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Re-designing *Alice*. An interview with costume designer Karen Hobbs about her work for ballet

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Re-designing *Alice*. An interview with costume designer Karen Hobbs about her work for ballet

Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud

- 1 Hélène Darroman is a dedicated and highly inventive ballet teacher and choreographer whose creations have very often won prizes at the regional and national competitions held by Confédération Nationale de Danse. One of her latest works, *Une histoire d'Alice*, inspired by Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, was performed in July 2022 at Espace d'Albret in the small town of Nérac where she has worked for nearly two decades.
- 2 Revisiting *Alice* involved designing new costumes, for which Hélène Darroman decided to rely on the skills and imagination of Karen Hobbs, a British designer who settled in France a few years ago after a distinguished career in Britain and Australia. In the wake of the performance an exhibition of the costumes took place in August at the Galerie Padma in Nérac.

Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud: Could you describe your background and the different stages of your career as a designer?

Karen Hobbs: I started my UK training with a Diploma in Fashion, which was a great grounding in patterncutting, that is, creating models for garments, and the history of art and design. I followed this with a Higher Diploma in Theatre studies, which included set design, construction, and scene painting alongside costume design and construction. I started working in the production wardrobe of The English National Opera before spending a year in Australia, traveling and working in theatre and opera and it is where I experienced my first work for television. On my return to the UK, I did a one year Advanced Diploma in Costume Design at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

I then forged working relationships with students from the National Film and Television School, which paved the way for future projects designing costumes for the BBC. Before I came to live in France in 2018, I had amassed 30 years of freelance

work in costume, as a designer, wardrobe supervisor, stylist, and constructor, in theatre TV, film opera and photography.

NVA: How did you get in touch with the École de Danse d'Albret and choreographer Hélène Darroman? Had you worked for ballet before that in England?

KH: The combination of Brexit and Covid has changed everything. It gave me the opportunity for a career review and I began to seek out a local network. In our nearby Chateau, there is a marvelous display of Renaissance costumes, created in paper, by artist Inge Zorn Gauthier and I immediately contacted her. Very kindly, she put me in touch with other creatives in the area and this is how I met Hélène Darroman, Directrice of the Albret Communauté Ecole de Danse. Despite my training and experience, I had comparatively little experience in working with dance costumes, and the world of ballet was a whole new discovery!

NVA: Did Hélène introduce any changes or specificities in the plot or staging that you found particularly inspiring for your work?

KH: When Hélène announced that we would be staging *Alice in Wonderland*, my mind went into overdrive! During my last few contracts in England, I was mainly working in television, on contemporary productions, with hired or purchased costumes, therefore less creativity, so I was ready to revive my making skills. The reality in working with young students for a community school meant drastic plot changes to accommodate the cast and budget, so we concentrated on presenting the story from when Alice first encounters the White Rabbit. I listened to the score throughout the design and making process and attended rehearsals as often as I could in order to unify the costumes and props with the choreography. In turn Hélène was able to use the designs I produced to inform the choreography so our ideas really meshed together.

NVA: There have been so many adaptations of *Alice in Wonderland* that it must be quite challenging to produce something original that may work on the audience. How did you deal with that in terms of designing?

KH: I looked at various versions of the ballet, in particular the Royal Ballet *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, for The Royal Opera House in London from 2011, designed by Bob Crowley. There, they had the resources to prototype everything, whereas, working solo, I had to find creative solutions to make the most of locally sourced and recycled materials. A large stock of corps de ballet costumes already existed at the school, and I had to integrate the new principal character costumes into that world. With that in mind, I first mapped out the designs, then I adapted them to the available fabrics.

NVA: Were you particularly familiar with *Alice* before working for that particular piece? Also, did you wish to bring something specific into relief in your work? I was struck by the title of your exhibition, *Sommes-nous toujours au pays des Merveilles?* (*Are We Still in Wonderland?*), which seems to question – or suggest – the work's current relevance and its connection with contemporary issues. How do you feel about that?

