

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Scottish Opera's Head of Costume Lorna Price shares the history behind an 11-foot dress for *The Gondoliers*' most extravagant character

It is not unusual for an opera costume department to make 18th-century clothing: extravagant and often architectural gowns, elaborately embroidered fabrics, and sky scraping wigs adorned with all manner of embellishments. For the elite, fashion was a show of wealth, and the wider the panniers or 'hoops' that supported your gown, the more expensive fabrics could be draped over them.

It was common for ladies to take lessons in wearing these great court gowns before attending a ball or soiree; you would be expected to walk, sit, and negotiate stairs and doors in an elegant manner. Taking a turn on the dance floor would have been fraught with peril. These beautiful, ungainly creations were vast and probably not very comfortable to wear, but none were quite the size as the beast we created.

The Duchess of Plaza-Toro's costumes, designed by Dick Bird, were based around the fabulous outfits worn by Sophia Magdalena of Denmark, in particular the 1766 gown for her wedding to Crown Prince Gustav of Sweden. It was a glittering spectacle of silver lace and sequins – they had sequins or 'spangles' in the 18th century too! The hoops spanned 2.3 metres and the back of the mantua (the overdress) included a 3- metre train (thankfully for Yvonne Howard, who plays the Duchess, we omitted this).

But 2.3 metres was simply not wide enough for our Duchess! We stretched to 3 metres. By the time the gowns were complete with layers of draped brocades and metallic taffetas, the weight was such that traditional hoop construction techniques could no longer support the skirts. The costume became cumbersome and difficult for Yvonne. Something had to be done.

Small, squeaky tea trolley wheels, screwed into plywood panels, were added early in the build to help with movement. A rehearsal pannier was made to help Yvonne get used to wearing the beast and to help us iron out problems. But Yvonne got stuck, immobile, when the dainty wheels failed. After much head scratching, troubleshooting, and a weekend of sleeplessness the team – Yolanda, Edd, Andy, Kenny, and Dick – landed on the solution. The cage had to be heavier.

We had tried to keep the structure light and collapsible so that it was easy for Yvonne to get in and out of costume. But conversely, weight helped. Solid inner and upright supports were added to steering sticks that enabled Yvonne to change direction, and the tea trolley wheels were swapped for industrial multi-directional castors – which we hid from view with the bottom frill of the skirts. It now has to be lifted over Yvonne's head by a team of six dressers, but it worked! No strain, no getting stuck on stage, and not a single squeak from a wheel – just a comically thunderous rumble!



The Duchess' Dress, In Numbers...

The frame:

- 24 castors
- 50 metres crin steel
- 50 metres poly carbon rods
- 1 sheet of 12mm ply wood
- 50 metres beige twill tape
- 50 metres India tape
- 10 metres gold bullion fringe

Act 1:

- 15 metres open weave hessian
- 15 metres heavier hessian
- 15 metres cotton sack cloth
- 15 metres poly viscose voile
- 15 metres cobweb
- 12 muslin bows

Act 2:

- 8 metres gold bullion fringe
- 28 metres gold brocade
- 25 metres gold taffeta
- 40 metres gold lurex chiffon
- 12 ivory taffeta bows

The Gondoliers was supported by Scottish Opera's Play a Supporting Role Appeal and Garfield Weston Foundation (Weston Culture Fund).

Illustration by Belinda Clisham

