



P R E S S   P A C K

# Breathe: Five Arias That Saved My Life

Katy Lees | Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2026

---

*‘Moving, powerful, framed beautifully. Breathe is brilliant — just go!’*

Lisa Spirling, Artistic Director, Stratford East Theatre

---

## CONTENTS

1. About the Show
2. The Story Behind *Breathe*
3. Why Now: the Mesothelioma Moment
4. About Mesothelioma
5. About Katy Lees — Full Biography
6. Performance Details
7. Quotes & Reviews
8. Media Angles & Interview Themes
9. Key Dates & Press Opportunities
10. Production Team
11. Photography
12. Media Contact

## 1. ABOUT THE SHOW

---

***Breathe: Five Arias That Saved My Life*** is an extraordinary autobiographical one-woman show by soprano Katy Lees, written with director Amy Phillips. It is the true story of one of the UK's longest-living survivors of mesothelioma, a rare and deadly form of cancer. Told with humour, emotional honesty, and virtuoso live singing, the show interweaves Katy's personal story of survival with the five opera arias by Puccini, Mozart, Verdi, Bellini, and Bernstein that became her lifeline.

Duration: approximately 60 minutes. No interval.

### **100-word programme note**

*When soprano Katy Lees was given months to live, she defiantly replied: 'Fine, I'll have 600.' But Katy had to decide: even if she lived, would she ever sing again? 238 months (twenty years) later, one of the longest-living British survivors of mesothelioma tells her captivating story, with the help of Puccini, Mozart, Verdi, Bellini and Bernstein — the music that rescued her. This extraordinary one-woman show, told with humour and unflinching honesty, will tear you apart and put you back together again, with renewed faith in the courage of human nature.*

A glorious collision of storytelling, opera, virtuoso singing, inspiration, and playful audience participation.

### **40-word summary**

*Extraordinary autobiographical one-woman show by one of the longest-living British survivors of mesothelioma. Soprano Katy Lees tells her beyond-inspiring story, featuring the music that rescued her. A love letter to hope and the courage of human nature.*

### **The Five Arias**

- **Puccini** — *Sola, perduta, abbandonata* (from *Manon Lescaut*)
- **Bernstein** — *Glitter and Be Gay* (from *Candide*)
- **Mozart** — *Dove sono i bei momenti* (from *The Marriage of Figaro*)
- **Verdi** — *Pace, pace il mio Dio* (from *La Forza del Destino*)
- **Bellini** — *Casta Diva* (from *Norma*)

**Promotional film:** [Available at this link](#) (or see [www.cancer-diva.co.uk](http://www.cancer-diva.co.uk))



Katy Lees in *Breathe: Five Arias That Saved My Life* | Photo: Doug Ross

## 2. THE STORY BEHIND *BREATHE*

In October 2006, Katy Lees was 38 years old, married with two young children, and building an international career as a classical soprano, when she received a diagnosis of mesothelioma. The prognosis was stark: months, not years.

Six weeks after the diagnosis, 800 musicians, family and friends gathered in her local church in Wimbledon for a concert performed entirely by their musician friends. Something shifted. Katy was in less pain afterwards. She began, slowly and inexplicably, to recover.

She attributes that shift, in part, to opera. The arias she returned to again and again through treatment (by Puccini, Mozart, Verdi, Bellini, and Bernstein) met her intensity. They gave her emotions somewhere to go: fear, grief, anger, and even hope, each held momentarily in the strength of the music.

*‘Opera didn’t calm the storm; it allowed me to step inside it safely, long enough for the heat to diminish.’*

— Katy Lees

Nearly twenty years later, Katy is still here. And after eighteen years — a combination of survivor’s guilt and simply getting on with living — she has finally written a show that’s a testament to the power and beauty of this music.

*‘You have to take your show to more people. You have to give them hope.’*

— Professor Stan Kaye, Katy’s oncologist, after seeing *Breathe*

### 3. WHY NOW: THE MESOTHELIOMA MOMENT

---

Katy's story is not only extraordinary on its own terms; it arrives at a moment of unusual national attention on mesothelioma. Asbestos-related cancers are increasingly in the public eye, driven in part by high-profile litigation in the United States: nearly 90,000 lawsuits have been filed against Johnson & Johnson, alleging that asbestos contamination in its talcum powder products caused mesothelioma and ovarian cancer. The legal proceedings have generated sustained media coverage due to the tragedy of this disease.

