

Marcelino Sambé as Romeo and Anna  
Rose O'Sullivan as Juliet in *Romeo and  
Juliet*, The Royal Ballet © 2019 ROH.  
Photograph by Helen Maybanks



*Fashion at*

# THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

*Michelle Rowley goes behind the seams with  
Amanda Hall, head of the costume revivals  
department at the Royal Opera House  
to learn more about her unique role*



*Michelle Rowley*

**F**rom Jack Nicholson's ties to the swans in Matthew Bourne's ground-breaking *Swan Lake*, Amanda Hall has been sewing incredible costumes for the stars of film and stage for over 30 years. Having loved opera and sewing from an early age, Amanda currently has her dream role as head of the costume revivals department at the Royal Opera House. She spoke with Michelle Rowley about her fascinating career and its unique creative challenges.

**Amanda, please tell me what led you to a career in costume**

I enjoyed sewing from an early age. I had grandmothers who sewed, one of whom was a court dressmaker, and I learnt from them. I was sewing my own skirts from commercial patterns from the age of 11. I knew it was costume I wanted to go into rather than fashion and they are quite different.

**What are some of those differences?**

Our work needs to be neat and robust but must also be simple to alter. One of the main differences between costume and fashion is that we have no linings. Most costumes start with a cotton drill layer and for alteration purposes include wide seam allowances. I'm currently working on altering a costume bodice for a new performer in a principal role, which needs slimming

## FIND OUT MORE

See what's on at the Royal Opera House and explore the fascinating history at [www.roh.org.uk](http://www.roh.org.uk)



La Traviata: Joyce El-Khoury as Violetta Valéry, Sergey Romanovsky as Alfredo Germont. © ROH. Photo by Tristram Kenton

down and the sleeves resetting without cutting anything off.

**How did you get in to the industry?**

I went to Wimbledon School of Art to do a two-year BTEC in Costume Construction. Whilst there I was lucky to get to know the tailor Mervyn Hughes who recommended me to the team at *Phantom of the Opera*. My first job was embellishing costumes for them. From there I met Phil Reynolds, a well-known costume maker. I learnt a tremendous amount from working with him and his practical approach to problem solving in costume production. I then worked in film and West End productions.

**Do you get to meet the stars because you have to do the costume fittings?**

Yes, we do. I met Rupert Everett to fit the body paddings I had made 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!* When I met Michael Keaton who was playing Batman, I had to remember not to treat him like the fibreglass life cast we had been working on first!

**Can you tell me about your work for The Royal Opera House?**

I have worked for the Royal Opera House since 2015 and I currently head the revivals department. We are a team of 15, who all take pride in our work and always do the absolute best possible

job we can. Our job is to prepare all the costumes for all the productions in the Royal Opera House's repertoire, which are many! We are usually working on three or four productions at any one time. This season we have *The Magic Flute*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *La Traviata* and *Swan Lake* amongst others. For *Romeo & Juliet* for example we have 13 Juliets who each need four dresses, equalling 52 costumes for Juliet alone. Our key role is to make the performers safe and look as good as they possibly can in a finite amount of time.

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**Where do you even begin?**

For every production there is 'The Bible', a book containing 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, so we can 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.

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.

Each member of the team has a particular dancer within the company that they are responsible for, this helps them to build up a relationship and to get to know their body and adjustment requirements.

**How much time do you have to prepare all the costumes for a production?**

Sometimes we have a year, sometimes a costume is required the following week. If a performer for a principal role 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 have to 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 the dress for Act 2 whilst the performer is on stage in Act 1!

## ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer, maker and passionate reader. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#)



*La Traviata* © ROH, 2016. Photo by Tristram Kenton



Matthew Ball and Yasmine Naghdi as Romeo and Juliet ©2015 ROH. Photograph by Alice Pennefather

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*We don't throw anything away*  
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### Which are the most difficult costumes?

Tutus! The fit is vital, otherwise a dancer's partner is picking up fabric not the dancer. The dancer can't spin independently of the costume and everything must fall into place perfectly when she lands. You can't have a strap falling off a shoulder during a performance, but the costume still needs to be comfortable and to move with the dancer's body. It is highly skilled worked requiring 12 layers of net hand tied together.

### What have been your favourite costumes to work on?

Without a doubt, Brünnhilde, the leader of the Valkyries, in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. She is a strong, heroic character in the longest and most difficult-to-stage opera. She wears a leather wrap-around dress,

which is printed with silver and gold by our dye department, with an organza shift over the top.

In 2018 I worked on the swan costumes for *Swan Lake*. Whilst you only see 26 white swans on stage at any one time, there are 42 white swan costumes to be made. There are an additional 20 black swan costumes that, despite only appearing briefly, must still be made to the same high standard. It took a year, starting with prototypes of the tutus in order to get the exact shape that designer John McFarlane envisioned.

### What's the most enjoyable aspect of your work?

Every day is different, you never know what's going to happen! I enjoy working with such a variety of designers and the team gets huge satisfaction from taking a costume that doesn't fit and making a performer feel wonderful in it.

### Sounds fabulous! I'd love to do it

Well, take a look at the University Centre South Essex BA (Hons) Costume Construction degree, which was developed in partnership with the Royal Opera House. It's never too late!

