



## THE DESIGN

Designer Neil Irish built huge art tasks for each school into his designs, so that students could be engaged in making important elements of the sets and props. Each scene includes visually spectacular props, set pieces, or items of costume created by children working with their Art Co-ordinators and staff, overseen by Project Art Co-ordinator Karen Large whose task it was to enable the schools to realise Neil's exciting designs.



## The Schools

Berger School's tasks included colourful and imaginative textile shoes made into headwear and two large shoes made as part of a design and technology project. For *The Walk Learner*, Orchard School created beautiful bird hats and banners as well as ferocious leopard masks. Morningside School made delightful banners and gory body parts for *The Peach Thief*, whilst Lauriston School designed and created stunning decorative hanging panels and an enormous dragon. Daubeney School produced their breathtaking ghosts' masks as well as hats for the Chess pieces and St Dominics School turned bicycle helmets into fabulous cricket headdresses.

Every school was asked to produce Chinese lanterns, which were flown in during the finale and the imaginative range included Yin and Yang painted octagonal shapes, tiny decorated lanterns by Wentworth Nursery, and huge constructions by Lauriston School designed with blue butterflies and flowers.

## The Teachers

### Peter Sanders

Project and Art Co-ordinator, Lauriston School

Assisted by Dot Young and students from The Central School of Speech and Drama, Karen and Neil led a teachers' INSET to introduce them to the skills and techniques they would need to enable them to carry out their tasks.

*The best way we can learn is by doing. The best people we can learn from are the people who 'do' the thing we are learning as a job. This is why the teachers' art workshop designed to prepare all Art Co-ordinators for the task of producing props, sets and some items of costume was such a success. It was a real privilege to work alongside Neil, Karen and Dot on learning techniques that would help us later. All three of them and their willing student accomplices showed great skill, patience and generosity while working with our motley crew from the EAZ schools. It is a rare and treasured INSET that has everyone working together, laughing, joking, learning and being sad when the day comes to an end. However, that's what happened in the workshop.*



Skills and techniques were learned there that were then applied in classrooms and gave another dimension and scale to work done by the children.









## The Design

**Neil Irish talked to Project Director Tertia Sefton-Green about how he designed the show:**

**TS-G:** How did you create the concept for your designs?

**NI:** The set design for *Confucius Says* evolved from trying to morph two visual elements which were dominant in my thoughts: one, the iconic image of the Great Wall, the other being the simple universal Yin and Yang symbol. The final curved shape of the platform or wall emerged when these two elements were combined. We were then able to add elements to this basic structure which were specific to each individual story.

**TS-G:** How did you decide on the different looks for each scene and the range of historical references which you used?

**NI:** The overall 'look' for each story was a response to the content of the piece and what was required to help tell the story in a clear and simple way. This was combined with a more expressionistic response rather than a laboured historical recreation. Various periods in history

were chosen to vary the visuals of the overall piece.

The stories involving Emperors were especially in need of variation whereas the more abstract stories such as *The Hungry Ghosts* were set in a fairly timeless abstract period.

**TS-G:** How did you go about ensuring the 'Chineseness' of the design?

**NI:** The 'Chineseness' of the design was not a laboured, detailed, obvious approach. Again it was allowing a broader approach. Hopefully this freed up the schools to be more creative rather than them just copying existing objects and allowed children some personal input as a response to all things Chinese.

**TS-G:** Did you do a lot of research to ensure historical and Chinese accuracy?

**NI:** Certain elements needed to be specific and accurate

such as the Chess pieces, the calligraphy on the costumes and in the video production for special effects. I think this approach of an expressionistic broad approach to the culture of China freed everybody up to be creative, individual and energised, although contained and controlled within the wider 'Theme'. This broader, less detailed approach, also worked as, due to the time constraints, I had to create the design from the synopsis before seeing the detailed Libretto and final Score!



For me the best part was hearing comments from children in the audience when their huge lanterns and banners were flown in. 'That's my dragon, lantern, tree.' For the non-performers, it was a real surprise and pleasure to see the fruits of their labour appear before them on the stage. It made them realise that they had made as valuable a contribution as anyone else in making the opera the immense success it truly was.

Peter Sanders, Project and Art Co-ordinator, Lauriston School





# The Costumes

Additional elements of the project included a programme of adult learning to engage the wider school community. Costume Supervisor Karen Large led a course for parents to involve them in the making of the 350 costumes needed in the show, and to develop their sewing skills and techniques. Karen's enormous task of producing all the beautiful costumes for the show, and realising Neil's designs fully, included sourcing clothes from India, as well as Chinatown, commissioning costume makers, dyers and painters (for the calligraphy and skeletons), working with students from The Central School of Speech and Drama who made the professionals' stunning costumes, as well as hours of buying materials, sewing, altering, labelling, adding and creating intricate details, not to mention co-ordinating the huge numbers involved.

I enjoyed making the shoes because of the designs.

Vanessa



Being part of the vast team that united to create this visual feast has been an inspirational, challenging and life-changing experience for me.

Karen Large – Costume Supervisor/Art Co-ordinator





## The Central School of Speech and Drama

### Caroline Townsend

Senior Lecturer, Costume Construction and Pathway Leader, Theatre Crafts

The project was a great experience for Costume Construction and Props students on the BA (Hons) Theatre practice course; as a course we always value the opportunity to work on collaborative and innovative work. Working alongside professional practitioners, Neil Irish, Karen Large, professional opera singers and the schools, plus the added exciting dimension of it being a new opera allowed the students to develop their creative and problem-solving skills.

In the early stages the students were able to work with Neil and Karen to undertake new roles in planning and assisting in the art workshops in schools and the community, and then later to take on the roles within the production team such as Assistant Costume Supervisor, Costume Makers, Prop Makers and Dressers for the performances. The Opera was one of the biggest performances these students had been a part of; the world premiere, performing at the Hackney Empire alongside the professional team, ensured that all work was done to a high standard.

**The best part was getting our costumes and trying them on for the first time,**

Jessica

**I really liked MeiMei's costume, it was red, orange and yellow, the colour of fire!**

Nikyta

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