

# Disco diva happy to be queen of panto

SHEILA Ferguson is the first to admit the road to success hasn't always been easy. The Philadelphia-born star has grafted for fame – she's put in hours of hard work, endless travelling and endured long periods of separation from her family.

Picked to replace original Three Degrees member Helen Scott in 1968, Sheila was to remain with the group for nearly 20 years.

They enjoyed huge mainstream success with their 1974 single *When Will I See You Again*, picking celebrity fans along the way.

The trio, or 'Charlie's Angels' as they were dubbed by the *British Press*, performed at Prince Charles's 30th birthday at Buckingham Palace and were guests at his wedding reception after his marriage to Princess Diana.

"When I told my parents I was going to be a singer, there wasn't much talking in the Ferguson household," Sheila says. "My dad had put down a deposit for me to go and study at the University of Pennsylvania so I had to prove to him that I was going to make it without turning into some kind of drink-fuelled druggie performer.

"But my parents instilled some very positive values in me and I've always lived according to that positivity."

International fame came with a hectic

## Dick Whittington

As a member of '70s girl group *The Three Degrees*, Sheila Ferguson was one of the biggest stars in the music world. In recent years she has reinvented herself as the Queen of Pantomime. Zita Collinson met her as she prepares to take on the role of Fairy Oatcakes in *The Regent Theatre's Dick Whittington*

schedule, and Sheila left *The Three Degrees* in 1986 to look after her young twin daughters – who are now aged 28. She settled in Bray, Berkshire, where she lived for 27 years, before moving to her current home in Palma, Majorca.

"For the time I was in the group, it was manic," says Sheila. "Every day you get off the plane in a different country.

"I remember doing a tour of the Far East and returned home. There were my little four-year-old twins and they clung to their nanny's legs. My heart dropped. I said, 'That's it, it's got to stop', so I made plans to leave and look after them myself. I have no regrets because I know my kids grew up happy."

And since then, she has made a surprisingly un-American reinvention – as the Queen Of Pantomime. Her appearance in *The Regent Theatre's Dick Whittington*, alongside Jonathan Wilkes, will be her fifth such Christmas show and she's once again looking forward to the challenge.

"I'm at the stage that when I work, I work because I want to, not because I have to," she says. "There's no such

thing as panto in America. I love it because it's the one time of the year I can stop being an adult and be a kid."

Sheila is currently in the thick of rehearsals for her starring turn in *Stoke*. And because of the busy schedule ahead – the cast take just two days off over Christmas and New Year – she's wary of catching the dreaded sniffles.

"I've been on *Day Nurse*, *Night Nurse*, *Lemspip* and everything I can buy in readiness for this because I have to really sing," she laughs. "I've got to sing full out, it's the only way I know."

So by taking on the role of Fairy Oatcakes, has Sheila been tempted to try our most famous local delicacy?

"I arrived here in November and ate my first oatcake the other day," she says. "I was dreading it but I ended up having three. The fans on my website were warning me, 'You better stay away from them or you'll lose your figure,' but they're so moreish with cheese and bacon."

■ *Dick Whittington* runs from Thursday, December 10 until Sunday, January 10, 2010.

Sheila Ferguson in her Fairy Oatcakes costume for *The Regent Theatre's* production of *Dick Whittington*. Right, Sheila during her time in *The Three Degrees*. Main picture: Phil Radcliffe



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