

Cathy Pope

# HANGING ON BY A thread

Cathy Pope has a repertoire of experience in costume design that spans feature films, television, opera and theatre. Louise Taylor chatted with Cathy to find out how she carved her way into this exciting and extremely competitive line of business.

Cathy Pope was 28 when she decided to change her life and her career. On the outside, she had everything, a good job with a prestigious media company and a great salary, but there was one problem - she was miserable.

"I was absolutely bored to tears," Cathy confessed. "I didn't want to be two people any more. I didn't want to be the person who goes to work and the person who comes home again. I just wanted to be one."

Confronted with this epiphany, Cathy concentrated on revamping her career into something more creative and fulfilling that reflected who she was as a person. She had completed her Bachelor of Communications degree after school, with a major in TV directing and producing, but was treated so badly during her first job as a runner that she turned away from it. Despite her experience in the entertainment industry, she was determined to try again. This time, she would combine it with her skills and passion for sewing.

Cathy called several people in the film industry and began to volunteer her time as a wardrobe assistant. Work slowly trickled through but it was increasingly difficult to take time off her full-time advertising job. A decision had to be made. She needed to give up her job, and with that, her security.

"It was terrifying, because I was giving up a really good salary position to go into the abyss of the unknown of being self-employed. I just took a huge gulp and did it," Cathy says.

"My mother was devastated! My boss thought I was going back to work for the competition and was just telling lies. But I wasn't. I knew what I wanted to do."

Cathy will be the first one to say that the entertainment industry is one tough nut to crack.

"It's difficult to make an impression on people that employ you. It's a really cutthroat industry and people can be quite brutal," she admits.

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However, one person on whom she did manage to make an impact was *The Lord of the Rings* wardrobe supervisor Janis MacEwan. Cathy thought the epic production would be the perfect way to break into the industry and, after calling Janis every two weeks for six months, she was finally given a break.

Cathy says she met up with the wardrobe supervisor and, at the end of the meeting, was told, "I'll be in touch with you, don't worry. Cathy quit her job at *National Business Review*. She would be free in case Janis called. A week later she did call and Cathy got the job.

Cathy started work as standby wardrobe for *The Lord of the Rings*. This meant she had to dress and style all the extras' costumes for the cast from four film units, constantly moving around the country.

"It was a massive job for someone who didn't have any experience," Cathy told *Her Magazine*. "I was literally thrown into the deep end. It was either sink or swim. It was probably the biggest job you could have started with. Nothing has compared to it."

*The Lord of the Rings* marked the beginning of a new life for Cathy. She has since established herself in film, television, theatre and opera as a costume designer and the days of working nine to five in a boring job are gone forever.

"My life is completely different now. I can't just switch off when I come home. Now, I treat myself as a business. I'm always thinking about using my time productively; how I can get my next job or what my point of difference is. These things are at the back of my mind all the time."

One of the most prolific experiences of Cathy's career has been her involvement in opera, both here and overseas. In 2004, she secured a job with Canterbury Opera as a wardrobe supervisor. However, with her skill and determination, she was quickly promoted to the role of costume designer.

"I thought, I can't do that. I don't know how to do it. I'd never seen myself as a costume designer," Cathy recalls.


Despite her doubts, her work was widely recognised and she was offered more and more jobs as a costume designer, not just in opera, but film and television also.

Costume design is a role that challenges and inspires Cathy. For each project, she will spend months collaborating thoughts, researching fashion, watching relevant programmes and ploughing through scripts to form designs within her mind. From that point, she starts drawing and the script's characters take shape.

"When I've done operas, it's been hugely rewarding to watch my costumes on stage. By the time it goes to stage, my goal is to have everything done. I don't know if I've done my job properly until I see the finished product on stage on opening night. It's my job to make sure that everything is perfect," Cathy says.

At 34 years of age, Cathy has designed costumes for Canterbury Opera's productions of *Rusalka*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Tosca*, *Count Ory* and *A Little Night Music*. However, these days her focus is on film and television, having recently spent the past three months designing costumes for a TV comedy, *The Millen Baird Show*. Last year she designed costumes for the feature film *The Devil Dared Me to*, due to be released in October.

With an extensive resume that spans New Zealand and Ireland, Cathy says she has finally reached that point in her career where people seek her out for work, rather than vice versa. She confesses though, that reaching that point has been hard.

"New Zealand is so small and there's not enough work to keep everybody really busy. The most challenging part is making contacts and getting the projects. It's just getting your foot in the door. That's always been the hardest thing to do and I'm closer to that now." 

By Louise Taylor

Visit: [www.cathypope.co.nz](http://www.cathypope.co.nz)



## RISKING IT ALL

Cathy risked it all when she decided to make the bold move into a new and challenging career. For anyone thinking to do the same, here is some of her advice:

**1** The most important thing you need to do is research. Investigate the industry and the people involved.

**2** Starting having dialogue with people in the industry. Find out the best way to get into a job, what the work involves, and the money it pays.

**3** Have a strong idea of what skills you already possess and if those skills are transferable, or whether you will need further education.

**4** Be persistent. Calling up the wardrobe department for *The Lord of the Rings* every two weeks might seem daunting for some, but for Cathy, it was the key to establishing her career.

**5** Be open minded, if the job that you are seeking doesn't sound like the one you want after all, be aware that it could still lead you to a new and exciting career path.