

## **NCP Costumes 1960-1993**

**by Mary Epsom**

“Will you do the costumes?”

The costumes – the hats, the crowns, the ball gowns, the capes. The gold-braided uniforms, the rags! The costumes that complete the illusion of reality on our stage.

Where to begin? Read the script, again and again, and think. Talk to the Director. The Director wants the NCP production to look like the original London show! Take a deep breath, read the script again, think, and begin to plan. Organise a costume team.

### Start to work

List the scenes in each act. Place. Day/night. Actors in the scene.

List the cast, the character to be played, name of actor.

List measurements of each actor plus size of head and shoe. Tailor to be present.

Sketch each costume required. Talk to tailor. Note quantity of materials required for each. Work on the colour scheme.

Explore the bazaars for the type of materials required – price per yard. Take samples of each suitable and attach to the costume sketches.

Present rough budget to NCP. Director to OK designs.

### Get going

Buy all the materials that are required. Tailor to make the costumes.

Organise fittings before rehearsals times.

And then - the right buttons, the right lace, the right sequins, the right ribbons .... all have to be found and costumes trimmed.

Next - hats have to be made and trimmed.

Hand bags, gloves, parasols all have to be found, borrowed or made.

Practice with quick-change costumes.

Finally – two dress rehearsals.

Under the stage, Mr Bhadresa, my sewing machine and I are hard at work with last minute adjustments...a little too tight, too loose, to short, too long! Mr Bhadresa cheerfully nodding and telling me that 'all automatically coming right!' Lots of help given by the team, last minute sticking on of more sequins, or ensuring every cast member has the right costume at the right time. After each scene checking that costumes are properly hung up in each dressing room for the next performance. These are long nights, but we feel we are winning!

Special mention must be made here of those ladies who joined the costume team and gave invaluable help and support on many shows. For some big musical the team grew to 10 or more, for smaller shows maybe one or two. There were some regular helpers such as Shirley Bishop, Barbara Maynard, Betty Larkins, Evelyn Kalibbala, Brenda Purcell, Jenney Dunnet, Marian Walker and Jocelyn Rait, Marian Johnson and Elise van der Linden. Some of these ladies took on the Costume Design for other NCP shows.

Betty Larkins not only made all the dresses and all the hats for the Ascot scene in *My Fair Lady*, she also made Eliza's ball gown. Amazing!



*My Fair Lady hats*

Jocelyn Rait cut out and made all the 15<sup>th</sup> century shoes out of soft leather for *Kiss Me Kate*. Amazing!



*Jocelyn*

\*\*\*Special mention must also be made of Mr Bhadresa our tailor from 1963 to 1979, when he left Kenya to join his family in UK. Mr Bhadresa could cut out costumes from my sketches. He was a fast worker and understood the pressures of theatrical work. He was very obliging and would agree to work at any hour if needed. We worked happily together for all those years – I designed, he cut and sewed, I trimmed and decorated. Together we were responsible for well over 2,500 costumes. Thank you, Mr Bhadresa.

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### **Challenges**

Sometimes we need to find really difficult things for our shows and somehow, they are found, because people are so willing to help. Sometimes with advice, or lending something, or finding a useful contact. Good entertainment is highly valued, and people look forward to coming to the Theatre.

*Annie Get Your Gun & Oklahoma*

We need cowboy boots. The Prison workshop will make them.

We need Stetsons. The John B. Stetson Co., Philadelphia gave them to us!

Conduct Unbecoming We need swords & scabbards. An S.O.S to Clubs, and swords appear.

Cabaret

We need a fur coat. One appears on loan.

We need fur stoles. We have them on loan.

We need a gorilla. Swiss Air flies out a hired costume.

Caesar & Cleopatra

We need Peacock feathers. We are given 20.

My Fair Lady

We need Ostrich feathers. The Game Department give us lots.

We need lots of buttons. Box of old metal fly button found in bazaar and painted for Pearly King and Queen.

Mother Goose

We need white feathers. Everyone helps. They all need to be washed.

Conduct Unbecoming/The Cain Mutiny Court Martial/Ross

Military and Naval Uniforms. Kenyan army uniform makers will make ours. Sample uniforms loaned by retired officers.

Oklahoma

A surrey with a fringe on top. The Norfolk Hotel has one and will lend it.

Cinderella

A pony for Cinderella's coach.

One comes with horsebox and groom.

## **Necessity is the mother of invention**

12 Siamese dancers' headdresses. Find pictures of how they look. Try to imagine how I can copy these. I soak some heavy buckram [the sort for making lampshades] and press it over my Vaseline greased wooden wig block. When it is dry and stiff, trim round the edge to fit a head. Get a long plastic knitting needle and push it through the top so that it sticks up straight. Thread onto the needle different sizes of things, a cotton reel, a little film spool, a different shaped cotton reel, a piece of a toy, a large wooden bead [I have been collecting a lot of useful shapes for this]. Wet a plaster-of-Paris bandage and wrap it round all these items threaded onto the needle. Let it all dry firm and stiff. Line the edge of the inside of the headdress with a strip of foam rubber so that it fits well to the head and does not slip. Spray the headdress with gold paint. When dry, glue on some sequins and some gold braid to decorate. Now repeat 11 times!!!!