Katy Lees is a human counter-story to that legal abstraction: what survival looks like when all the odds say no. She offers media a rare combination of genuine news relevance, personal depth, and extraordinary music.

For journalists covering health, cancer, women's lives, or the arts, Katy's story sits at an unusually compelling intersection. This is not a story that only opera lovers will recognise. It is a story about love, fear, and the things that keep us alive.

### 4. ABOUT MESOTHELIOMA

---

Mesothelioma is a rare and aggressive cancer affecting the lining of the lungs, abdomen, or heart. It is most commonly associated with past exposure to asbestos, and the prognosis remains poor — typically just a few months from diagnosis. In the United Kingdom, approximately 2,700 people are diagnosed with mesothelioma each year.

Despite the work of extraordinary research teams, there is still no known cure. Treatment typically involves chemotherapy, surgery, and palliative care. Survival beyond two years remains uncommon.

Katy Lees is believed to be one of the longest-living survivors of mesothelioma in the United Kingdom. Her survival remains, in the words of her medical team, unexplained.

For further information, visit: [www.cancer-diva.co.uk/about-mesothelioma](http://www.cancer-diva.co.uk/about-mesothelioma) and [www.mesothelioma.uk.com](http://www.mesothelioma.uk.com)

## 5. ABOUT KATY LEES — FULL BIOGRAPHY



Katy Lees | Photo: John Stone

Katy Lees studied music at Cambridge University and singing at the Guildhall School of Music, going on to build an international career as a classical soprano performing across the UK, Europe, the United States, and the Middle East in opera, oratorio, and recital. She has worked with conductors and directors including Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Mark Elder, Jonathan Miller, Annilese Miskimmon, Paul McCreech, and Tadaaki Otaka, with roles including Tatyana in *Eugene Onegin* and Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*.

In October 2006, her career was brought to an abrupt halt by a diagnosis of peritoneal mesothelioma, an exceptionally rare and aggressive cancer affecting the lining of the abdomen. There was no known cure; the prognosis was months. What followed confounded the medical profession. Slowly, inexplicably, Katy began to recover.

During and after treatment, her relationship with her voice changed profoundly. Singing stopped being about pursuing a technically perfect sound and became instead about emotional authenticity. She trained in the Estill Vocal Model, broadening her vocal palette beyond classical technique to include musical theatre, jazz, and pop. She worked extensively in schools and community settings. She established a choir for female voices: Katy's Songbirds ([@ksongbirds24](https://www.instagram.com/ksongbirds24)).

Convinced by her own experience of the healing power of collective music-making, Katy became passionate about reframing opera as intimate, real, and deeply human rather than a remote or elite art form. That conviction is at the heart of *Breathe*.

The show represents Katy's debut at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, following a development period during which it received outstanding responses from peers and early audiences. A national tour is planned to follow the Edinburgh run. Katy is a member of the Independent Society of Musicians.

### **Selected performance highlights**

**Leading Operatic Roles:** Performed prestigious lyric soprano roles, including Fiordiligi (*Così fan tutte*) at the historic Aldeburgh Festival under the baton of Tadaaki Otaka, and both Fiordiligi and Tatyana (*Eugene Onegin*) at the Royal Opera House's Linbury Studio Theatre.

**Groundbreaking Staged Masterworks:** Selected for the original cast of Jonathan Miller's historic, critically acclaimed staging of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* at Holy Trinity Sloane Square — a revolutionary, immersive production performed in the round that redefined the presentation of sacred choral music.

**Elite Vocal Specialisms:** Selected for advanced study of Russian song repertoire at the Britten-Pears School, training directly under the legendary world-renowned soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya.

**Professional Choral Projects:** Performed in elite vocal ensembles under the direction of legendary conductors, including Sir John Eliot Gardiner and Mark Elder.

