



Rose Beale in the props department at Glyndebourne

Behind the curtain

Rose Beale has been making props at Glyndebourne for 30 years. She tells Simone Hellyer what it's like to work in the wings of the renowned opera house

PHOTOS: Jim Holden

Glyndebourne is well known for its world class opera productions. And as audiences know, they are a treat for the eyes as well as the ears. The intricate and visually arresting props needed to bring a performance to life are the work of Glyndebourne's in-house prop team.

Senior prop-maker Rose Beale has been at Glyndebourne for 30 years. A Lewes local and a talented artist and sculptor, Rose joined the team somewhat by accident. "I had done a fine art degree and was trying to find a job. Although I was local, I didn't really know what Glyndebourne was all about. My sister Blossom started working at Glyndebourne as a dresser and she got me in to see half of the production of *Porgy and Bess*, which really inspired me," she says, adding: "I was then involved in an emergency prop-making project after my sister volunteered me. There was a painted library for a production of *Falstaff* and the director suddenly decided that he wanted books and scrolls to be hurled about, but the props department was at full capacity. And once I'd landed there, I just kept going."

One of the first shows Rose worked on was *The Rake's Progress* – designed by British artist David Hockney, it is one of Glyndebourne's most famous and best-loved productions. It is back at the festival this year for the first time in a decade and will be using some of the props that Rose created 30 years ago.

Over the years Rose has seen a lot of change at the opera house – having started off in a workshop at the old theatre, she now works from Glyndebourne's

new state-of-the-art production hub that houses all of its making departments. From there she creates a host of props for a variety of productions, as she explains: "In the props department it's the scenic painters who create the set and my job to produce anything that's moveable. There's always a good diet of rocks, trees, beds, baths, rubber fish – all sorts. Paint effects and sculpture are my areas of specialism, but I have learned a lot of skills along the way, such as upholstery, mould-making and gold-leafing.

"There are often singers from all over the world rumbling and humming"

"Often we have to distress things – like when making an old armchair, you have to think of where it would wear out on the arms and create the greasy bit where someone's head would have rubbed it. Now that productions are filmed in high definition, you are no longer catering for just the audience in the theatre. You have to make sure that your work is detailed and of a high enough standard to be filmed close up."

Rose says the props she creates can sometimes "sit round the corner in the dark", but one of her greatest creations was an enormous head for the opera *Saul*. "It was right in the centre of the stage and when the show opened it was in the middle of a double-page spread in *The Guardian*," she says.

Rose is right in the middle of the busiest time for the props department, but says that great teamwork makes the job easy: "It's lovely having the combined minds of different people with

different skills. There's quite a range of ages too, so the youngsters teach me things and I teach them a thing or two as well."

Teaching is Rose's other big passion and she has led adult education classes in figurative sculpture and arts and crafts in the Lewes area for more than 20 years. She also takes on private commissions, one of her most memorable being two bronze sculptures of Lady Mary Christie's pug Fred that sit in the rose garden at Glyndebourne. "That's my little claim to fame that might live on after I've gone," she jokes.

Glyndebourne's beautiful setting is one of the reasons Rose has stayed in the job so long, she says: "Being able to walk round the lovely garden at lunchtime is great because we often work rather long hours. There is some nice food to be had too."

When asked whether she was always a fan of opera, Rose gives a sheepish "no," but says that she has come to love it, adding: "I get a lift to work on Glyndebourne's minibus and there are often singers from all over the world rumbling and humming on the journey. As you walk backstage you hear the rehearsals and it does really get under your skin after a few years."

Currently Rose is sprucing up the props for the latest version of *The Rake's Progress* and creating a plethora of props for a brand new show, which we're sure will still be talked about in another 30 years. ♦

GOOD TO KNOW:

Public booking for Glyndebourne Festival 2020 opens at 6pm on Sunday 8 March.

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