

## FEATURES



New beginnings:  
Volpe, far right on  
the front row, at  
Woolverstone Hall  
in 1977

# The state boarding school that saved me

Opera director Michael Volpe tells *Glenda Cooper* how a stint at the 'poor man's Eton' enabled him to avoid his brother's fate

**B**y rights, Michael Volpe should have grown up with a long jail record – just like his older brother, Matteo. Instead, the general director of the prestigious Opera Holland Park company has a Who's Who entry and a nice line in lunching companions. "I remember going to lunch with the judges at the Old Bailey. Someone I know knew the Sheriff of London, and every day the judges invite a person to have lunch with them... I sat round the table with some of the law lords and the Master of the Rolls, and thought: 'I wonder how many of you have sent Matt to prison?'"

But a twist of fate meant that Michael didn't end up like Matteo – whose death two years ago, aged 52, after a long battle with drug addiction, inspired Volpe to write an extraordinary memoir, *Noisy At the Wrong Times*. It details

how a state boarding school known as the "poor man's Eton" helped Volpe escape his background and achieve the kind of astonishing social mobility that meant while his mother had a pauper's education in Italy, his daughter graduated from Oxford.

The book, published today, is far from a "misery memoir" – despite some gobsmacking details of poverty and plot twists worthy of the kind of operas Volpe now stages. Instead it is a trenchant challenge to politicians, teachers and parents to raise the aspirations of a generation.

"If you come out of a working-class background – or an inner city or black or Asian background – too many schools say: 'Right, we can't expect too much of this kid, so what we've gotta do is get him to a level that he's not committing crimes and then we've achieved,'" says Volpe. "The problem we've got with those kids is we don't expect enough from them."

Sitting in an Italian café in west

London wearing a loud check jacket and nursing a glass of red wine, Volpe looks every inch the affluent Italian businessman – until his strong London accent betrays him. Born in 1965, he was brought up by his single-mother Lidia on a rundown housing estate in Fulham with his three older brothers Lou, Matt and Serge (his father left when Michael was seven months old).

While Lidia worked long hours as a cook in a nursery, teenage Matt was already set on his criminal career. In a bid to avert a similar fate for Serge and Michael, who were both bright, a teacher entered them for the exam for Woolverstone Hall. They both passed.

Woolverstone – known affectionately as 'Woolvo' by its alumni – was an extraordinary experiment in education. Set up in the early Fifties by London County Council, it was a secondary grammar boarding school in Suffolk that took boys in the state system and gave them the kind of schooling usually only open to the richest echelons. Its alumni include the novelist Ian McEwan, comedian Phill Jupitus – and two of Volpe's own friends, the actor Neil Pearson and former rugby international Martin Offiah.



Today, Volpe is director of Opera Holland Park





PHILIP HOLLIS

For a tough, streetwise kid, being transplanted from a concrete housing estate to a world of tuck shops and trunks, prefects and prep was a shock – but pupils were expected to embrace the culture straight away.

Crucially, Woolverstone did not see its function as merely rescuing boys from their background, but instilling in them a high sense of expectation. “Woolverstone taught me to believe

## ‘It’s a tragedy that a school with such elevated ideals no longer exists’

in myself,” recalls Volpe. “It said, ‘You are the best, so any sort of reduction in that status is a failure on your part.’”

Boys were exposed to classical music, history and drama as par for the course – school productions included highbrow fare such as Brecht’s *Mother Courage* and Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* – and were encouraged to debate politics for hours in the school common room. Volpe believes that learning to live with boys from different backgrounds in a tightly

### Hard times: Michael Volpe grew up on a poor housing estate in London

bonded community was invaluable in developing his confidence.

Not that life was always idyllic. Volpe recalls acute homesickness, fights with other boys and corporal punishment. “But for us, slipping was the first time we had really clear parameters: ‘I know doing this thing will get me four whacks; is it worth it?’ And that was the first time I think a lot of us experienced quantifiable consequences to our actions.”

If this were a Hollywood film, Volpe would have walked out of Woolverstone into university and a hotshot career. In fact, he left, aged 16, with two O-levels in Art and English to begin work in a hair salon. Does this mean his schooling was a failure?

“The remarkable fact about Woolverstone is that it found the things I was good at [drama, music and English] and it didn’t say: ‘Well, you will only have succeeded if you leave here with a place at Oxbridge.’”

As well as a love of music imbued in him by his choirmaster Derek Thornbery and music teacher Barry Salmon, Woolverstone gave Volpe

the self-confidence to hold his own in professional circles – even the notoriously rarefied world of opera. In the Eighties, having worked in journalism, advertising and marketing, he began running cultural events for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. By this time, the borough had taken over the management of Holland Park and the half-ruined castle in its grounds, where visiting companies staged the first operas under canopy.

Seven years later, the influence of Woolverstone came to the fore again when Volpe helped found Opera Holland Park to make high-quality opera accessible – without dumbing down the art form.

“The reasons for setting up OHP were manifold,” says Volpe. “It was to ensure that every penny we spent went on stage and not into an independent producer’s pocket; to offer opportunities to emerging British and British-based singers to work with experienced practitioners; and to give a platform for late-Italian rarer repertoire that seemed to be totally neglected in the UK.”

But while his professional life was on the up – Dustin Hoffman gave him a part in his film *Quartet* and he scored a cameo in Woody Allen’s *You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger* – behind the scenes, a family tragedy was playing out. After decades of heroin abuse, Matteo collapsed with a brain haemorrhage in 2013. Volpe, with Matt’s wife and his other brothers, had to make the difficult decision to turn off Matt’s life-support machine.

“I don’t feel guilt about anything – I think I did everything I could for Matt,” says Volpe, acknowledging he could have met a similar fate: “but Woolverstone intervened. Perhaps the question needs to be asked the other way around: I wonder what it would have been like if Matt had gone to Woolverstone?”

Volpe now lives in Hammersmith and has three children (a son and daughter from his first marriage, now grown up, and a six-year-old daughter from his second). All were state-school educated – but to his regret his son did not get a chance to go to Woolverstone. After turning comprehensive in 1977, its standards declined and the school was eventually closed in 1990.

“This is no rags-to-riches story, because I was never in rags and I am certainly not rich,” reflects Volpe. “But my school ensured I had a choice. It is a tragedy that schools with such elevated ideals for boys of our background don’t truly exist any longer.”

*Noisy At the Wrong Times* by Michael Volpe is published today in paperback by Two Roads, RRP £8.99. To order your copy call 0844 871 1514 or visit [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk)