

# A Chorus Line

The singing, dancing chorus of *The Gondoliers* share their stories...

If you've seen *The Gondoliers*, or plan to see it in 2022, you'll notice the energy and presence of its chorus. While providing tra la las aplenty, their lively dancing – and lots of it – distinguishes their work.

'Not many operas are dance heavy; it makes a nice change to be active on stage!' Chorus Member Jane Monari says. As well as singing with the mezzos, Jane is Dance Captain for *The Gondoliers*. She supports the Choreographer (Isabel Baquero) and Assistant Choreographer (Lucy Burns) in teaching and rehearsing the choreography, leads pre-show warm-ups (particularly good when we're in a new theatre so we get a feel for what that's like,' says Chorus Member Zoe Drummond), and supports the Assistant Director (Roxana Haines) and Chorus Master (Jonathan Cole-Swinard) if dances need to be adjusted. 'In some venues the edge of the stage was closer to the pit, so we had to modify dance sections for safety reasons,' Jane says. 'We have 40 minutes total for notes, a musical warm up, and a physical warm up. We usually do a 10 minute physical warm up and stretch. We then run the more active numbers in the show and anything else that needs a brush-up.'

'Learning the choreography has been interesting and challenging,' says Chorus Member Colin Murray. 'I have done some dance and movement in the past, but never so much while having to sing full choruses, and especially not while having to wear face masks! Our big dance number was built up slowly and methodically over a number of weeks with Isabel. Once we had the physical steps in place safely, we had to relearn the scene whilst singing.'

'It's a really nice time to connect with everybody as a whole,' says Zoe. 'We start breathing together, we start moving together. Jane – our dance captain, she's fantastic – leads some really great stretches.'

'It was a joy to work with Isabel Baquero!' Jane says. 'She is an amazing



choreographer, and also an inspiring and encouraging presence during rehearsals.' Her favourite bit of the show is the first scene. 'We got to incorporate balletic movements. It's so funny and over the top, I find the juxtaposition

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hilarious and delightful.'

The Cachucha is Zoe's favourite dance. 'We do two versions – one at the beginning of Act II and another in the finale, and I need to have my mind switched on as to which version we're doing. I'm right at the front of the stage so I can't see if people are doing the same dance that I'm doing! When the orchestra takes over the melody, we all form straight lines across the stage and move with little jump-kicks. It feels like a united front of partying.'

'There's a lot going on', Jane says of the Cachucha, 'but it was well worth it. We added costumes and wigs once we got to stage rehearsals. It's amazing how many things come alive when you add costumes and wigs.'

Zoe appreciated only having one costume for the show but found herself surprised by the ways a corset affected show day planning. 'If I have a really big breakfast and tiny snacks for the rest of the day, it works. On a double show day, I eat as soon as I'm out of costume.' Zoe developed a 'new neutral position – 'feet together and a lifted torso' for the show's stylised movements.

The dancing was not the only area of evolution. 'We have been given scope to build our own narratives into the show, which makes a much more enlivening experience,' says Colin. 'The fun has been watching jokes grow organically, and having a director (Stuart Maunder) that encourages that. For example, at the start of Act II where Mark (Nathan, who plays Giuseppe Palmieri) has to "knight" me, he once accidentally bopped me on the head as I came up from kneeling. This is now a regular part of the staging.'

Zoe agrees that *The Gondoliers* is immense fun. 'It feels like a party,' Zoe says. 'When we do a two-show day, you wonder if you have the energy, but when the bright, sprightly music starts you find you do.' And does the audience feel the same way? 'It's an energy exchange. We put in so much on the stage and the audience gives it all back.'