

Feature



Gilbert & Sullivan Meets Bollywood! Kathleen Barcos

A little known G&S musical takes on a touch of magic as a San Jose California theater company produces "The Sorcerer" as a Bollywood extravaganza. The costume designer tells how she did it without paying a Raja's ransom.

The Invitation

I received a phone call from the producer at Lyric Theater asking if I was costuming "these days" and whether I would be interested in costuming "The Sorcerer" with a twist- Bollywood style. The idea intrigued me and I saw hot pinks and lime greens with gold sparkles and flying skirts dance before my eyes. What fun I thought, so I said yes.

I had a lot to learn.

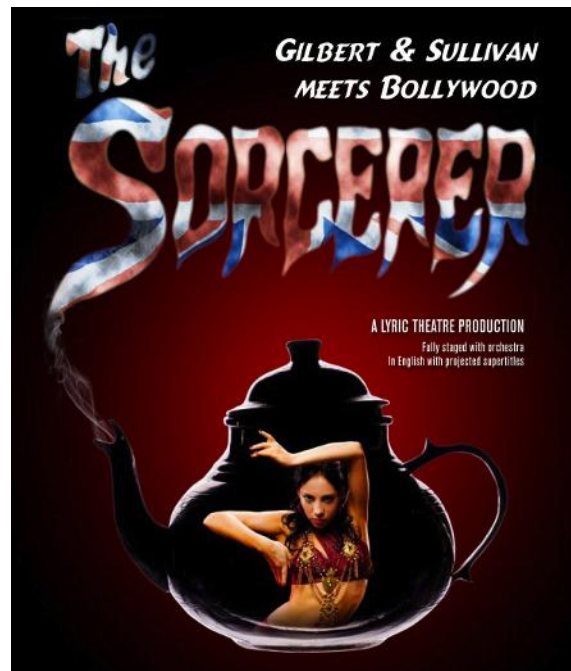
Then reality hit. Those colors that flashed were colors from modern times, not Victorian – ala Gilbert & Sullivan. And so it began.

Character Description

The first thing I like to do before I meet with the director is read the script and get a first impression of the story and

characters. Pictures come up in my head of characters, colors, and general content. The actual script was not available, so I went to the library and rented the video, done in proper British fashion.

I then met with the director and we went through his overall vision and the general traits of each lead character. When I met with the director, I found out that not all of the characters in the show were to be Indian. He had a split cast of Victorian British and Victorian Indians. The cast was not only divided between the British and Indians, but by specific characters and class levels for each member of the chorus (an



Indian cook - lower class, a British cook-lower class, etc.).

And not just the Indians would be dancing – the entire cast would be dancing.

I must say, designing and costuming for the British half of the cast was very familiar to me, since I had designed numerous Victorian shows prior to this one. The theater company also had an extensive costume bank full of Victorian costumes from past Gilbert & Sullivan productions. However designing and creating the Indian costumes was the real challenge.

Beginnings

The first thing I thought of was to call an Indian friend and pick her brains. She was wonderful! I went to her home and she laid out her clothes and jewelry. Thus began my education. She taught me the basic vocabulary of Indian dress. (*Sewcabulary* on the following page provides a primer on Indian costuming terms.)

I say basic because there are so many variations and each variation has a name. This is because India is divided into regions and each region has multiple villages that differ in both dress and dialect. You go to another village ten miles away and you won't understand the language, and they dress in a different style. This is still true today. So for that reason, she taught me the basics. Although there are many more items

of clothing, it was from these basics that the show was designed.

The next step was to decide on the year and begin the research. I had been given a range of 1860-1890. I chose the 1880's. Gilbert & Sullivan's first opera was written in 1888 and the British were well entrenched in India. Skirts had become slimmer, which was better for dancing - no hoop skirts or trains- yet could have a slight bustle. This would leave us more room on stage.

Research

In doing research I usually like to use as many references sources as possible: the library, friends, videos, exhibits, paintings, performances, etc. I love this process.

