

STITCHER'S STORY



ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

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Dressing the **DAMES**

Michelle Rowley chats with pantomime costume maker Dan Smith to discover the secrets of sewing the biggest and boldest costumes on stage



Dan Smith

If you've experienced the fun of a pantomime in the last few years, there's a very strong chance you've witnessed the incredible work of Dan Smith and his colleagues at D and S Costumes. His small team provides a dazzling array of imaginative costumes for the theatrical sector, as bespoke commissions or for hire, for both amateur and professional productions.

Having run an amateur theatre company himself, Dan knew the costs

and difficulties in sourcing fabulous costumes. Despite no formal training, Dan started to create costumes for his own productions driven not only by necessity but also by his passion for the theatre. Through hard work, determination and hours and hours of research, Dan's incredible costumes went from strength to strength and from theatre to theatre across the country.

Michelle Rowley caught up with Dan to discover what it takes to build a successful costume business and to learn some tricks of the trade.

How have you learned to create such incredible costumes with no formal training?

I taught myself to sew using commercial patterns. I chopped them up to do different things with them and to get a more theatrical style. People started asking me to make things for their productions and then everything really snowballed. You learn quickly when you need to! I taught myself draping first and then pattern-drafting through hard work and dedication. As the work increased, I roped my mum into helping, so I taught her to sew too!

When does sewing for panto start?

It never stops! A dame can finish a panto in January and be ordering their costume for the next one in February. They need the costume by May or June, ready for the poster photoshoot.

Can you talk me through the design process for a pantomime dame costume?

A lot of dames we work with have a very clear idea of the shapes, patterns and colours they like. I'll do a sketch and talk through it with them. The great thing about panto is anything goes. Someone can tell you "I'm doing a scene in a haunted bedroom" and I'll be thinking "Cool, I can think of something whacky!" There are no rules. You can do anything and that's what the kids and families want to see, they want that "Can you believe he was dressed as a hot water bottle!" That's the fun of it.

How do you create the fabulous shape of a pantomime dame's costume?

There are different ways we do it. Sometimes it's a crinoline, which we always make ourselves as it needs to be strong enough not to collapse under the weight of 10 metres of fabric. We use



When the elves came to *Strictly*



The evil stepmother

plumbing pipe as it's really lightweight, strong and flexible. Sometimes we use a petticoat, but it requires hundreds and hundreds of metres of frills, which can get expensive as it's so time consuming. It's also a lot of weight for someone to wear for 50 shows. I've just made a fairy godmother costume for *Cinderella* in Bolton, and we've used a combination of the two methods to achieve the look of the petticoat without so much weight.

What considerations do you have to make for quick costume changes and regular laundering?

We're always looking at ways we can make the costumes as practical as possible. We're also continually exploring new ways to improve things. You learn over time how to make things adaptable. I improved a Buddy the Elf costume for *Elf* yesterday by making the cuffs and collar removable to help with laundry. The hired costumes, which are worn for so many performances, have taught us a lot about which fabrics work and which don't.

How do you deal with the issue of sizing?

We make everything with a very big seam allowance. Everything is split under the arms and overlapped separately so that



Your wishes will come true!



The elves are the same as them, but we make them much skinnier with curly-wurly boots to make them extra silly!

What's your favourite part of your job?

It's always the fitting. It's so fun to see how excited people are to get their costumes, especially in the amateur productions. When they put their costume on they feel amazing and that's very special to me.

we alter side and back seams. The zip is always moveable. We often use lacing at the front, which can give us a few inches and use elastic and Velcro where we can. Over time, we make more and more of each costume in different sizes. Now we own thousands of costumes, and I know roughly all the measurements in my head.

What's been your proudest make?

Ooh, I don't know! We have a couple of fairies that I really love. There's one that's made from beautiful Indian blue velvet that's absolutely covered in stones and mirrors. It sparkles like nothing else and is just so beautiful. We made some dame costumes for Goldilocks that are so camp and silly. For example, one is a circus tent and another is a picnic table. Whenever you make something and people wonder how on earth you made it, that's when you know you've done a good job. I love the idea that people don't know how it's done – that's the magic of it.

Which costume was your biggest challenge?

For an Easter panto of *Beauty and the Beast*, we made a tutu that needed to look flat from the front, but when the dame turned round revealed petticoats up to the neck. Trying to work out how to do that shape was wild, but I always love a challenge! If someone comes to me with something I don't know how to make, it makes me want to make it even more.

What's been the most fun project?

We costumed the opening number of the *Strictly Come Dancing* Christmas show. It was wonderful to watch our elf costumes on TV. We provided all the shoes for the West End production of *Kinky Boots*, so that was a 'pinch me' moment sitting in the audience. But I love them all. I love doing a small village hall as much as a West End gig because people are just as excited. For me, it's not about the number of people watching, it's about how it feels to be the person wearing the costume.

Do you have a favourite character's costume you particularly love doing?

Oh, I always love making a Cinderella! Last year we made six rag dresses and four transformation dresses. I spent hours and hours researching how to make the transformation dresses, which involves lots of hooks and fishing wire. It's incredibly complicated, but so satisfying!

I love the Lord Farquaad and elves' costumes with the pretend legs! We went through so many prototypes of how to do those because it's such a weird one. You can't buy a pattern to make a pair of legs! One day, I just wrapped my legs in cling film and parcel tape to create the pattern. They are attached to a waistband so that you can position them higher or lower to help them reach the ground.



Widow Twankey