### **Community and education work**

**Katy's Songbirds female voice choir:** Founder and director of Katy's Songbirds, a vibrant community choir for female voices based in South West London, dedicated to exploring the joy, connection, and healing power of collective, communal singing.

**Vocal Coaching & Education:** Worked extensively across schools and community settings, delivering inspiring vocal workshops and music education programs designed to make high-level vocal technique accessible to all ages.

## **6. PERFORMANCE DETAILS**

**TITLE:** *Breathe: Five Arias That Saved My Life*

**WRITTEN & PERFORMED BY:** Katy Lees

**DIRECTED BY:** Amy Phillips

**DURATION:** Approximately 60 minutes (no interval)

**WEBSITE:** [www.cancer-diva.co.uk](http://www.cancer-diva.co.uk)

**TICKETS:** [Available here](#)

**INSTAGRAM:** [@katyleesbreathe](#)

**VENUE 1:** St Vincent's – 197, Edinburgh Festival Fringe

**DATES:** 9–14 August 2026

**PRESS NIGHT:** 9 August 2026

**VENUE 2:** The Royal Scots Club – 241, Edinburgh Festival Fringe

**DATES:** 17–22 August 2026

**PRESS NIGHT:** 17 August 2026

## 7. QUOTES & REVIEWS

---

*‘Moving, powerful, framed beautifully. It also brought me much closer to opera. Breathe is brilliant — just go!’*

— **Lisa Spirling, Artistic Director, Stratford East Theatre**

*‘This amazing show is by turns uplifting, frightening and inspiring. Katy’s story is truly astonishing, and her raw energy, emotion and musical talent shines through.’*

— **Declan Costello, Consultant ENT Surgeon**

*‘Uplifting, inspiring, devastating, but laugh-out-loud funny — and wow, the music!’*

— **Morgan Pochin Music Productions**

### Audience responses

- *‘This show has been beautifully crafted with some of the most taxing arias in the soprano repertoire. Just amazing!’*
- *‘I was so mesmerised by your powerful story, incredible voice, and the true emotion behind everything you did.’*
- *‘Everyone can learn from your incredible strength, bravery, and music’s ability to lift us out of dark times in life.’*
- *‘I thought I might cry, but I didn’t expect to laugh so much.’*
- *‘Breathe is the most extraordinary piece of theatre. It is unbelievably moving, but at the same time incredibly uplifting.’*
- *‘Katy’s journey through cancer is one of amazing faith, resilience and strength born of her family. Her voice is so beautiful, she truly sings from the heart, and Mozart’s ‘Dove sono’ will touch your soul.’*
- *‘You need to give the world your show.’*

## 8. MEDIA ANGLES & INTERVIEW THEMES

---

### Katy’s cancer journey

- The UK’s longest-living survivor of mesothelioma: how Katy defied a terminal prognosis
- What it felt like to be diagnosed at 38 with two small children
- What survival really looks like: beyond the ‘fighting talk’ narrative of cancer
- Survivor’s guilt: what it’s like to live when others haven’t

### Telling her story

- Eighteen years in the making: why it took so long to tell this story

- 
- Why she decided to make the show now, and what she hopes audiences take away
  - Her message to others with mesothelioma or anyone facing a terminal diagnosis

### **The healing power of music**

- Opera as medicine: the five arias that held Katy together through cancer treatment
- The Wimbledon concert: when 800 musicians came together out of love
- The healing power of communal singing: from her own experience to her work with choirs and schools
- The role music played in Katy's survival — and the science behind it
- Why opera is not an elite art form: accessibility, emotion, and the human voice

### **News hooks (2026-relevant)**

- Johnson & Johnson asbestos/talc litigation: nearly 90,000 lawsuits
- Katy as a human counter-story to that legal abstraction
- Growing public and media conversation about asbestos exposure, corporate responsibility, and rare cancers
- Edinburgh Fringe 2026: a debut that has been 238 months in the making

## **9. KEY DATES & PRESS OPPORTUNITIES**

---

The following dates offer distinct and time-sensitive press opportunities. Katy Lees is available for interview, photography, and broadcast media in connection with each.

