

# A son's story

*Between The Ears* – *My Month With Carmen* Saturday 27 January 10.00pm BBC Radio 3



*Lou Stein's mother, Carmen Stein*

Cancer is never an easy subject to read or write about, but when it's your own mother's illness you're discussing, and you know it's only a matter of time before the disease takes her life, most people would find it impossible. Not so for Lou Stein, the director, writer and producer of *My Month With Carmen*, the touching story of his relationship with his dying mother, which can be heard on Radio 3 this week. Jane Dudley met Lou as the first anniversary of

Carmen's death approached and discovered that, although it's a play he probably wishes he'd never had to write, it both helped him to get to know his mother again and to grieve for her when she passed away.

"I wanted to write about this experience, which is both about a man encountering a woman's disease, cervical cancer, and about a son's relationship to a mother. I thought if it's too schmaltzy, it becomes simply a story about me and my mother which,

although it's very touching, there are a million stories like that already. So I really wanted to broaden it out so that people could relate to it."

Lou's experience started in the summer of 1999 when, while working in London, as he had for the past 20 years, he received a 'phone call telling him of his mother's condition. She had, doctors thought, only days left to live.

"People literally said: 'Make peace with your mother as quickly as you can,' so you're on the plane thinking 'Okay, how do I do this? What does it actually mean, make peace?'" recalls Lou. "I thought, 'I'll say I love her, that's what the movies say,' but, of course, that doesn't work because she just rolled over on her side and more or less said 'Bugger off!'"

In *My Month With Carmen*, Lou's first play for radio, he likens this "peacemaking" to a theatre director saying: "Okay everybody, we'll go into role-play now. Your mother's dying of cancer, you've got 15 minutes to come to peace with her. I'll play the mother."

"That's what it was like," he explains. "Suddenly I'm in London, I'm working on a theatre project and the next moment I'm in a strange world, I'm in Florida, dealing with a woman who is my mother, and also a woman I don't know."

Lou's relationship with his mother had, by his own admission, been difficult at times, largely, he feels, due to him leaving her and his sister behind in New York, firstly to go to university, then to build a career in London. He had long been the head of the family – his father died when he was just seven – and felt a certain amount of resentment from his mother when he left home. "There was a distance between us both culturally and socially which, for many years of my life, I was running away from," says Lou.