

# THE SET AND COSTUMES OF *WIVES AS THE WERE,* *AND MAIDS AS THEY ARE*



## An interview with Set and Costume Designer Kit Surrey

**Kit, the set you have designed for *Wives as the were, and Maids as they are* is very contemporary and very different from the period set you designed for the 2007 production *Black Eyed Susan*. What are the ideas behind it?**



*Wives as they were, and Maids as they are:*  
set model box.

Well, there were two ideas behind the design concept. First, Colin [*Blumenau, the director*] and I very much wanted for audiences not to expect the same as before; i.e. for *Black Eyed Susan*. It would have been all too easy to produce a similar design and to have gone along with various preconceptions of what to expect when going to a restored Georgian theatre to see a play from that period. In a sense we wanted to make people think.

Secondly, and this ties in with your second question, the play itself triggered a more radical approach to its design. *Wives...* seemed to me to be rather more of a challenge - although a comedy there were serious issues being discussed, written by a woman it dealt with, as Michael Billington noted in his review, the stirrings of female liberation and women's place in the society of its time. It seemed to ask for a more demanding and questioning approach from me as a designer.

**Did you have an external inspiration for the set and its contemporary aesthetics, or were you entirely inspired by the text of the play?**

Yes, there was an external inspiration as well - Colin sowed the seeds of the idea in his own inspirational way very early on in our discussions and I thought that museum 'vitrines' or glass showcases perfectly epitomised the boxes or pigeonholes that societies place their members in.

This idea, combined with memories of the costume collection at the V&A Museum in London and especially the collection at the Kyoto Costume Institute in Japan, crystallized into what you see on stage - also we felt that it would help the play seem more relevant to a contemporary audience.

**What role do lighting and music play in the concept?**

Lighting was especially important - filling a stage with multi-reflective surfaces (which was a deliberate move to emphasise the artificiality of the current society) poses something of a challenge to a lighting designer and without any 'naturalistic' scenery the opportunity arose to use colour to establish the different locales and moods demanded by the play. This was achieved by throwing intense coloured light onto the back projection behind the perspex boxes. Matt Eagland's lighting complemented and enhanced the whole production.



Alexander Caine  
as Sir George Evelyn  
Photo: Mike Kwasniak

**In stark contrast to the set, the actors are wearing very beautiful period costumes. Were you at any point thinking of making this an entirely contemporary production and put them in modern clothes instead? If so, what made you decide for the period costumes?**

Yes, there was a moment when we thought about using modern clothes in order to highlight just how the issues dealt with are still with us. We felt though that it would be too heavy handed and somewhat obvious and the "museum" show cases seemed to demand period clothes. Period costumes also impose certain period mannerisms and behaviour that seemed relevant to the play.

**There is clearly a difference between the costumes of the traditional, established people like, for example, Lord and Lady Priory, and the modern, fashionable characters like Maria Dorillon, Lady Mary Raffle and Mr Bronzeley.**

**Tell us a bit more about your research into the fashion of the period:**



Joannah Tincey as Lady Priory and James Wallace as Mr Bronzeley.

Photo: Mike Kwasniak

**How authentic is this 'split' in fashion for the late 18<sup>th</sup> century? Did it really exist or have you decided to take some liberties with the costumes to make the differences in character more prominent?**

**Have you modelled Mr Bronzeley on the period 'fashion icon' Beau Brummell? Have you had any other 'real' people you modelled some of the characters on?**

The date of the play, 1797, was an important time in fashion. Both France and America had had revolutions and ideas for change were everywhere. Fashion can reflect society accurately and particularly so at the end of the 18th century. To a certain extent I did exaggerate the difference between the old and the new generations but it was noted at the time - there are plenty of contemporary cartoons high-lighting the fact. I have slightly stretched the concept - the clothes that Lord and Lady Priory wear are a little earlier than they would have been and Lady Mary and Maria are a little later, but not very much!

Yes, to a certain extent Mr. Bronzeley is a precursor to Beau Brummell but Brummell would not have approved of Bronzeley's waistcoats... too flashy. Brummell was the epitome of the way a gentleman should dress - immaculately cut coats in dark colours and perfectly starched cravats, the precursor of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century three-piece sober suited man. I don't think any of the other characters are based on 'real' people. I just looked long and hard at contemporary imaged and, as mentioned before, the stunning collection of period costumes from the Kyoto Costume Institute in their glass cases.



Laura Doddington as Miss Maria Dorrillon, Ursula Early as Lady Mary Raffle and Joannah Tincey as Lady Priory.

Photo: Mike Kwasniak

Questions by Heritage Manager Helga Brandt