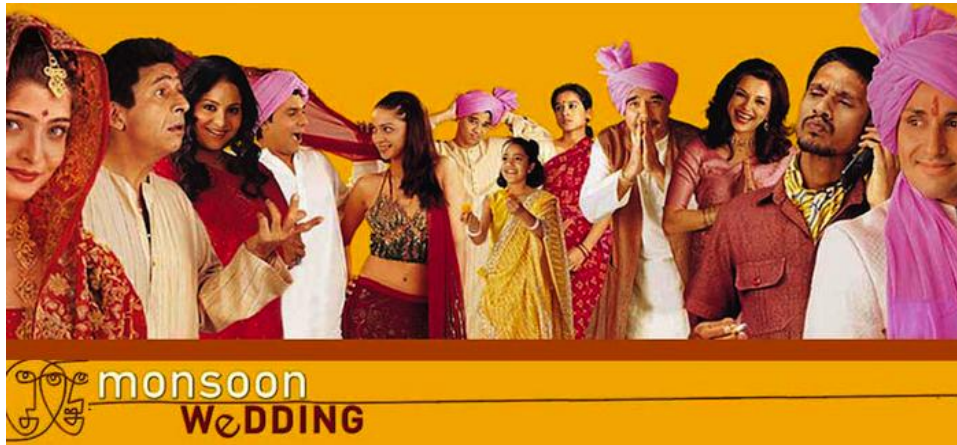
Videos. The director had given me a list of Bollywood videos to watch, both Victorian and modern settings, and some internet references. In viewing these, I found that Bollywood had a much wider dynamic than I had initially thought. Also, our choreographer had a background in modern

dance as well as Indian dance, which provided more depth to the production.

Bollywood movies are great, but beware, they were each at least 3 hours long. I continued to find Victorian period Bollywood movies to watch. With each one, I found the world of Indian dress opening wider and wider to me, and my admiration for the dancing growing and growing. It was absolutely wonderful.

Here is a list of some of the videos I watched: *Lagaan*, *Veer*, *Kisha the Warrior Poet*, *Sharp's Challenge*, *Dilse Dilease*, *Monsoon Wedding* (below), *Om Shanti om*, *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Marigold*, *Devdas*, and *Guzaarish*, among others.

Books. I read books, especially those with art and old photographs, and used several books about the Raj in India and about the day to day living of the British in the country. One of the best books was called, "Women of the Raj." It told how Victorian women handled day-to-day living in India. It was probably not necessary for the show, but was extremely interesting to me. I found that happening a lot: the history and people of India being so interesting that I would get caught up in the smallest details.



Sewcabulary

choli – a cropped blouse

chunidars – pants that are tapered and gather at the ankle

doiti – sarong like skirt worn by men

dupatta – 4-yard long scarf

kurta – thigh length collarless tunic

lehenga – full skirt worn with a choli and duppata

pajamas – loose fitting pants- the Indians invented pajamas

salwar kameez – thigh length tunic top worn with chunidars

saree – 6-yard long wrapped skirt worn with a choli; one end goes over the shoulder

sherwani – a long tunic

stole – 84-inch scarf

One of those details that I did use was the use of dyes in 1880. I found a copy of an original document on the internet that described the making of dyes and the colors produced in India in the 1880s. The document said that minerals and flowers were used, and gave the name of each one. It described the process, some taking days, to produce the "colors of the times" –yellow, gold, red, rose madder, and indigo.

Internet. I must say that most of the time I was on the internet because the period around 1880-1890 had photography, so there were many references on the web. There were pictures of military meetings, workers,

street scenes, and leaders of various provinces in all their silk robes and jewelry.

I was also trying to decide on a color palette, and since the majority of the photos were in black and white (sepia) color was the first area where East meets West.

The Victorian palette in that period was generally rather muted, so I decided to use the color palette of William Morris as accents for the British, and brighter oranges, reds, golds with accents of blue and green for the Indians. That way, the British costumes would provide a background for the Indian ones, and make them appear even brighter.

