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| **Interview data sheet:** Behind the Scenes Project |
| **Ref no:** THM/258  **WAV files ref:**  |
| **Collection title:** Behind the scenes: saving and sharing Cambridge Arts Theatre’s Archive**Interviewee’s surname:** Chambers **Title:** Ms**Interviewee’s forename(s):** Phoebe**Gender:** F**Occupation:** Wardrobe supervisor/ assistant |
| **Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):** 17 March 2022**Location of interview:** Cambridge Arts Theatre**Name of interviewer:** Lucy St Clair Holborn**Type of recorder:** Zoom H4N **Recording format:** WAV**Total no. of tracks:** 1 **Total duration (HH:MM:SS):** 00:31:45**Mono/Stereo:** Stereo |
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| **Abstract:** | Wardrobe Supervisor Phoebe Chambers explains the important role played by the wardrobe department in the theatre and shares some memorable moments from her time working at Cambridge Arts Theatre.  |
| **Key words:** | Pantomime, costume, *Aladdin*, *Cinderella*, COVID, *84 Charing Cross Road*, Terry Baker, Matt Crosby, *Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver,* Sue Simmerling, Wayne Sleep |
| **File** | **Summary** |
| 00:00 | The interviewee introduces herself as Phoebe Chambers. |
| 00:10 | **Could you tell me a little bit about your connection to the Cambridge Arts Theatre?** |
|  | Chambers grew up in Cambridge, a part of a family who were heavily involved in the local amateur dramatics scene and she attended the pantomime every year with her family. Chambers studied costume production at university. After graduating she returned to Cambridge. Her first paid work was at the Arts Theatre, working on the Theatre’s production of *84 Charing Cross Road*. The following Christmas, Cambridge Arts Theatre asked if she would like to work as Wardrobe Supervisor on that year’s Pantomime. Since then, she has worked on the Arts Theatre Panto every year and has now done six productions, working alongside Terry Baker. She explains that many of the creatives who work on the Pantomime come back every year; everyone is very friendly and enjoys spending Christmas in the city. ‘You know it is Christmas when you see all the familiar faces come back into Cambridge’.  |
| 01:33 | **And what does your role entail?** |
|  | Chambers explains that she joins the team in the middle of November. The cast and company spend two weeks in rehearsal on Mill Road [at the St Philip’s Church Centre], while she spends these weeks shut away in a little room, fitting all the costumes to the cast and making sure that the costumes are complete. Chambers explains that once rehearsals start, the costuming requirements can change as the show develops. There is a lot of last-minute buying, working hard to ensure everything gets here: ‘there’s a lot of Amazon Prime!’ |
|  | From there the cast and company move to the Theatre and the wardrobe department unpack properly. Then it is tech week, which involves very long days. Chambers recalls one year working 70 hours in a week. Although it is tiring, it is fun and everyone works together. And then the run begins. Three show days are tiring, Chambers would be in the Theatre from 8am until 11pm. But there are breaks and lots of fun, ‘secret Santa’, ‘board games’, and ‘playing hide and seek around the Theatre’. Chambers recalls that last year [2021], following the COVID pandemic, everyone was very grateful to be back in the Theatre. |
| 03:37 | **How did COVID impact your day to day?** |
|  | Chambers explains everything she does is contract work. At the beginning it was very sad, everything getting cancelled one by one. But it has come back. She explains the Arts Theatre was better placed than most because they put on a socially distanced, one-act, Panto style production. It was a compilation of all the Pantomimes, the highlights from each show, and the baddy was trying to take over Panto land [*Dame Trott’s Panto Palaver*]. She explains the cast and company all had to wear masks and undertake a strict testing regime. Unfortunately, the Panto closed on Christmas Eve when Cambridge went into Tier 4 restrictions. Chambers still thinks it was a great achievement and she was proud to be part of it.  |
| 04:45 | **And how different was that from your normal Panto in terms of what you had to produce?** |
|  | Chambers explains that when the show is running, she dresses the actors. ‘It was really hard to keep a two-metre distance and do a quick change at the same time, it just doesn’t work!’ But she reflects that the cast and company did not all catch COVID so she thinks they did well to be COVID safe. This year as well, she felt the Theatre looked after the company in the face of the continued COVID threat. |
| 05:53 | **And when you say ‘quick changes’, how quick must they be?** |
|  | Chambers says ‘they can be twenty second changes’. In this year’s production of *Aladdin,* she recalls at the end of Act I, Aladdin goes from rags to riches and he has to run back stage and had around 15 seconds until he needed to be back on stage dressed in his Prince outfit. Chambers recalls there were times he nearly did not make it. The show suffered with COVID cases in the cast and so many of the understudies also got to try out the quick change.  |
| 06:31 | **And was it difficult working with the different cast members...?** |
|  | Chambers suggests more so for the actors, she explains they would talk the new actor through the process in rehearsal, but often when it came to it, they forgot, and the best thing for the actor to do was often to stand there and let Chambers and her colleague Terry Baker dress them. |
| 07:19 | **Have you ever had costumes be incomplete, and you have had to send them back?** |
|  | Chambers explains they get the costumes from Sue [Simmerling of Carry on Costumes] in Southampton, who makes very good quality costumes. However, she reflects that the haberdashery items they buy, zips and buttons etc, are declining in quality. The result is that ‘zips that pop half way through a number’ and need to be repaired quickly. Chambers explains that they might sew and actor into an outfit if there is not time to replace the zip. Emergency understudies also cause difficulty, because they also have to have a costume, this year [2021] many understudies had to be rehearsed in at very short notice which was challenging. |
