

The making of a queen

Posted By: Mary Ellen Green

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Langham Court Theatre has come full circle with its latest production, the Victoria premiere of *Elizabeth Rex*, which is set inside a royal barn in Elizabethan England.

Langham Court, whose home is a heritage building that has been a community theatre for more than 80 years, started life as the carriage house and barn of "The Laurels," — the home of Robert Ward and his family, built in 1876.

In order to pull off this award-winning period piece written by Timothy Findley, Langham Court had to transform not only their stage, but also the inventory in their costume loft into something out of the early 17th century.

"Our collection is getting a little bit tired from being rented out to the public, schools and other theatre groups that repurposing wasn't appropriate for this show," says Lisa Leighton, costume designer.

"For me, this show has been all about building. When all is said and done, 15 volunteers have built 80 pieces, from hats to corsets to elaborate court gowns, bum rolls and tunics."

Leighton headed up the team of designers, sewers, and milliners to pull off this great feat in just three short months.

"I started my research the day after I signed on for the show. This show is built on research. It was a lot of fun," she says. "One of the joys of doing a show like this is because we had so little, we got to design the whole thing from the ground up. I got to pick the palette and the textures."

Leighton and her team spent endless hours scouring their current costume inventory, doing research online and investigating what was available for rent.

"The costume loft was the first place I came. We have some suitable pieces, but they are so well used that if we wanted to present a certain calibre of production, we either had to build or to source," she says.

They were able to rent some of the men's costumes from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and even the same wig worn by Diane D'Aquila when she originated the queen's role in *Elizabeth Rex* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in 2000.

“We decided to concentrate our efforts on building the ladies’ costumes because gowns always rent well, which is another source of revenue for the theatre,” Leighton says.

The team got to work right away, ordering Elizabethan patterns online and learning how to build elaborate pieces like bum rolls and standing ruffs. They used ingenuity and creative thinking to invent solutions for tricky pieces when they ran into problems.

“They didn’t have Velcro in 1601,” says Leighton, while holding a wheel farthingale she fashioned out of a hoola hoop. The farthingale is a piece that goes underneath Queen Elizabeth I’s underskirt.

“To build the queen, first we need the hose, corset and farthingale; then the underskirt, which has the forepart attached to it, then the overskirt, the bodice and the sleeves — which are attached,” Leighton says. The sleeves and foreparts of dresses of that time were removable and interchangeable to create more than one outfit out of one dress, says Leighton.

“What the costuming department has done is amazing,” says Jean Topham, who plays the role of Queen Elizabeth I. “When I’m in costume and I look at myself in the mirror, I don’t see Jean at all. I haven’t had the whole thing on yet, but it may take well over an hour to get ready.”

Elizabeth I had small pox in her 30s, which left her bald and her face pockmarked. As a result, she wore very heavy white makeup, which was full of lead.

The play centres around Elizabeth, who is trying to distract herself from the inevitable execution of her lover, which is to happen the following day. The queen invites Lord Chamberlain’s Men, an acting troupe under the guidance of Shakespeare, to perform *Much Ado About Nothing* to keep her mind off her lover’s terrible fate. After the performance, the queen and actor Ned Lowenscrof, famous for playing leading ladies, get involved in a discussion of gender issues and sexuality, which is the underlying theme of the play.

“For me, this is the biggest role I’ve ever played, and certainly the most challenging on many levels — emotionally and physically,” Topham says. “The costuming is physical and the number of changes that have to happen are quite demanding.”

Leighton and her team have set up an area backstage specifically for dressing the queen. “We have a dropcloth down here because her outfit is white and we need to be quite careful with it,” Leighton says. The costume designers washed their hands incessantly while building the off-white brocade and installed a front zipper on Topham’s costume allowing for a smooth transition on a quick change in the first half.

“Lisa needs to know the play inside and out,” says Chris Stusek from the costume department. “She needs to know all the logistical stuff like how much time there is for changes.”

Stusek and Ann-Marie Arneson helped Leighton build many of the costumes. "Intricacy-wise, this is the biggest build I've ever worked on," Stusek says.

"We've had the pleasure of working with an enormously enthusiastic team," Leighton says. "The constant creative collaboration is amazing. It's been a great experience in terms of building confidence for everyone on this team. Sharing our creative vision is such a charge." M

Elizabeth Rex

Opens June 9 and runs nightly until Saturday at 8 p.m.

Week 2 and 3: Tuesday through Saturday 8 p.m.

Matinees June 18 and 25, 2 p.m.

Tickets \$18 adult, \$16 student/senior

Tuesday, June 14 and 21, two for \$18 students/seniors

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