

Scottish Country Dancing! It's still the most important role that I have played so far.'

Is that how he would like to exit this world – dancing a Highland jig, rather than endure a long, debilitating illness, or dementia, like his beloved mother? 'Yes of course, absolutely. Couldn't be better. Bang. Snuffed it. Then I would like to be buried in my own back garden, and return to feed the soil.'

But Callow isn't here to talk about that film, Shakespeare or his passion for Dickens. He has gallantly invited me to lunch at his favourite Turkish restaurant, Gem, in Islington, to talk about his role as Ambassador for charity Live Music Now (LMN).

I'm ashamed to admit that I had previously suspected Callow might be rather remote and highbrow, with his love of discoursing on Christian Mysticism and Sufism, but I was quite wrong. He has a flair for making the highbrow seem fun and accessible to all.

So off he goes, pointing out with great feeling, how unelitist his favourite charity is. LMN takes music into the heart of the community – to the old, the disadvantaged and forgotten. He came across it quite by chance, when he was visiting his mother, Yvonne, a former school secretary, in a retirement home in Sussex, where she is being cared for while in the advanced stages of dementia.

'Music is at the centre of my life, and always has been since I was a child, not as a practitioner, but as a listener,' he declares. 'I know what music does for people, how it transforms lives. The sad thing is that my mother loved music very much, too, before the dementia came on. And here she was, surrounded by these wonderful young musicians who had recently graduated from The Royal College of Music, really reaching out to her.'

'These are people who have been trained to a high level of skill and artistry, who would normally expect to exist in the rarefied atmosphere of a concert hall. But here they were, playing to an old woman, coming right up to her, so she could see the instruments. It was a beautiful thing to see, but it is also fantastic to be reminded of what music really is. It isn't standing up on a platform in a dinner jacket with a lot of people sitting there in rows. It comes out of direct communication with human beings – with rhythm, melody and harmony.'

Callow was clearly hugely moved by the experience, and tells me that he is happy to do whatever he can to lend his support. 'Live Music Now also does wonderful work with musicians who are old and have perhaps lost the power to play, but not the desire. It is one of the aspects of our society that is often neglected – the bit that isn't about lists and quotas and percentages. Instead it's about one human being connecting with another. Sound is one of the most powerful means of connection we have and LMN are missionaries in that view.'

I am left with a new admiration for my twinkling, enigmatic host. He is passionate, candid, and at times refreshingly frank, and laughs constantly at ideas that delight him. Yet he insists, too, that his life is terribly flawed.

'I am stupid, I have no time – my life has been sacrificed to my work.' But surely you chose to work as much as you do?

'Yes, but I don't think it's a good choice; it's just something that happened, and I wish it hadn't, and I am trying to unpick it.'

Perhaps it is a subconscious insecurity that pushes Callow to

work so hard? He talks compellingly, but without sentiment, of a childhood that was resolutely 'lower middle class'.

There were caravan holidays in Hastings, cheek by jowl with the next-door-neighbours, which he liked very much, and a brief, doomed odyssey to Africa, for his mother to attempt reconciliation with his father, who bolted when Simon was 18 months old. Sadly, love wasn't rekindled, and mother and son returned to England alone.

In any case, Callow has taken up a new hobby. He has discovered a love of cooking, under the careful tutelage of Nigella, whom he remembers fondly from her days as a literary editor on *The Sunday Times*.

'Reading one of her cookbooks is almost as good as having her in the kitchen,' he purrs. 'She's practical, and very good at holding your hand, and cooking and choosing food is so therapeutic. Of course, I make lots of mistakes, but I am quite ambitious and never cook the same thing twice. I am rather good at risottos.'

He tells me he eats organic food because, on the whole, he 'prefers the taste, rather than



Simon with musicians from Live Music Now

'I know what music does for people, how it transforms lives'

for ethical reasons', though he would always abominate any cruelty to animals, being the owner of two adored, but not 'slavishly obedient' boxer dogs, Rocky and Biff, whom he walks on Hampstead Heath or a windswept pebble beach at Climping.

But he is no poster boy for the environmental lobby. 'I think it's gratuitous; to tell us to change the way we live, when restaurants are absolutely filled with cod, halibut and skate. If it's that serious, then pass a law that says we can't eat fish that is endangered. It's that simple. It's a peculiar thing that has developed over my lifetime, this idea of universal guilt.'

He feels the same way about light bulbs. 'We have the bitter complaints about wasting energy, while we are encouraged to buy more and more products that require more and more energy. Then I notice how beautiful the floodlighting of London looks at night, while I'm being told to switch off the lights in my house.'

Can't you just hear Middle England applauding?

'I grew up in a time of incredible thrift and austerity, after the war, but our economy is now based on constant consumerism. The idea that you are replacing things all the time, and if we didn't do that, then hundreds of thousands of people would be out of work. It's a vicious circle, and I don't have the answer. If I did, I doubt that I would be touring plays in Stratford. I would be running the country.'

In an age of manufactured and packaged celebrity, Simon Callow is a man of substance. He is one of the last remaining classical actors, from the golden age of Olivier, Gielgud, and Guinness. For it was Laurence Olivier who encouraged him to become an actor, and Sir Alec Guinness was a close friend.

And how can Brad Pitt possibly compete with all that? ◆

SIMON CALLOW is an Ambassador for the charity Live Music Now. For more details, go to www.livemusicnow.org

TWELFTH NIGHT starring Simon Callow is reviewed on page 81.