| 08:46 | **So did you have to make a costume [for the understudy]?** |
|  | Thankfully Sue [Simmerling] had sent a backup costume, and they were able to adapt this for the new cast member. Chambers explains that with COVID safety restrictions, all costumes must be laundered between uses.  |
|  | **So, who organises that?** |
|  | Chambers explains that the Company Manager says who is going on and then the cast member understudying will be in high demand, Chambers must try to get some time with them and work quickly to fit the costume.  |
| 10:18 | **So does Terry Baker lead on sewing?** |
|  | Chambers explains Terry just has lots of experience. They get on very well.  |
| 10:49 | **Have you ever had any serious wardrobe malfunctions?**  |
|  | Chambers does not think there has been anything that an audience would notice. She does remember one year three male cast members repeatedly split their trousers at the crotch! If it is in a number there is nothing you can do. Chambers recalls people going on in the wrong costumes, or only parts of costumes and in the COVID era, one ensemble member did a whole number in a face mask which he had been wearing backstage and had forgotten to remove. Chambers thinks it is a result of doing so many shows, you can get a bit complacent.  |
| 12:34 | **So do you work all the shows?** |
|  | Yes, it is just Terry and I, we dress one side of the stage each.  |
| 13:08 | **So can you talk me through the day-to-day process?** |
|  | Chambers explains that at the end of the performance, she and Terry Baker collect and wash all the costumes. They must wait for the wash to finish and the they hang up the clothes to dry overnight. The next day they arrive two hours before the show. They sort through the washing and tumble dry anything that is still damp before pressing and returning the costumes to the actors’ dressing rooms. They work through a long list of fixes. Then breakfast. They do the pre-sets for the show and help the actors to dress – the Dame in particular cannot get into his costumes on his own.  |
| 14:48 | **Have you ever had a really long list of fixes?** |
|  | Chambers explains that Tech week is the time with the longest list of jobs. Otherwise, normally it is quick fixes, like replacing zips. When there is nothing that needs doing, they work on their own projects, this year Chambers managed to knit a jumper.  |
| 16:03 | **A dressing track…?** |
|  | Chambers explains it is the list of changes for the show. She reiterates how well looked after and appreciated cast and company feel at the Theatre.  |
|  | **And some of those costumes look really intricate?** |
|  | During *Cinderella* [2019], Chambers remembers the Ugly Sisters, played by Matt Crosby and Wayne Sleep, had amazing finale costumes. Crosby’s was a huge glitter ball which was so wide it could only go through certain gaps. Sleep’s was a chandelier and the candles kept dropping off. Another year, Crosby’s had a Popcorn dress, 5ft square, and it had to be flown in like a piece of scenery because it would not fit through the doors. The dress finished just below Crosby’s knees, one night he tripped and fell to the floor, he could not get up without help because the dress was so big.  |
| 20:16 | **And how do you find space to store things?**  |
|  | Chambers explains it can be hard at the Arts Theatre, the stage entries and exits are narrow, so often Panto costumes do not fit. Stage right has a little space. Stage left has a loading bay which has some space, but this is also where the slosh truck is stored. Chambers also highlights that in Wardrobe they also need space for their sewing machines and materials. Chambers will shortly be working on another show at the Arts Theatre, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* and she compares the costumes for that show to Panto.  |
|  | **So where is Wardrobe?** |
|  | In the green room. The green room set up here is good. There is a central space which means people can spend time together. Wardrobe is off one of the dressing rooms. There are washing machines, tumble dryer, drying racks and every year for Panto they hire a drying cupboard. This is useful to the Dame’s fat suit and the shoes which the cast involved in the slosh scene wear.  |
|  | **What is the hardest part of a Panto run for you?**  |
|  | Chambers says it is the tiredness, especially between shows.  |
| 24:39 | **What are the numbers like, how may costumes are there on average?** |
|  | Chambers counts…the Dame 10, Ensemble 5… there are 6 ensemble members so 5 costumes each. If there are child performers then 3 for each child. Principal cast have at least 2 – they tend to have a main costume, and a finale costume.  |
| 25:54 | **So, you dress the Dame, not the ensemble?** |
|  | Chambers explains that the ensemble tend to dress themselves and help each other. Dame has harder costumes and harder changes.  |
|  | **What are the most quick changes you have ever had to do?** |
|  | Chambers explains that the changes were not too bad this year [2021 *Aladdin*] but that *Cinderella* [2019] was harder because there were two Dames and the nature of the costumes, ball gowns etc, made quick changes difficult. The slosh scene in particular makes for hard changes, she explains that the shout-outs and birthday announcements by the Dame allow the Silly Billy character time to have a very quick shower and change after this scene, 5 minutes is a luxury. During *Cinderella* the cast could not go up for their entrances too early because the large costumes would get in the way of the technical crew.  |
| 28:31 | **Have you ever done anything, where you have learnt a lesson and thought I am never doing that again…?** |
|  | Chambers explained in her first Panto they tumble dried some chef’s whites, but they could never get the creases out; another year they had “washing powder” for the slosh scene which was pink, the pink stain from the slosh costumes stayed in the washing machine afterwards, and the dancers’ white tights were getting gradually more pink as the run went on… Chambers had to throw them away and they returned to white ‘washing powder’ for the slosh scene.  |
| 30:03 | **So how do you get that message across?** |
|  | Chambers explains that everyone understood. She reiterates how much she enjoys working with the team at Cambridge Arts Theatre, |
| **END.**  |  |