Local Shops. My friend took me to some of the local Indian clothing shops, where the world of Indian dress took on a whole new meaning. I could also go online



Beige was replaced by a color to reduce the brightness of the woman's costume under stage lighting. Photos by Robert March.

and get a list of India shops in the San Francisco Bay Area. The variety is huge, the handwork and the machine work is very intricate, multi-patterned and just beautiful. They have colors that our material stores cannot match. I was truly in awe, and my admiration just kept growing.

Unfortunately, we did not have the budget to purchase, so there was a huge challenge in representing the more expensive, higher class items. (A lehnga /choli wedding dress can cost anywhere from \$2000 on up and weigh from 10-20 lbs with all the beadwork). I have to say I was frustrated for awhile because I knew that I could not reproduce them at that level. Replicating their richness within budget was my goal.

The Cast. We had several Indian men and women in our cast and I began to talk to them and ask whether they had garments that could be used in the show. They turned out to be a wonderful resource.



Men's doitis were replaced by pajamas and kurtas. Photo by Robert March.

Changes That Were Made

The color white. When you think of an Indian market place or street, the men are usually dressed in white with colored turbans and the women wear an array of color and patterns. The obstacle was that we could not put that many men in white because it is very hard to light. I didn't want to give it up completely, though, so I had to use it sparingly. Even the light gold and beige I used for some costumes had to be changed when we got to the theater because they were still too bright on stage (left).

Men in doiti's. When designing for the men I thought it would be nice to have a variety of bottom wear – some in pajamas, some in chudars and some in doitis' (a sarong – like wrapped garment). I continued to think that until I saw the men dance. We immediately changed to pajamas and kurtas (above).

Women's Clothes. The women's clothes are gorgeous, colorful, and modern looking, as well as very expensive, with intricate beading, embroidery, etc. During the 1800's there was a lot less of that, and the materials were simpler. I wanted to break the barrier for the higher class women, and put them in some gold sparkle and brighter colors, while keeping the working class in less decorative materials. This led to my biggest challenge: fabrics.

Resources

Fabric. Since I could not afford to buy the garments, I had to think of making at least a few of them. The problem was that there is very little true Indian fabric available in the area, especially fancier beaded fabrics. Solid material at fabric stores have a modern, processed look, and I wanted more texture. They also had what my assistant dubbed "acid looking"



Choli made from part of a saree



Lehenga made from the other part of the saree.



Actor in Choli and Lehenga. Photo by Robert March.



Lehenga made from saree

colors. This describes the harsher look of polyesters that take color much differently than cotton.

With the garments that the Indian members of the cast contributed, we began to piece together some of



Actor wears saree. Photo by Robert March.

the outfits. My Indian friend also took a trip to India and came back with some sarees that her mother had given her. I used them to make costumes, including a lehenga and choili (photos at left).

Thrift stores.

This gives that used look for the men. The vest (right) cost \$1.50 for a used sheet that has already been distressed.

Ebay. Wedding dresses are very expensive: \$2500 and up. I found a "fusion" dress (below), a combination of the traditional style of Indian dress and modern Indian dress, at a more reasonable price.



Vest made of bed sheet. Photo by Robert March.



"Fusion" dress from Ebay. Photo by Robert March.

Flea Market. The San Jose Market had two Indian vendors whose fabric was a little more unique, and not recognizable as coming from the local quilters' fair. It is always nice to find material that the public does not recognize.

Local Indian Clothing Stores. There are a lot of Indian clothing stores in the area that I visited. They only had ready-made clothing that was beyond my budget. I did purchase a ready made turban.

Construction

Men's Costumes. Indian men wear kurtas and pajamas. They can be made out of any material from cotton to silk. To make a kurta I used a collarless shirt pattern and



Indian servant. Costume design by Kathleen Barcos. Photo by Robert March.



various material. For an Indian servant (below left), I used a regular collarless white shirt underneath the blue kurta, and added a burgundy sash and a blue turban.

Present day Indian men usually wear a sherwani or long tunic to a wedding or fancy occasion. However in Victorian times there was a wide variety of dressy men's clothes. The richer you were, the fancier they would be. Jewelry was also a key to wealth.

