



Dresses by Catherine Shaw: top left, top right, bottom left



Catherine enjoying the sea

Down at the end of Coopers Yard off Westow Hill you'll find 'The Overspill'. Upstairs houses an artist and jewellery designer, downstairs you'll find Catherine Shaw, who designs bespoke clothing for weddings and other special occasions. Jerry Green discovers...

“I’d always had this idea of setting up a studio where I could make - I suppose alternative wedding dresses is the best description - dresses for women who didn’t want the usual long white wedding dress - they wanted something a little bit different.

“I like to make dresses that reflect the personalities of the women who are wearing them. “Sometimes people come along with ideas that they want and sometimes they’ve got no idea.

“So we just work through a process and eventually they have the dress of their dreams”.

Catherine's philosophy is that a traditional white wedding dress usually ends up in a box under the bed.

“These dresses can be worn as party frocks, cocktail dresses - and if there's a dress and a coat then these pieces can be separated and worn with other items in their wardrobe,” Her

interest began in the sixth form at Eccles grammar school, Manchester where she was in the craft section for the art 'A' level syllabus. “We could do theatre design and I decided that sounded just my cup of tea” A theatre design course at Croydon College of Art followed. “We’d do everything - costume, props, scene painting, lighting as well as the design of the sets.” When Catherine finished college she went into making costumes.

“I worked for a woman at Covent Garden who made tutus for all the major ballet houses in Europe. I moved around with jobs over about two years then got a job with the English National Opera.” Catherine stayed with ENO for 13 years. During her time there she worked with many directors, designers and singers including Jonathan Miller, who directed 'Rigoletto and The Mikado', Gerald Scarfe who designed 'Orpheus in the

Underworld' and Philip Glass, the composer. She’s also made costumes for Lesley Garrett, Anne Murray and Marianne Faithfull. Catherine then took a year off travelling and landed up in Australia where she had friends.

“When I was flying to Australia on my first trip I came from Bangkok. We flew over from the north-west point to Sydney – virtually across the whole of Australia.

Landscape

“When I looked out the window of the plane the landscape looked just like an Aboriginal painting - just the little dots of colour all over the land. When you're on the land that's not apparent.

“I think they do a bit of astral travelling. You have to be so high up to see the land. But all their paintings before aeroplanes are all based on these dots. It's as though they are floating up above the land looking down on it.” Catherine lived in the outback

for quite a long time and became involved working with the Aboriginal Land Council. Some people she met at Broken Hill - a lead ore mining town, near the South Australian border and a non-stop 18 hour drive from Sydney - were involved in building a cultural centre which would enable Aborigines in Sydney to go and learn about their own culture. “They were going to stay in this centre called The Missionary - although it wasn't religious it was built on the spot where a Catholic children's home had been.” The centre had been built by an Aboriginal woman called Beryl who had been taken from her mother as a young child and placed in this home. “There's a lot of lost Aborigines in Australia. It's frowned upon if they want to follow their traditional way of life. “Beryl set up The Missionary where they could go and learn about the 'walkabout', bush tucker, how to play the

it's a SHAW thing...



didgeridoo, how to make a boomerang and how to throw it properly. These are all skills the Aboriginal people have lost. The storytelling is very important to their culture because they don't have anything written down.

"For the Aborigines it's the dreamtime that's part of real time. Their stories are all connected with the dreamtime and they feel they are privileged to be walking on this land and take great care of it and move around with the seasons - very similar to the Red Indians of North America.

Song lines

"There are songlines that connect up to all the energy places in Australia. Uluru (Ayers Rock) is a very sacred place and they don't encourage people to walk on it anymore.

"It's a very interesting culture. Some people in Australia don't value the essence of Aboriginal life. Living out there within the outback communities really

opened my eyes to so many things; colours especially because the landscape in the outback is very clear - there's no pollution. There is a very large artist community in Broken Hill because of this.

“ I like to make dresses that reflect the personalities of the women who are wearing them ”

Catherine Shaw

"The colour is just amazing. When you look you think it's just the red interior but when the sun is coming up or the moon is going down the colours that are there are just incredible.

"It heightened my sense of colour co-ordination. It made a very big impact on me."

Catherine also got involved with

a sculpture symposium where 12 sculptors from all over the world carved sculptures out of sandstone blocks. The sculptures were sold to raise money for the Fred Hollows trust. Hollows was an eye surgeon who had pioneered treatment for Aborigines because of eyesight problems caused by diabetes and worked tirelessly for their cause. All the monies raised went into the Fred Hollows trust for eye care.

While in Australia Catherine worked in the Sydney Opera House and for a theatrical costumier making costumes for the Cameron Mackintosh musicals in Australia - 'Les Miserables', 'Phantom of the Opera', 'Miss Saigon' and 'Sunset Boulevard'. She was also involved with working with Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin -who made the films 'Moulin Rouge' and 'Australia'- and for a production of Benjamin Britten's 'Midsummer Night's

Dream' which went on to the Edinburgh Festival in 1994. During her time living in Sydney she became involved with sailing and took up yacht racing, competing in two 'Sydney-Hobart' races as well as many other off shore races. In 2004 Catherine gained her yacht master certificate and skippered two yachts to Mallorca and Malta as well as competing in the Rolex 'Middle Sea Race' a 605 mile race around Sicily.

Catherine spent eight years in Australia before deciding "It was basically time to come home" Returning to England in 1999 she moved to Crystal Palace the following year. In 2005 the opportunity to acquire her studio space arose and she took it. Catherine will be celebrating her fifth anniversary in Coopers Yard in April and hopes to employ a part-time seamstress this year and continue to expand her company... and maybe even do a bit of yacht racing!! ■