

Dress Them Up!

Meet the North Shore resident behind those quick changes and gorgeous costumes on *Ragtime*....

"The stage door, the stage door!" I'm repeating this like a not-so-mystical mantra to myself as I prepare to get off the bus from North Vancouver and look for the stage door somewhere in the back alley of downtown's Ford Centre for the Performing Arts. My sense of direction being what it is (or, more accurately, isn't) I envision myself wandering aimlessly through the alleyway attempting vaguely to be inconspicuous.

Thanks to Kasandra Nicols, the woman I am to interview, this minor directional catastrophe never takes place. I have mentioned during my bus ride, to a friend who got off at an earlier stop, the purpose of my venture over the water. As I prepare to disembark, Nicols (who was on the same bus and overheard me) introduces herself and we walk to the theatre together.

Having never been to the Ford Centre before, I am quite excited to be given entry into the—ahem—bowels of it. Nicols guides me through a maze of stairs to the lower level where it seems most of the backstage action takes place. The show being put on is *Ragtime*, a Livent production that has already played on Broadway and in Toronto, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, and is now in Vancouver until the end of August.

Nicols, a North Vancouver resident, is a dresser for the show. She and 15 other dressers are responsible for all of the 450 costumes that the cast members wear—including everything from shoes to parasols to incredibly intricate turn-of-the-century-style dresses.

The most difficult task of a dresser takes place during the actual performance. As actors and actresses rush back and forth on and off stage, Nicols runs right along with them, getting them into and out of costume very quickly. She and two other dressers

change 19 women in the supporting cast as well as two actors. In *Ragtime*, Nicols does almost a dozen changes.

"They are mainly dresses, very elaborate dresses," says Nicols, eating a sandwich and relaxing in the green room before her work begins, an hour and a half before the curtain rises. Elaborate indeed. Nicols takes me

gets torn or broken or ripped." A torn costume can create havoc during a show and can even be a danger if an actor should trip over a loose piece of fabric. The dressers ensure that the costumes remain in excellent shape and do any minor repairs required between shows. All of the dressers come in twice a week for four hours to do a work

call, where all of the costumes are gone over in detail to make sure that nothing has become hurt or stained. Dressers are also responsible for any preshow ironing, a fact made obvious by the numerous hands on irons before the show.

"We're in charge of everything from the neck down," Nichols says as she reaches for one of several laundry baskets that fill the rooms. The make-up and hair department are in charge of hats, wigs, and everything else that goes on above the neck. There are different rooms of costumes for men and women and a whole separate set for the understudies who could be called upon even in the middle of a show.

"You really have to be ready for that," says Nicols, referring to the possibility of a mid-show replacement. Once, during *Show Boat*, Diahann Carroll became ill and was replaced by her understudy after intermission. While Nicols wasn't involved in that change, she remembers it as quick and efficient because of the preparation by those involved. The size of the costumes in addition to their intricacy—hooks and eyes and buttons—makes for quite complicated changes. Velcro openings help this along but fine finger work is still necessary.

"You develop really strong hands and muscles," Nichols says, smiling, without a hint of nervousness about the work that lies ahead of her. "It's like a dance; everything becomes intricately choreographed...It does get crowded [backstage]. We have to be consistent. We don't want to have to worry about it all during the show."



Donna Bullock as "Mother" in a scene from the Vancouver production of *Ragtime*. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

through the various rooms that house the wardrobe. Rack after rack are filled with gorgeous dresses of all colours, in the style of the early 1900s. They are thick, rich, beautiful, and complicated. All of the hangers are positioned in the same way. "That is important," says Nicols, "so that nothing