

# STITCHES ON STAGE

Revival Costume Department Head at the Royal Opera House, Amanda Hall, shares what it takes to sew for the world's most famous performances

Written by Michelle Rowley



What image does the word ballerina conjure in your mind? For most of us, it's like the opening of a musical jewellery box: an elegant dancer on pointe, with arms aloft and dressed in a beautiful tutu. It's hard to think of ballet without this iconic garment. Swan Lake wouldn't be Swan Lake without an abundance of white tulle. For while the most important aspect of ballet is the dance, the role of the tutu should not be underestimated, and nobody knows that better than leading costume maker Amanda Hall. Swan Lake tutus made by Amanda and the team at the Royal Opera

House can be seen on stage between March and June and in a live screening to local cinemas in April. "I went to Wimbledon School of Art to do a two-year BTEC in Costume Construction. I was lucky to get to know tailor Mervyn Hughes there, who recommended me to the team at Phantom of the Opera. My first job was embellishing costumes for them and I met Phil Reynolds, a well-known costume

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maker. I learnt a tremendous amount from working with Phil and his practical approach to problem solving in costume production."

### FILM AND WEST END

Amanda then spent time working in film and West End productions, often meeting the stars of the screen and stage to fit them for the garments she had made. "I met Rupert Everett to fit the body paddings when he was playing the Prince Regent in The Madness of King George. I probably didn't really need to meet Jack Nicholson to help fit the ties I made him for his Joker role in Batman!" With a love of opera matching her love for costume, Amanda was to find her true home when she started working at the Royal Opera House in 2015. She currently heads the revivals department, whose job is to prepare all the costumes for the many productions in the Royal Opera House's repertoire. "We are a team of 15, who all take pride in our work and always do the absolute best possible job

### STARTING YOUNG

Thanks to an inspirational grandmother, Amanda's love for sewing began at an early age. "My grandmother was born in the early 20th Century and, like many women of that time, was a proficient dressmaker. She sewed for Queen Elizabeth II's mother, but as was customary had to leave her position when she got married. She used to sew my sister and

Tutus made by Amanda and the team at the Royal Opera House can be seen on stage between March and June and in a live screening to local cinemas in April 2024



Credit: Bill Cooper



Stiff net is used on the upper layers of the tutus to hold the shape, but the underlayers have to be softer so that they don't scratch the legs of the dancer or the partner's face when they are lifted

we can. We're usually working on three or four productions at any one time. Our key role is to make the performers safe and look as good as they possibly can in a finite amount of time."

#### ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Every production, from *The Magic Flute* to *Romeo & Juliet*, has its own 'Bible'. This book contains all the information required to stage that show. It includes all the fabric swatches, fabric amounts and photographs of the costumes, including hair and make-up, to keep the look the same as previous revivals. "We have rails of costumes and fabric because we keep absolutely everything. Every scrap of fabric is precious – we don't throw anything away as the fabric may become obsolete and you never know when you might need a small amount to repair or make a new sleeve for example," explains Amanda. "We look at which costumes need altering, repairing or replacing in preparation for the whirlwind of

costume fittings. We take pride in making everything look brand-new, especially when some costumes date back to the original production. Gradually over the years most get replaced once they can no longer be altered or repaired".

#### PERSONAL TOUCH

Each member of the team has a particular dancer within the ballet company that they are responsible for, which helps them to build up a relationship and to get to know their body and adjustment requirements. The time available to prepare a performer's costume can vary greatly. "Sometimes we have a year, sometimes a costume is required the same day. If an opera principal falls ill, a performer who knows the role well will be flown in to take the role. They might arrive at the airport two hours before the show starts and they are taken straight to fittings. In that situation we must work calmly to make any necessary alterations to the first costume. The role of Violetta in *La Traviata* for example, requires three enormous dresses, which are really complicated; we might be working on

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The most challenging costumes are the tutus, says Amanda, on the one hand, creating a light and beautiful ballet outfit and, on the other, making a comfortable and robust costume.

the dress for Act 2 whilst the performer is on stage in Act 1!"

