

April 24, 2008

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By Diane Welch

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But don't be fooled by that theatrical exterior. This oft-labeled high priestess of punk (a misnomer, by the way) is far from pretentious; she's all heart from her comfy flowered thong sandals to her now tamed bobbed hair do.

Earning iconic stature during her almost 40 years in business as a British haute couture designer, and with a Commander of the British Empire title from Her Majesty the Queen of England, (not too shabby!), Rhodes is an international celebrity. While her signature couture is well established, Rhodes has recently ventured into new territory. That of costume and set design for opera.

The San Diego Opera will be staging Bizet's "Pearl Fishers," featuring Rhodes' flamboyant set and costume designs starting Saturday, May 3, 2008.

A resident of Del Mar — where she lives with her partner Salah Hassanein — Rhodes made her San Diego Opera debut when she designed costumes for "The Magic Flute" in 2001. She returned three years later to design sets and costumes for "The Pearl Fishers" which is being encored this season, back by popular demand. Last year the four-show run sold out. But this is often the case. Rhodes has single handedly added another dimension to the larger than life operatic productions. She has "Zandrified" them. And audiences love it.

The color, the richness, and the playful artistry of Rhodes' designs have a broad appeal. And the plot of the Pearl Fishers with its exotic ancient Ceylon setting, provided the perfect backdrop for Rhodes to express herself.

"I didn't even know the plot of the Pearl Fishers," Rhodes admitted, that was until she read Bizet's storyline as part of her homework for the commission. The plot is far from feasible, it's fair to say that it's far fetched. But this gave Rhodes the artistic license to design without boundaries. "Don't forget that Bizet never went to Ceylon," she said Campbell told her. So the sky was the limit. Rhodes had a free rein and her imagination took flight.

The story weaves a tale of passion and intrigue. The main character, Priestess Leila, a "tantalizing virgin priestess", who protects the pearl fishers' fleet, is tempted by a passion which shatters the friendship of two men who love her: the fisherman Nadir and the king of the fishermen, Zurga. When storms wreck the fishermen's boats, Leila is saved from a ritual sacrifice through an heroic act of one of her lovers. Passion, drama, love and heroism are romantically and beautifully staged. Rhodes, having never designed for opera before 2001, said modestly, "I just learned it as I went a long."

Her conceptual drawings are designed with colored pens on 8 x 10 sized rice paper, conveniently the exact size to be translated into full scale set designs which are then recreated into soft and hard sets. Rhodes constructed "small ones" (maquettes) to establish how the lighting works, and the transitions from one scene to the next.

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Designer Zandra Rhodes. Photo/Jon Clark

India," Rhodes said. The organizers weren't paying a fee but the government funded the travel costs. "If you can't pay me then I need to bring someone with me and I need to go onto Sri Lanka afterwards," Rhodes told them. "I did a five pointed trip with my sketching partner and we did lots of drawings in Sri Lanka. There was this magical medieval palace in Candy, carved out of rocks; you climb like 200 stairs and on the way up there are caves with paintings of court ladies." She did sketches on the spot, then took photographs, and the celebrated Sigiriya frescoes ultimately led to the background of the Pearl Fishers.

The inspiration filtered through from that point. "The thing about opera is that it can be larger than life, so it helped going to Sri Lanka. I could bring back saris, print on them and Zandrify them and end up with it looking, you know, correct." It also helped knowing about the Indian gods, she said. "And I was influenced by what I'd learned so far with working out that the priestess would be hidden in a sari; all those sorts of things that you wouldn't get otherwise. Then we worked into tying saris into different castes, different levels, so that it could be different."

Using the sari as a major element, she added her distinctive colorful wiggly patterns which are repeated in the backdrop landscape of palm trees with purples, pinks, blues and yellows dominating her palette. The entire visual complements the exotic tropical atmosphere of Bizet's melodic music.

Over the past seven years, Rhodes has continued to design for opera but still manages to create her couture collections. She puts in 14 hour days, seven days a week. She staves of falling asleep by "keeping moving". Along with Hassanein, she is a philanthropic force in San Diego Coun-

ty. For the past 11 years they have contributed to UCSD's Cardiovascular Center, La Jolla Playhouse, La Jolla's Athenaeum, to name just a few. "I enjoy getting involved in charities and causes around the world," Rhodes said.

One of her most passionate causes has been the Fashion and Textile Museum in Bermondsey, London which opened five years ago. The building, designed by Mexican architect, Ricardo Legorreta, houses exhibitions that celebrate contemporary fashion and textiles from 1950 to present day. In 2005 Rhodes' first major retrospective was shown there.

In her typically down to earth and modest manner, Rhodes seems more like your favorite aunt who is a tad eccentric, than a world celebrated design diva. She has traveled a long and fascinating road since her graduation from London's Royal College of Art in the 1960s when Twiggy made thin "in", and Mary Quant launched the mini skirt revolution. Today Rhodes' signature flowing chiffon gowns are sported by movie stars and royalty. Princess Diana was a huge fan; Paris Hilton wears Zandra Rhodes, as does Sarah Jessica Parker.

When asked if she sees retirement in her future, Rhodes characteristically said that she has no intention of slowing down, let alone retiring. "Well, if I didn't work what would I do?" she rhetorically pondered.

Pearl Fishers will present four shows: May 3, May 6, May 9 and May 11. Visit [www.sdogera.com](http://www.sdogera.com) to find out more about the shows or to purchase tickets. Or call (619) 533 7000

To contact Zandra Rhodes visit [www.zandrarrhodes.com](http://www.zandrarrhodes.com) or call her at (858) 792-1892.

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