Masks and headdress for Wicked Simon of Legree and the hunting dogs. I have made a plaster-of-Paris model face. Grease with Vaseline and stretch wet heavy buckram over it to take on the shape of the face. When stiff and dry cut the eye holes and space for mouth. Trim edge to fit face. Make a shape to fit the head and glue to the top of the mask so that the headdress fits securely. Cut shapes to build around the basic mask to make it as terrifying as possible. Spray with black paint. Decorate with gold streaks and flame like shapes. The face must be terrifying. Add strip of foam rubber inside for a comfortable fit.

Hunting dog masks also made on the model face in the same way, adding ears and snouts.

Trick Hat 'Annie has to shoot a decorative bird off the top of a lady's hat' I am told. I have a suitable hat, I have a stuffed decorative feather bird, but how to make it look as if it is shot off the hat. Finally, a little toy Jack-in-the-box provides the answer. The spring mechanism of the toy is stitched onto the hat and hidden with a little flower decoration. The bird sits snugly on top. The actress holds a very thin piece of fishing line. This is attached to the release catch of the spring. When she pulls it, the catch is released and the bird flies off the hat! Annie has to aim her rifle and fire [a blank was fired off stage] - it worked every night.

Pantomime Animals – I made a cow, a camel, a cat, a panda, a goose [head and feet loaned from an actress in UK], and a huge octopus for an 'under the sea'

scene. They were all big enough for one or two actors to get inside. The story of how these were done is too long to tell. Just let me say it all involved chicken wire, foam rubber, hessian, seize, more wire, buckram, spray paint and glue.



*gorilla and goose*

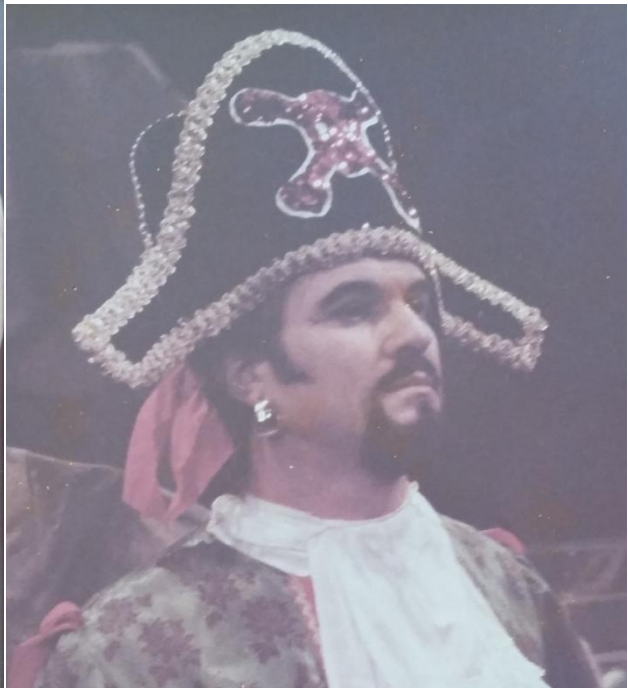
Crinolines I had a problem finding the right wire to sew into the calico petticoat for Anna in *The King and I*. There was no whale bone available! The hooped petticoat was worn under all Anna's costumes. The last wire hoop to be sewn in had to be quite firm to hold out the weight of the satin ball gown that Anna wore in the dance scene. I thought I had done it, but when the actors went into the Polka, the crinoline rose and twisted!!!! I had to weight it down by sewing marbles into the hem. It worked but made it even heavier for Anna to dance.

Then make another 10 crinolines for the King's wives!

Hats The first time we did *My Fair Lady* we were so lucky to have the help of Betty Larkins, who was a trained milliner and made all the fabulous hats for the ladies in the race scene. I learned from her how to use a wooden wig block and how to wet buckram to make the crown of a hat, and how to use seize a stiffening agent, how to design cut and prepare and wire the various brim shapes. With my own wooden wig block I made many hats on it. Pirate hats, cocked hats, Indian headdresses, bonnets, Siamese headdresses, period hats, modern hats, and even a Pearly Queen hat.



I was told very firmly – YOU MUST GET THE HATS RIGHT!





Siamese hats, Pirate's hat, General's hat , Indian chief, Marlene eastern hat, Marlene hat, Hope Red hat





Hello Dolly

All my own work!

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Over the years we were given many useful items to add to the wardrobe. We are given tail coats, morning coats, bowler hats, top hats, army caps, uniforms medals, and sometimes beautiful evening dresses, long kid gloves, ostrich feather fans, things no longer needed in Kenyan society.

Our wardrobe grew and grew and was stored under the theatre stage.