



CELEBRITY

On life with Elton John and who (surprise!) baby Zachary's godmother might be

DAVID FURNISH IN CONVERSATION WITH ELIO IANNACCI

PRODUCER DAVID FURNISH and Elton John became parents of a new baby on Christmas Day. Furnish's latest movie is a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* featuring garden gnomes.

Q: Your producing portfolio is quite diverse. In 1999 you produced *Women Talking Dirty*, in 2005 you produced the Broadway version of *Billy Elliot* and, most recently, you produced your first animated feature *Gnomeo & Juliet*. What common thread runs through all your projects?

A: I hope a thread that promotes inclusiveness. When Elton and I work on things, we want to invest our time, creativity and energy in things that hopefully bring the world closer together, not further apart. If you look at *Gnomeo & Juliet*, the movie's message essentially says it doesn't matter if you're a "red" or a "blue," at the end of the day, parents should love their children and want what's best for them. Elton and I try not to be judgmental people. We are not advocates in the placard-carrying way, we just try to live our life by example.

Q: Do you think *Gnomeo & Juliet's* anti-war

message is something children should learn about at an early age?

A: I do. We live in a confused world at the moment. It's a world that seems to be less about tolerance and less about togetherness. People seem to be more and more divided. There is such [debate] over civil rights for all couples and [laws surrounding] people just wanting to have marriage or some form of civil union to ratify their relationship. Many seem to be tarring a lot of Muslims with the same brush. What's happening in terms of terrorism has been such a tiny sect of extreme people within a religion. I think people get fearful of things they don't know or understand. Out of ignorance and fear comes judgment and division.

Q: *Gnomeo & Juliet* has already made over \$55 million at the box office. Did you think it would be this successful when you signed on?

A: It's just nice to be in a situation after 11 years where we can see it finally find its wings and people are responding. It's a big dream come true.

Q: In 1997, you directed a documentary about

Elton John called *Tantrums & Tiaras*. Elton fans keep asking for a sequel. Would you consider making one?

A: I had a whole layer of objectivity then that I don't know if I can bring to our world anymore. There has been such evolution and growth in both of us since that was made. I don't think it will be entertaining anymore because Elton is much more settled, happier and more centred. Having Zack has been another step in our evolution and a grounding influence for both of us.

Q: Speaking of Zachary, what was your first reaction to the news that a Harps grocery store in Arkansas decided to place a family shield protective cover over the *Us* Weekly magazine that you, Zachary and Elton posed for?

A: I was disappointed but not outraged. They put the shield up and two days later, they took it down. That is progress in its own right.

Q: What do you think needs to happen for the majority of Republicans to accept gay families?

A: People have to realize that these issues take time and this is a new concept and the world is not going to change overnight. As

far as Elton and I are concerned, we try to be good people, we are going to try our best to be good parents. People will realize the sky is not going to fall because we have a son.

Q: Have you felt a lot of support from home?

A: I'm always very proud when people ask me about being a Canadian. I know when [Stephen Harper] was elected he talked about repealing gay marriage—legislation that was already passed in Canada. When it went to the House of Commons, more people voted to keep it than put it in in the first place. That is a sign of society taking a step, walking into unknown territory and realizing that this isn't going to be the destruction of the moral fabric of our society. This isn't going to hurt or kill anybody. I believe that collectively we are all stronger. People in relationships are stronger—same thing goes for family units.

Q: Elton has recently been quoted as saying that he feels like a second-class citizen in America because of his sexuality.

A: I think Elton was aiming that at people who judge him on the basis of his sexuality and those who try not to acknowledge that he, I or our son deserves equal rights. That's when he feels like a second-class citizen. I do feel Canada is much more progressive and more accepting on all sorts of levels relating to same-sex couples and families. Elton loves America, we have homes here, the country has been good to him—there is a whole side of America where he feels like a first-class citizen. It's just when a certain segment of society tries to beat us up with things like putting a [family shield] over *Us* magazine that makes you feel like a

second-class citizen.

