when I was 18 months old. It shattered her and made her harder. She tried to be my mother *and* father, which was oppressive for a child.

**The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it...** I would steal Bronzino's Portrait Of A Young Man from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and feast on its enigmatic beauty in solitude.

**The song that means the most to you...** Offrande, by the Venezuelan-born composer Reynaldo Hahn. He catches the tenderness of the gift of love with astonishing vulnerability.

**The happiest moment you will cherish forever...** Getting my first commission as a writer in 1984 for my memoir *Being An Actor*. I was in Santa Fe, in the US, and I went up in a balloon and shouted the news to the surprised birds.

**The saddest time that shook your world...** The death in 1991 of my friend Peggy Ramsay, a legendary theatrical agent, left a gap in my world that will never be filled again.

**The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you...** I've never acted professionally in plays by Chekhov, Ibsen, Congreve, Feydeau or Stoppard.

**The philosophy that underpins your life...** Make the negative positive.

**The order of service at your funeral...** I would want some Shakespeare sonnets – maybe Nos. 29 and 60 – and Mahler's *Der Abschied* from *Das Lied Von Der Erde*. Then Cole Porter's *In The Still Of The Night*, Mozart's *Vorrei Spiegarmi* and the last movement of Elgar's *Cello Concerto*.

**The way you want to be remembered...** A rough beast who constantly struggled to do something dainty.

**The Plug...** My book, *Charles Dickens And The Great Theatre Of The World*, is published by HarperPress, priced £16.99. Visit [www.simoncallow.com](http://www.simoncallow.com) ■

*As told to Rob McGibbon*

**The prized possession you value above all others...** A gold ring that belonged to the great Irish actor Micheál Mac Liammóir. I was his dresser in Northern Ireland in 1968. He left it to his partner, who left it to an actor, who gave it to me. It connects me to a theatrical past.

**The unqualified regret you wish you could amend...** I cut off relations with my grandmother Vera for six years when I was 18. She was the most powerful influence in my life, but it was overwhelming so I had to stand back. I now deeply regret those missing years.

**The way you'd spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions...** I'd have breakfast in Zambia's Luangwa Valley as crocodiles eat *their* breakfast in the river; coffee and madeines on Venice's Lido island; lunch in Stockholm; tea at London's Maison Bertaux; dinner on the island of Mykonos; vodka and caviar in St Petersburg; and bed at the Gazelle d'Or hotel in Morocco.

**The temptation you wish you could resist...** Oh, I can resist anything. Although bread is a weakness.

**The book that holds an everlasting resonance...** Plato's *Symposium*. It introduced me to my hero, Socrates, who taught me how to think.

**The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day...** I would terrorise stupid and cruel dog owners.

**The pet hate that makes your hackles rise...** The use of the verb 'pop' as a substitute for any other word. A nurse once said to me, 'Pop your clothes off. I'm just going to pop a little injection into your arm then I'll pop off to get the doctor.' I've become an anti-pop commissar and correct people all the time. I become quite deranged – but I'm right.

**The film you can watch time and time again...** The French film *Les Enfants Du Paradis* – the most poetic representation of the destructive power of love.

**The person who has influenced you most...** Christopher Fettes, my drama teacher. His vision and ideas made me the man, and the actor, I am today.

**The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint...** Charles Dickens. Being in his company would be a tonic and a joy. The conversation would surge with electric energy.

**The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child...** Whenever you've a free moment, run, jump, swim, kick a ball, dress up, climb a tree, learn a song. Avoid *anything* operated by electricity.

From top: The Lido in Venice, Charles Dickens, Bronzino's Portrait Of A Young Man, a rubbish bin, the film *Les Enfants Du Paradis*, coffee and a madeleine, a gold lorgnette, Simon Cowell and bread

## PS...

*Kate Winslet and Jodie Foster clash in Roman Polanski's **Carnage** – in cinemas now. See the play **The King's Speech** was based on as a national tour starts in Guildford. And Paul McCartney's album **Kisses On The Bottom** is out Monday*



## NEXT WEEK

- Russell Grant on following in Michael Crawford's footsteps as the Wizard of Oz
- Britain's most controversial quizmaster on his new comedy role
- Romantic desserts for Valentines
- Jamie Oliver revisits French classics
- PLUS Britain's best TV listings