KH: *Alice* is such a classic that I was already familiar with the story and some of its numerous adaptations. Indeed, as a child, I was cast as the Lory in a primary school production! I couldn't have been more than 10 years old. My parents made me a pair of wings and a beak, from cardboard and crêpe paper, so I think somewhere I was inspired to make the most of limited materials, as they were.

My recent exhibition here in France was an opportunity to show the ballet props and costumes that I designed and made for *Alice* along with a costume project that I created some years ago around Attachment Disorder that can occur as a result of neglect and trauma in early childhood. This was my response to the experience of adopting an older child. For me there was a connection between the two topics. As a costumier, it was a way of exploring issues of a child being suspended between two worlds.

The title *Are We Still in Wonderland?* was a reality check: the entrance to the exhibit featured the fantasy costume of the Mad Hatter, complete with giant prop cakes and an enormous knitted teapot followed by Alice and her flamingo marionette amongst machine stitched images and soft sculptures depicting the effects of early trauma. Despite the contrast, there remained a sense of humour, which I do think is a particularly British way of dealing with uncomfortable issues.

As an immigrant myself, on one hand, I am living the dream and on the other it is natural to feel part of me in both countries, so it became a more and more personal project.

Current world events have touched everyone, and now more than ever we are feeling the impact of change, it is destabilizing. We are all Alice to some extent.

NVA: There are, of course, specific requirements for ballet clothing and designing. Can you mention some of them, on a general level and more specifically concerning *Alice*?

KH: I remember being shocked at first seeing ballet costumes up close. More used to working for the screen, I was surprised by the scale of the décor and the sometimes evident reinforcements. In Australia, I was fortunate to see an exhibition of costumes and designs from Serge Diaghilev Russian Ballet, and then it all made sense.

Dance costume is a highly specialized field. Classical ballets, for example, can be required to follow traditional styles or could be staged in everyday clothing that would have to be heavily adapted. The style must always reflect the overall concept of the work, the movement, the demands of the choreography and the effects of different fabrics in motion in any particular dance technique. All dance designs have to allow maximum freedom of movement and care has to be taken when placing decoration.

The creation of costumes for our *Story of Alice* project posed a particular challenge because it was a cast of adolescents, so I had to factor in potential growth in between the first costume fittings and the final performance. Since it is a school, I was also mindful of future cast changes and the possibility of adapting fitted garments onto a smaller or larger dancer, hence allowing enough fabric without compromising the line.

NVA: Being a great fan of David Bowie, I heard with interest that at some point you were trained by Natasha Korniloff who designed some of his stage clothes. How far has it been a source of inspiration for you?

KH: Oh, tremendously! Natasha was a fabulous mentor. She taught me the tricky business of drafting patterns for all-in-one body stockings and techniques for dyeing. She showed us where to find the best theatrical fabrics and would accompany us on London shopping trips. Most of all she taught me to not be afraid to experiment. I

have a photo of Natasha and David Bowie preparing for the video of Ashes to Ashes in my studio to inspire me!

NVA: How was your work for *Alice* received? Did you get any feedback after the July performance that was of particular interest to you?

KH: The feedback from the ballet (and the exhibition) was very positive. I think the performance and staging exceeded everyone's expectations, my costumes and props being part of that. I had forgotten just how much I enjoyed prop making and the fabric cakes were a particular favourite with spectators and visitors. It was really my first opportunity to put myself on the map here in France.

NVA: Do you have any further projects concerning ballet (with H  l  ne maybe?) in the near future?

KH: I am keen to create another ballet. I love the responsibility of interpreting the music with design and the challenge of presenting the work on time and on budget. H  l  ne Darroman is a dream to work with. We are on the same wavelength creatively and the production was a joy from start to finish. I do think it is important to embrace the process. The subsequent exhibition has encouraged me to forge my way ahead as an artist.

I can be contacted by email: costumechanges@gmail.com

More pictures can be seen on Instagram (@neranglaise).

Figure 1



Cr  dits photos : galerie Padma (N  rac).

Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



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Mots-clés: ballet, confection de costumes, chorégraphie, Alice au Pays des Merveilles

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