The plan was to have as many turbans as possible on stage to help recreate the period. I was worried how to get them to stay on without "making" them. As it turned out the men who were to wear the turbans actually knew how to tie them, so that they would stay on their heads. It was so much fun to watch them wrapping those long pieces of cloth. They were really good. I did give them the turban cloth for rehearsal about three weeks before opening, so they could get use to



Petticoat of wedding saree.



Saree attached to petticoat waist.



Saree w/ attached petticoat.

having something on their head while dancing.

There were enough who were comfortable with turbans, that those who were not comfortable didn't need to wear them, or they wore them in the opening scene and then made scarves or sashes out of them for the rest of the show.

Women's clothing. The initial directions from the choreographer were there were to be no sarees. The reason was they thought sarees were too hard to dance in, especially for those who had never worn Indian clothes before. As we know in the theater, what starts out does not always end up on stage. Access to sarees is far easier to manage than lehenga/choli, simply from the time and cost aspect.

When I found the "wedding" saree on Ebay, we tried it on and the one request was to make it feel secure for dancing. In order to do that, the underskirt or petticoat, which is worn under everything, was attached to the wrapped saree so it felt like a one piece skirt (photos at left).

Lehenga/cholis that were appropriate for the time period

of the show would cost from \$250 to thousand of dollars, and the material with the beadwork and hand embroidery was not available in the area. You can find Sarees from \$75 on up, but you are looking at polyester materials, and they lack the traditional look. Silk chiffon or Indian cotton look more traditional, but they lacked the beading.

Jewelry. Aside from the use of material to distinguish class, I found that one easy way of distinguishing class in the Victorian era was through jewelry. Indians, especially the women love jewelry, and some of the Indian cast members owned beautiful pieces. I had to say “no” to some of them because they cost in the thousands of dollars, and I



just didn't feel comfortable having them in the theater. I was lucky enough to have a volunteer assistant to help me, and all she did was jewelry.



Every person in the cast had some sort of jewelry. Men wore necklaces, or stones on laces. The wealthier men had jeweled pins, fancy rings, and pearls. The women wore chokers (some of which were made out of pearls and gold laced trim), large earrings, necklaces, rings, lots of bracelets and tikkas (a



Photos by Robert March.



My jewelry assistant. Photo by Robert March.

what we had and where we still needed to go. At first glance, there were several costumes that I thought would work, but it became apparent, as often happens, that they would not, and we had to make changes.

I asked some of the Indian women to work with me in assembling the costumes and start putting together the pieces we did have. However, very few of

piece worn in the hair coming down to the forehead, center photo far left). These we made from earrings, strings of pearls, and various styles of trims, because some of the ones we purchased could not be seen on stage. It was quite a job to keep track of it all and to purchase what we needed. I felt very lucky to have an assistant for this (left).

Once we got on stage, we could see



Choli made of Navy T-shirt. Photo by Robert March.

the pieces had the truly “high class look” we wanted. What they lacked was the intricate beading and embroidery that would catch the lights, even though we had put glittery trim on the skirt hems and choli tops. I made one “choli” (below at left) out of a navy T-shirt and trimmed it with sequined trim.

When we got to the theater, the cast, especially the women, saw what would be on stage and realized what a better show it would be with their own clothes. The choreographer also saw what we had, and brought in costumes from her dance company, as well as some personal items. It was the true magic of the theater coming together. Those contributions made a huge difference and truly livened up the show.

It was a true mixture of created, borrowed, and purchased costuming. With the enthusiasm of the cast and the burst of colors, it all came together and was wonderfully fun. You can view a trailer from a dress rehearsal is on [YouTube](#).

Kathleen Barcos' theater experiences started with neighborhood “yard shows.” After 10 years as a performer, she became a costumer and loved it. Over the past 10 years she has costumed shows such as “The Miracle Worker,” “1776,” “Patience,” “HMS Pinafore,” “The Gypsy” Baron,” “Crossing Delancy,” and “King Lear.” She has also been a director, nightclub singer and theater photographer. So in order to enjoy the theater you do not need a Master's in Drama- the universe will provide.