Theatre

by Sue Hitchcock

I love acting, it's so much better than real life. Well I ought to say I love the theatre, I'm far too much of a scaredy cat to have people examine my performance, even when I'm drawing, but is there anything more enchanting than a performance of real people convincing you that they are living a life eventful, colourful, significant?

My new job was better in many senses than my last. It paid more, the theatre was more prestigious and I had an office to myself. The mailing list officer job at Sadlers Wells was not enchanting, but it had a few advantages. In the theatre, offices, the canteen, changing rooms and even a practice room were squeezed in around the auditorium and the stage. My office was next to a practice room and I could watch Kenneth Macmillan coaching the dancers through the small windows in the top of the swing doors or when they were on stage, I could look down from the heights above the lights from the unguarded space next to the concrete staircase – that is if my boss, a thin, red-haired woman with a terse, efficient style didn't catch me. My office was occupied by an addressograph machine, files of address stencils and many boxes of leaflets.

My job was to type up new stencils when I received payments and applications, and fortunately not stuffing the envelopes. I worked the addressograph machine when a mailing was due and took a taxi to a place in west London where a specialized business took care of the stuffing and mailing. It wasn't a dream job, not half as enjoyable as my previous one, but I had blotted my copybook.

The year before I had worked in the wardrobe department of a small drama school near where I lived. It was housed in a grand Victorian villa onto which all manner of accretions had been added. Initially a small, traditional theatre with about twenty rows of old cinema seats and a proscenium stage had been built. Then an open stage theatre had been build behind it, using the remainder of the garden, leaving the odd tree between them. The principal of the school lived upstairs in the villa, with a few classrooms around. The wardrobe department was built where a garage, or maybe a stable had been before. It consisted of a sewing room with three machines and a cutting table, but costumes were stored behind in a dark tunnel, and in an even darker tunnel were a washing machine and tumble dryer.

There was a lot of work. With three years of study, there were always three plays on the go each term, usually one Shakespeare play, one modern and one musical. There was a huge collection of costumes, bought maybe from a defunct costumier or theatre. In the roof of the villa were even more, possibly from a film studio. I found a hat with the name "Barbara Streisand" in it once.

Where the collection did not provide the required outfit, we had to make things, like a set of Greek chitons for "Lysistrata" and a lot of flat caps for a play about a mining community. I once made an army jerkin for a large student, with only greatcoat material available. I had to shave it down to fold the pockets.

My downfall was when my friend, Mary moved to London and needed a job. There was a vacancy so she joined me at the Drama school. Mary and I had always been inclined to mischief, but we were in our middle years now, so what we did was very mild. We went to the pub at lunchtime for a drink. Well you know how it goes. We would come back late and giggling. Surely we could not be working seriously? The principal got to know about it. Did he see us or was he told about our misdemeanour by Amethyst, the wardrobe mistress? It was decided we should sign in. It seemed ridiculous since we both researched the plays and suitable costumes in our own time. I wrote a letter to the Principle, pointing out that we were paid a pittance and were all qualified in Art subjects, besides having sewing skills. I could not accept such a measure.

I had to leave. Well that bit of life was quite exciting, but I would rather have had a happy ending.