

## Interview: **Designer and director Netia Jones**



Rachele Gilmore as Alice © Lightmap

She'd rather work in a nuclear power station than an opera house – and her biggest fear is computer malfunction. Designer and director Netia Jones talks to Christopher Gillett about the year she has spent creating costumes, projections and animations for Unsuk Chin's opera *Alice in Wonderland*.

### **Is *Alice in Wonderland* something of a gift to direct?**



It is, and the score is also a gift because it's so entertaining. The librettist, David Henry Hwang, and composer Unsuk Chin have a left-field approach to Lewis Carroll's work which feels very authentic, even though it's completely fresh and new. That's a joy to work with.

### **How did you start on this production?**

Originally I looked at Tenniel's drawings and thought about trying to roughen them up, to bring them into the sound world of the score. Then I came across Ralph Steadman's illustrations for *Alice In Wonderland*, which just look exactly like Unsuk Chin's score. They capture the wildness and the riot of the story, and they're very funny and full of energy.

Ralph is wild but he's also incredibly humane. He loves the text of *Alice* and I can see why, because not only is it incredibly imaginative, it's very astute. It has an observer's understanding of humans and how monstrous they are.

### **What's your planning and design process?**

When you're dealing with a fully-staged production that has a huge orchestra sitting in the middle of it, first you have to figure out a set design that can incorporate projection that won't blind anybody, will give you enough leeway for stage action and stage choreography, and is practical!

Swift on the heels of that comes the costume design. There are 100 costumes in this show, so that's quite a big deal. I had done the costume designs before I met Ralph, because that comes very early on in the

process. It was uncanny that so many of the costumes chimed with Ralph's illustrations of this story, because as far as I know, I hadn't seen them before. I had already dressed the entire chorus as businessmen in bowler hats and pinstriped suits and that is a motif that reappears often in Ralph's illustrations.

Then comes the video design, when you consider what will be real and what will be projected – and how it can respond directly to the conductor or the live performers so it feels musical and therefore invisible.



Illustration by Ralph Steadman

### **How do you animate somebody else's 'fixed' drawings?**

I decide what any character or drawing needs to do by listening to the score and looking at the drawing and seeing what is possible. I'm adamant that when we do animation of artists' work – and I work with great artists' work – that it has to look like the artists themselves did it. So we can't add anything: we only use marks made by the artist.

I also go for the simplest of animations, though they're complex to achieve and they're always done with the aid of a computer. Ralph has been incredibly generous with me, because I haven't just taken things from *Alice in Wonderland* – I've taken things from the whole range of his other drawings.

### **It sounds like a massive undertaking.**

It is ludicrously labour-intensive, but the labour itself is quite fun. We've been planning it for about four years and I've been working on it intensively for about a year. Given that it will have just three outings, it's verging on madness. But madness is part of the whole world of *Alice in Wonderland* so, hey, it fits perfectly.



Alice costume © Netia Jones

**And this is all before you've directed and rehearsed the cast. How do you describe what you do during the performance – sitting in the auditorium, controlling all the media in real time from your laptop?**



*Some of Netia Jones' designs for Benjamin Britten's Curlew River at the Barbican Centre*

I've described it to myself as 'playing the show'. You have to know the piece off by heart and you have to know what happens off by heart. I programme it on a laptop because that's a very easy instrument for me to be able to play and watch at the same time. I have to be looking up all the time. I programme every single key, so every key is in use. Sometimes it's a very simple scene, but mostly I'm on every single key to the beat or to the moment, whatever that is.

**Does this bring on performance anxiety?**

Oh my God! You have no idea. Any fear that you may have experienced – double it and then triple it. It's not just about me and my abilities. I am at the mercy of electronic technology, and as anybody knows who's had an interaction with a computer, it can be ridiculously scary because it can just go wrong. The sick feeling definitely comes from the idea that at any moment a sign will flash up and it will say 'COMPUTER ERROR'.

**Would you say you're spearheading a new form of performance?**

I think movie images, projected imagery, visuals – however you want to describe it – are increasingly a part of modern life. And theatre or opera does need to reflect life as we live it, and if it doesn't, all is lost. But what I actually do is so demanding it requires that slightly crazed level of involvement.

I've spent at least 10,000 hours on the computer – there's no question about it. At the same time, technologies are becoming more fluid, more available, and more accessible, so I suspect and hope that, yes, this is the start of something.

**Will we see your work in opera houses?**

I love doing things that are unexpected or the opposite of what you're supposed to do. So the idea of just going into an opera house and doing an opera isn't quite as appealing as going to a nuclear power station and projecting into that. That's more fun. It's more alive.

**And what about 19th-century repertoire?**

That'll never, never happen. There may be an exception with Wagner (</uk/learn/composers/richard-wagner>). I suspect there are some amazing things yet to happen, a proper *Gesamtkuntswerk* in every way. You'd probably need to dedicate a decade of your life to doing that, to pull it off properly. I can imagine visual technology is something that Wagner would be amazed and excited by. But I can't really imagine meshing this kind of work with other 19th-century pieces.

**A downside to the way you work must be that you can't open the show and leave it to run with somebody else directing the performances, as most directors do.**

No, I can't just leave it and fly off. It's getting more serious now because things are getting booked quite far ahead. It's a big leap for someone else to do what I do, because you have to be completely *au fait* with technology and totally *au fait* with the score. But I will prevail. I will find somebody.

Where the Wild Things Are & Higglety Pigglety Pop! - Knussen - Barbic...  



*A sample of Netia Jones's design for 'Where The Wild Things Are'*

**[Alice in Wonderland is at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles](http://www.laphil.com/tickets/alice-wonderland/2015-02-28)**  
 **[\(http://www.laphil.com/tickets/alice-wonderland/2015-02-28\)](http://www.laphil.com/tickets/alice-wonderland/2015-02-28)** on 27 and 28 February and at the  
**[Barbican Hall London on 8 March](http://www.barbican.org.uk/music/event-detail.asp?ID=15977)** (<http://www.barbican.org.uk/music/event-detail.asp?ID=15977>).

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