### **26 June 2026 — Katy's Songbirds Blue Light Walk with Opera, Wimbledon**

On the eve of Wimbledon 2026 (*The Championships open on Monday 29 June*), Katy Lees leads her female choir, Katy's Songbirds, on a sponsored Blue Light Walk through the streets of Wimbledon in aid of Mesothelioma UK. The walk starts from Wimbledon Tennis and ends at The Earl Beatty, with pop-up operatic performances at The Dog & Fox, The Hand in Hand, and Raynes Park Station along the route.

With press and photographers already converging on SW19 for Wimbledon fortnight, this is an unusually visual and accessible press opportunity: a choir of women singing opera at pub stops across south-west London, led by one of the UK's longest-living survivors of mesothelioma. It is the definition of a picture story.

Donate and follow the walk: [www.justgiving.com/page/katys-songbirds](http://www.justgiving.com/page/katys-songbirds)

**29 June 2026 — Wimbledon Championships open**

The 139th Wimbledon Championships begin at the All England Lawn Tennis Club, running through to 12 July. The Songbirds walk on 26 June is timed to coincide with the Wimbledon build-up week, when media attention on SW19 is at its highest. Any journalist filing Wimbledon preview coverage that week has a compelling human-interest sidebar on their doorstep.

**3 July 2026 — Action Mesothelioma Day**

Action Mesothelioma Day (AMD) is the UK's national annual awareness day for mesothelioma and asbestos-related cancer, held on the first Friday of July and organised by Mesothelioma UK. Events take place across the UK, bringing together patients, families, carers and campaigners. This year's campaign invites supporters to 'Go Blue for Meso' through Blue Light Walks, building illuminations and other awareness activities.

Katy Lees is available to media as a spokesperson and interviewee in the days leading up to and following AMD, as one of the UK's longest-living survivors of the disease. Her story is a compelling centrepiece for any AMD feature or package.

More information: [www.mesothelioma.uk.com](http://www.mesothelioma.uk.com)

**9–14 August 2026 — Breathe opens at Edinburgh Festival Fringe**

St Vincent's – 197, Edinburgh. Press night: 9 August 2026

**17–22 August 2026 — Breathe, second run at Edinburgh Festival Fringe**

The Royal Scots Club – 241, Edinburgh. Press night: 17 August 2026

**Week of 30 August 2026 — Mesothelioma UK BBC Radio 4 Appeal**

Mesothelioma UK is the featured charity on the BBC Radio 4 Appeal during the week of 30 August, sharing personal stories of those affected by mesothelioma with a national audience. Katy is available as a survivor voice for any associated broadcast coverage, features, or interviews connected to the Appeal.

---

**10. PRODUCTION TEAM**

---

**Written & performed by:** Katy Lees

**Directed & co-written by:** Amy Phillips

**Piano accompanist recording:** Giles Kennedy (Ben Robbins/Umbrella Studios)

**Producer:** Katy Carrington

**Sound & lighting design:** Andrew McBride

**Sound & lighting crew:** Harry Lees, Natasha Lees

**Publicist:** Natasha Lees

## 11. PHOTOGRAPHY

---

All images are cleared for press use in connection with Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2026 coverage of *Breathe*. Please credit as indicated throughout press pack.



*Katy Lees in Breathe: Five Arias That Saved My Life | Photo: Doug Ross*



*Katy Lees | Photo: John Stone*



*Katy Lees with her choir Katy's Songbirds | Photo: John Stone*

High-resolution images available for download at: [Dropbox press photo folder](#)

Promotional film: [Available at this link](#) (or request via publicist)

Follow Katy's Edinburgh Fringe journey, behind-the-scenes rehearsal content, and live updates from the run at [@katyleesbreathe](#) on Instagram — additional visual assets suitable for digital and social media coverage are posted regularly.

## 12. MEDIA CONTACT

---

For press enquiries, interview requests, photography, and review tickets, please contact:

**Natasha Lees**

E: [Natasha.Lees1@outlook.com](mailto:Natasha.Lees1@outlook.com)

T: +44 (0)7519 978979

Website: [www.cancer-diva.co.uk](http://www.cancer-diva.co.uk)

Instagram: [@katyleesbreathe](#)

---

*Cancer Diva 2026 | All press materials confidential until agreed embargo date*