#### BEAUTIFUL AND HARDWEARING

The most challenging costumes are the tutus. While as an audience member we just take in the stunning visuals of a tutu, Amanda and her team must consider not only its beauty but also the fit, durability and comfort of the garment. "The fit is vital; you can't have straps falling off dancers during a performance" says Amanda. Most importantly, the fit must ensure the dancer's safety. "If the tutu doesn't fit perfectly on the dancer's natural waistline, when she spins round her partner will be left holding just the costume!" It's a challenging task to create a light and beautiful outfit that is also robust enough to cope with being tugged off for a quick change and used for a performance night after night.

On average an adult tutu requires 10 metres of tulle, which is hand tied together in twelve

layers. "We use a stiff net on the upper layers to hold the shape, but the under layers need to be softer so that legs don't get scratched and to protect the partner's face when she's sitting on his shoulder." Consideration must also be given to the placement of embellishments. For example, while hand beading looks beautiful, it's important not to place any on the area around the waist or the dancer's partner will get scratched.

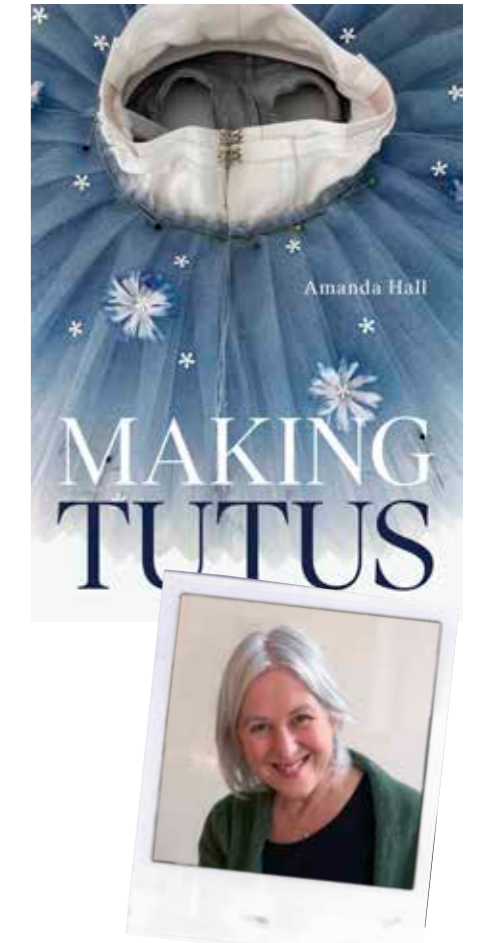
Amanda credits costume maker Jane Johnson with teaching her everything she knows about tutus and considers the tutus they made for the fairies in *Sleeping Beauty* to be amongst some of her favourites. Amanda has since found herself giving back, passing on the wealth of skills and knowledge she has acquired through teaching the tutu-making module on the University Centre South Essex BA (Hons) Costume Construction degree, developed in partnership with the Royal Opera House.

#### TIME TO WRITE

Through teaching on a tutu-making course in the early 2000s, she discovered there was an

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*Making Tutus* by Amanda Hall, is a practical guide to making these traditional costumes for classical ballet dancers. The book is published by Crowood Press and is £20. [www.crowood.com](http://www.crowood.com)



abundance of people who weren't costume students who wanted to learn tutu-making. "I was amazed to discover that the women from Brazil, China, South Korea and Russia on the course had flown in especially!" Her students were predominantly mothers whose daughters had reached a high level of ballet and needed high-grade tutus for competitions. With prices for such tutus ranging between £500 – £600, they were eager to learn the skills required to make them themselves. The 2020 Lockdown gave Amanda the opportunity to use those course notes as a starting block to write her fascinating book *Making Tutus*, an in-depth guide to sewing tutus for beginner and advanced costume makers. "I saw how much of a thrill the women on the course got from learning this skill," says Amanda. "When the three parts of the tutu (the plate, bodice and the decorative sections) come together, that's when the magic really happens."

Michelle Rowley (she/her) is a dressmaking tutor and writer with a love of fashion history. She lives in the Northwest with her family. See more @stitchywhitney.