



My London Mal Barton

The Royal Opera House Live cinema season sees nine productions screened in over 900 cinemas worldwide, including the ballet *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland* on 28 Mar. Mal Barton, Head Of Costume Workroom at the venue, talks about the magic that goes on behind the scenes. *By Jo Caird*

Alice's Adventures In Wonderland is a revival, having been first performed in 2010. How will you go about preparing for the show?

It's a co-production that we share with the National Ballet of Canada, so it's just done a tour throughout North America and the costumes will have been altered for that company. The costumes come back to us and it's about getting them to fit and look as they should. But also we'll have some cast changes so there will be some new costumes to make. The ballet is all about movement, so the cut and fit is vital.

What happens after the fittings are done?

The running teams set the show, put the costumes in the dressing rooms, look after the artists, make sure everything is dry cleaned and laundered and as it should be, and manage the dressers, [who help the artists into and out of their outfits during the show].

Some of ROH's productions are nearly 40-year-olds – how do you go about recreating them?

We keep very meticulous records of fabrics and everything else, so the supervisors work with those records, oversee the fittings and buy the fabrics. In the workroom you're restoring, conserving, repairing and altering, keeping it looking exactly as it did when it was first designed.

It sounds like things must get pretty busy around here...

We do over 6,000 fittings a season, purely for revivals. And we're putting on a big opera or ballet every seven to 10 days. The big productions will have 500-600 costumes.

You've worked at the ROH for over 30 years and in your current role for 12 – what's your favourite aspect of the job?

Working with the team and with the dancers and singers, generally trying to get them what they want. I think that's probably the most exciting, because it's the most challenging. It's not unusual for us to put someone who's a size 18 into a size 10. My favourite place is still the wings [the area at the sides of the stage out of sight of the audience]. Even after all these years I still find it really exciting.

Have you always loved ballet and opera?

Not before I came here, but I've absolutely grown to love it. I have opera and ballet music at home that I listen to. Like most art forms, it takes a bit of work, you can't go watch and listen and expect it all to be fabulous – it does take a bit of input from you. You have to know the story, think about what's going on and maybe sometimes familiarise yourself with the performers and their own interpretations.

Do you have a favourite show?

That's very hard. I think for the ballet my favourite is probably *Mayerling*: it's a wonderful story and has incredible choreography. I've worked on it for many, many years, so you get quite attached. And for the opera, it's the old favourites really, so *Madame Butterfly* and *La Bohème*.

Alice In Wonderland will be screened live in cinemas – does that bring additional challenges?

Costumes for opera or ballet are designed and made to be looked at from a minimum of 25 feet away, whereas the cameras are very close. I don't wish to brag, but I'm confident that our costumes are always good enough to be seen by camera – we haven't really done anything different. Also you have to bear in mind that it is a theatrical performance, it's not a movie, so the element of theatricality is valid.

You're based in an enviable location here at the ROH, right in the centre of London – what's your top tip for visitors to the capital?

For me it's really the galleries and museums, so take a look, find out what's on and make that effort to get there because you're just spoilt for choice. At the V&A (p. 59) there's something for everyone, from fashion and antiques to pre-history. And, of course, everyone should come to the Opera House (p. 77)!

IMAGE © JO CAIRD

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