

Gina Pinnick, Knitter

Just down the road from Sands Films — a lane, actually, filled with more warehouses — is Gina Pinnick's studio. She and nearly two dozen other artisans rent space in a cooperatively-run building that is a veritable warren of creativity and craft. 99 Rotherhithe Street contains painters and illustrators, jewelers, prop and lute makers, costumers, and people who specialise in leatherware and textiles, to name a few.

Pinnick, in her early thirties, is a specialist knitter. "I'll knit anything that needs to be knitted," she declares. Although she started out in fashion, her focus has widened to include theatre, film, video, and television, as well as private commissions. "I go round the bend when I finally see my work on stage or screen," she happily admits. By those standards, her life must be a continual revolution. She's only been knitting professionally for about five years, but already her list of credits is impressive — *La Traviata* for English National Opera, *La Bayadere* for the Royal Ballet, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, the West End productions of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and the new *Aspects of Love*, and a television special starring ice-skating champs Torvill and Dean.

Pinnick doesn't necessarily design the costumes for a given show, nor does she work on all of them. Instead she contributes particular skills, using both computer-based and hand-operated knitting machinery, and also offering crochet and macrame. Her repertoire of materials encompasses everything from silk and chenille to mohair and lycra. She likes to incorporate lurex, chiffon, suede, and many other substances into her work as well. "People don't realize just what can be knitted," she says. "And it doesn't have to be only clothing that I do. I'd love to work on backcloths, for instance."

A sizable chunk of Pinnick's time is spent making the rounds, calling on contacts, and networking. "I deal with freelance or company supervisors, the people who coordinate the costuming for the designers. They call me, or I call them, and we arrange a meeting where the designer picks out whatever materials he

or she likes from a big bag I've brought. I go away and come up with different samples, then bring them back to be looked at. That's when decisions get made as to what I'll finally do for them and how it'll be done.

"The amount of time I'm given varies. I've had some all-nighters. I once had to do the jumpers for several actors in a musical just over one weekend. Well, I did it, on no sleep, but it was worth it, because each job that comes along is a challenge."

Although she's had no formal teacher training, two years ago Pinnick started passing on her knowledge to others. She teaches knitting at a nearby university. "My students love to hear about what shows I've had a hand in," she says. "They also want to know things about knitting that I've never bothered with, technical and stylistic questions, so in a way I'm constantly teaching myself."

Terry Keen & Jonathan Bray, Armourers

"Bloody hell!" the man in the hall exclaimed in surprised admiration. He'd obviously been going about his business in the basement of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden when suddenly he came upon a door opening onto a room few people get to see. This is the storeroom of the Opera House's armoury department, a cramped space packed to the ceiling with nearly half a century's collection of weaponry. It's the stuff of an adventurous kid's dreams: breastplates and helmets (both real and fiberglass), genuine Napoleonic polearms, thrillingly heavy spears and dashing lightweight swords, brown muskets and fancy cutlasses. You half expect Errol Flynn or some latter-day movie hero to come charging round the bend with a loyal crew to take up arms.

"We're desperately short of space," department head Terry Keen says, glancing round what is scarcely bigger than a boiler room, "but it's so hot down here that nothing goes rusty. And everything you see gets used." His voice strikes just the right notes of professional pride and boyish enthusiasm. He's been at the Opera House for 22 years, and clearly loves both the old theatre and his department.

Just below the dome at the top of the

Opera House is the department workroom that Keen shares with two assistants. Here Keen tells how the department really got going and organized after World War II, thanks to the efforts of a now-deceased wardrobe department employee, the son of

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a well-to-do military family.

"Nowadays no theatre could afford to buy or start up an armoury like ours," Keen says. "It's the best-equipped in the country. Many of the pieces have been around for a long time. So long, in fact, that their origins are unknown. Anything over 100 years old, which some of our pieces are, is by English law an antique and therefore needs no licence. But if it's a copy, you need one. So we have half a dozen rifles and roughly the same amount of pistols registered with Scotland Yard. They're very, very particular. I think they just like to come and have a look at our stock, really."

"It's quite a nasty trade," Jonathan Bray says of the armoury. "Someone is always getting killed." Onstage, that is. Bray, a former dancer, has been in the department for 16 years. A good deal of his and his colleagues' time is spent on maintenance and repairs. "Some things get dropped deliberately, because that's what the script dictates, and that causes damage. You can ask the performers to do themselves or somebody else in with style — 'Cut your throat and put the knife down gently, please' — but it doesn't always work."

Armoury and wigs are the only two departments in the vast Opera House whose staff crossover between opera and ballet productions. Whatever the show, Keen and his cohorts try to use as much as possible from stock. But sometimes they can't do that and must make new pieces, whether it's weapons or leather goods. Lacking a forge, they must buy blades. Handles — comprised of pommel, grip and guard (or quillon) — are either designed as originals in metal or brass, cast from existing instruments, or cast using wooden moulds. "The craft is in knowing how to use materials," says Bray. "The art is if you do the designs."