



KATIE VAN DYKE

■ The staff at the Armoury at Covent Garden (left) is in charge of maintaining the collection of half-a-century-old weapons used for the Opera House's operas and ballets.

● *L'équipe de l'armurerie du Covent Garden (à gauche) est chargée de l'entretien de la collection des armes, vieilles d'un demi siècle, qui sont utilisées pour les opéras et ballet du théâtre.*

▼ Die Mitarbeiter der Rüstkammer in Covent Garden (links) betreuen eine Sammlung von Waffen, die ein halbes Jahrhundert alt sind, und für die Kämpfe und Schächten im Opernhaus benutzt werden.

can use or wear. I couldn't do embroidery to put on a wall — though I might have a go at the Bayeux tapestry.

"The work doesn't depend on size, but on the amount of pep and go you put into it. You need a frame, a design, and the will to do it. The frame, of course, has to be tight as a drum, or else the work will collapse. It also helps if you can draw well." He says he can't. "But when I do drawings, I use children's crayons." He doesn't mean Crayolas, but coloured pencils dipped in water. "They're more precise than brush or watercolour.

"Embroidery is therapy for me," Ellam concludes, "but it could be terribly frustrating. If I make a mistake, I can't leave it. I just cut it out and start again. It requires patience. I sometimes tell myself, 'Just one more leaf, one more...'"

Brian Peters, wig designer

Wig designer Brian Peters might legitimately claim to know a thing or two about entertainment industry psychology. The walls of his small office in west London, lined with the autographed photos of celebs like John Cleese and Wendy Hiller, are a miniature Who's Who of British show business. After nearly three decades

of handling both hair and egos, Peters pegs most performers as "introverts in an extrovert's job. We've all heard stories about wigs being thrown across the room, costumes being torn. But I find that most people are very easy. In this business, everyone wants to be loved, and one of my tasks is to make everyone happy. The actor wants one thing, the designer something else, and the director doesn't know till he sees it. I help everybody to see everyone else's point of view. It's a lovely way of earning a living, really, because you're manufacturing pretense. You're supplying a very important part of an illusion."

Peters, 52, is one of 25 employees at Wig Creations, located just off Hyde Park. It is one of the largest, most reputable firms of its kind in Europe, supplying wigs — not to mention all manner of facial and body hair — for stage, screen, judicial, and private use.

"We might be working on 10 or 15 different productions at any given time," Peters says, acknowledging how theatrically orientated the business is. Apart from frequent customers, private or professional, whose named, head-shaped wood blocks line the shelves of the workroom, a large part of the trade is conducted by post. Clients from abroad send detailed mail orders consisting of photographs, designs, charts with head measurements and all other manner of specifications, from colour and texture to weight, length and style.

Peters likens wig-making to both

painting by numbers, because of the seemingly infinite possibilities of blending shades and grains of hair, and small-scale rug-making, because of the method of using a hook to knit the nearly invisible strands of hair by hand onto the thinnest of laces. According to him, the profession hasn't altered much, technically speaking, since the 18th century. In his time, the only significant change has been a shift toward different, usually lightweight fabrics (nylon for the hair lace, for example).

Horse hair is used to create legal wigs, and yak hair ("It's quite coarse and retains curl") for beards and moustaches. The human hair is imported from Italy and Eastern Europe, in kilo bundles usually 10 to 24 inches long and costing approximately £1,000 each. At Wig Creations they unceremoniously store the hair — bound into what is known as hackles — in an ordinary two-drawer filing cabinet. Light-colored hair goes on top, with the darker, less expensive hackles below. You can easily discern the difference between artificially and naturally bleached or treated hair, but either way hair is a treat to touch for anyone into tactile sensation.

"It can be very sexy," Peters admits, "but I don't find hair erotic as a substance, maybe because we use it as a fabric and treat it with fabric dyes." He does, however, recognize the intimate nature of what he and his colleagues at Wig Creations do. "How much closer can you get to a person than their hair?"