Q: Did becoming a godfather to Elizabeth Hurley's son and being around Elton's godchildren—Victoria and David Beckham's three boys—help motivate you to be a father?

A: It all went into the pot [laughs]. I've always loved children and having godchildren added to that. I had a very happy upbringing, two very loving parents and great brothers. My brothers went on to have families of their own. It was always a big dream of mine and something Elton was less familiar with since he was an only child.

Coming from a broken home, his perspective was a little different than mine. [Especially] the joy and beauty of what a family could be—in all of its shapes and sizes. I think with Elton, the lightning struck when he walked into the orphanage and saw that little boy [Lev, an HIV-positive Ukrainian toddler], who is now fortunately going to be adopted. The disappointment we had with not adopting him was profound but it did start something in Elton that led us down the path we are on today. We couldn't be happier with how things ended up.

Q: Correct me if I'm wrong but Lady Gaga has been named Zachary's godmother. What led you to choose her?

A: We haven't publicly confirmed that yet but your sources are very good! I prefer not to comment on it because we are going to make a statement about godparents later on.

Q: Do you believe Lady Gaga has the potential to influence today's generation in the same way Madonna and Elton have?

A: Absolutely. The strongest thing that Gaga has—putting her amazing musical talent aside—is that she has such a connection with her fans. She has 25 million followers on Facebook and she communicates to fans [via] Twitter in a regular, ongoing way.

Q: Her knowledge of civil and human rights is impressive. What do you think about the type of messages she sends out to her fans?

A: She's all about inclusiveness and tolerance. She believes that you can be whoever you want to be and that we don't have to live in a world of conformity and that we can all [benefit] from individuality. That's the best message in the world. The freedom to be who you are, do what you want and love who you want to love.

Q: And you'd like that kind of message to be around your family?

A: Absolutely. Elton and I don't talk about

what we hope Zachary grows up to be—musician, doctor or whatever. We just hope he grows up to be happy and that he's able to do what he wants to do in life and has the freedom to take whatever path.

Q: Many people associate you with the success of the *White Tie and Tiara* ball since you are a key board member of the Elton John AIDS Foundation. Is it true you start planning the next ball a week after the last one is held?

A: We do. The landscape is very competitive in fundraising so we go through [a rundown of] what worked at the event the week right after—the decor, food, ambiance, entertainment, pace and even flowers. When we started *White Tie* we were the first event of that scale. No one had charged 1,000 pounds a ticket. There's now a lot of people who have followed our lead so we have to stay on our toes and offer the best experience.

Q: In an early magazine profile, you were called "the musical inspiration and the deciding vote" in your marriage. Is that true?

A: No. Elton doesn't need inspiration where music is concerned. I like to think of our marriage as a democracy. Sometimes it goes my way, sometimes his. If all is going well, it goes both our ways. Elton's musical prowess is enormous. Just look at his latest record with Leon Russell. I didn't tell him to pick up the phone and call Leon, that was his decision.

Q: Are there any songs Elton has recorded that are about you?

A: The only song he ever referred to is called *My Elusive Drug*. When he wrote it at the time, he said, "This is about you." The lyrics [speak] to how I was something Elton was looking for all his life and how it took a while for him to find me. The song also [implies] that when he did find [me], he was grateful.

Q: What's next in terms of producing projects?

A: I'm taking six months off because we have a new son and *Gnomeo & Juliet* was a long process. All I'm thinking about is making sure Elton, Zachary and I are together as much as possible, so we'll be on the road with [Elton]. Now that we have a son together, I want us to spend more time together and I don't want Elton to miss out.

Q: Are you thinking of bringing Elton and Zachary to your parents' place in Scarborough, Ont?

A: Yes, I think it's time. Elton hasn't been yet and he needs to see where I grew up because I've been where he's grown up. ♣