

INSIDE VIEW:

DANCING FOR THE QUEEN

A conversation with QM2 Dance Captain Carol Summers

by

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Passenger ships, and Cunard Line's Queen Mary 2 in particular, are often described as floating cities. Indeed, in recent years, the quality of the shows and the theaters aboard these ships has come to rival those in a major city. Along the same lines, while at one time, shows on passenger ships were ad hoc performances arranged by the passengers themselves or in later years, by the ship's cruise staff, nowadays, the performers are professionals specifically engaged for the purpose of doing these shows.

Carol Summers is the Dance Captain on QM2. She is both a performer and the leader of the 12 member dance team that does the production shows in the ship's 1,094 seat Royal Court Theatre. Her dance experience goes back to when she was three and began doing highland dancing in her native Scotland. Since then, she has studied ballet and gone to dance college. Her professional experience includes dancing on Cunard's Queen Elizabeth 2 and Queen Victoria as well as in production shows on land. We sat down to talk about what it is like to perform at sea on Queen Mary 2.

Preparing to perform

The shows on QM2 are not produced by Cunard itself but rather by Belinda King Productions of Northampton, England. This company has produced shows for Queen

Victoria, QE2 and QM2 as well as for Cunard's sister company Seabourn Cruises and for various shoreside venues.

Shows for the Royal Court Theatre are not bought off-the-shelf but are developed with Cunard and Queen Mary 2 specifically in mind. The production company "has to think of what fits what ship. You have got to make your shows fit to your audience. I think the audiences on QM2 are different than on another cruise line. You have got to have the correct show for the correct audience."

Since QM2 attracts passengers from Britain, the United States, Germany and other parts of the world, developing shows for QM2 is not as simple as developing them for venues that cater to a single nationality. Also, because the passengers are sophisticated, "it is not just sticking to what they know but having a little bit of variety at the same time."

During a given voyage, passengers want to see more than one show. Consequently, the cast's repertoire typically includes four productions shows and four "bumpers." Bumpers are short performances that open the welcome onboard and farewell shows as well as round out shows by visiting performers. Thus, the production company provides "about six hours of choreography, costumes, ideas, light design, and technical design."

Once a new show is commissioned, the artistic director at Belinda King Productions devel-

ops ideas for the show, deciding the story line and what numbers she wants to have in the show. "It starts off with her, she writes the shows, sends her ideas to the musical director. He puts the music together. After that, the music is given to the choreographer who comes up with ideas. [They are] also speaking to the wardrobe mistress because the choreographer has to know what the costumes are and make sure everything matches. They have to know what the scenery is, what the set is so [they are also talking] to the production designer."

Because of the time, money and effort involved, a given show may run for five years on a ship. During that time, different teams of performers will do the show. A given cast is often on for six months.

Over time, the shows evolve. For example, Ms. Summers performed the production show "Apassionata" on QM2's maiden voyage and she performed it again when she returned to the ship in 2009. "It has changed slightly in some things. The costumes are amazing. They were amazing before but now they are a little bit extra special. I don't know if it is because I am older but I appreciate the show so much more now than I did six years ago."

The performers are selected through an audition process. Singers come in and sing a few songs. Out of as many as 100 singers who audition, 10 will be selected. Those ten will then come in for a "workshop" at which they not only sing but act. They are tried in different combinations to see who looks good together and whose voices harmonize together. Four singers are selected to join the cast.

For the dancers, the company goes to several countries including the Ukraine, Russia, Rumania, Portugal as well as Scotland and England. The applicants first demonstrate their ballet skills and then move on to a jazz number. They are taught a number from the show and are evaluated on their ability to perform that number. Applicants also have a chance to demonstrate whether they have any unique skills such as unusual leaps or jumps or expertise in a particular style of dance. From hundreds of applicants, 12 are finally selected. "It is a process of elimination to find the cast that [the company] is looking for."

Those who are selected then live together for a month or six weeks in a large house in England. From nine in the morning to six at night, the cast is in a rented studio learning and rehearsing the show. This takes place six, sometimes seven days a week. "So our process before we get on ship is actually harder than any other person



Dance Captain Carol Summers

that comes onboard. For example, the waiters work hard when they get here but we actually work hard before we get here as well as during the production shows."

"From there, they drive us all down in a big bus and we get on [the ship] in Southampton." However, while the dimensions of the Royal Court Theatre stage are marked out on the floor of the rehearsal studio during the preparation period so the performers are aware of what the space is like, they do not have the lights or technical equipment that will be used in the show. Therefore, once the cast is onboard the ship, there is an additional period where they are learning the staging of the show and getting accustomed to the backstage area.

During this period, the cast that had been performing onboard continues to perform. "Slowly, we will start to do a show and they will start to do less and less until eventually they get off the ship."

Life Onboard

A typical day involves going to the gym for a workout after breakfast. While the cast burns large amounts of energy during



rehearsals and during performances, workouts help to build muscle and maintain flexibility. "You have to go to the gym, you have to build up your stamina."

They also do ballet classes, which develops a more sustained and controlled stamina than the workouts in the gym. In addition, "we do try to have a bit of a team spirit. Ballet class unites us in that way and keeps us focused and professional."

If it is the day of a production show, after lunch there will be rehearsals from 2 o'clock on. Because the theatre is used for passenger activities throughout the day, these rehearsals are done wherever the cast can find free space around the ship. "Space being a tender room, sometimes G 32 [the ship's nightclub], sometimes the Queens Room - - wherever there is a floor, the dancers will be there and rehearsing."

At about 4 o'clock, there will be a technical rehearsal in the theater often with the band and the lighting personnel. A sound check is done, the mechanical apparatus that lift sections of the stage tested and the lighting cues gone over.

This is followed by dinner and a half hour rest. Then it is to the dressing rooms, where the cast apply their make-up and arrange their costumes for that evening's performances.

Because of the small size of the dressing rooms, the cast cannot keep all of the costumes needed for all the shows and all the bumpers in the dressing rooms. As a result, they have to go to a storage area of the theater located above the stage level and bring down the costumes that they will need for that night's show.

Each production show involves several costume changes, which can include everything from dresses to hairpieces and shoes. Moreover, there is often only seconds allocated for these costume changes. Consequently, once a performer moves off stage out of sight of the audience, he or she is often frantically ripping off one set of garments and donning another.

In order to facilitate these quick costume changes, the cast members lay out their costumes prior to each performance in the order that they will be needed and in the way that that performer feels he or she can don them most quickly. "Basically, you have a chair and you work backwards. At the bottom, you have the [costumes for the] finale, the last number. So, it goes from the finale up to the beginning. It is sort of like a big sandwich of costumes. You set them in a way that is the fastest way for you to pick them up and get them on. Everyone has their own individual way of doing it."

Since a performer does not always exit from the same side of the stage, he or she has to set costumes on both sides of the stage. "So, I might have half my costumes one side and half on the other side. Sometimes if I have exited one way [and the next entrance is on the other side] I have to run around all the way through the back corridor to get to that side, which is a whole other performance in itself because I am normally running and ripping a hairpiece off my head at the same time."

To make changing easier, the men's costumes are fastened with Velcro while the women's costumes make use of quick zippers. Buttons, hooks and eyes are just too cumbersome. "From

the hair to the shoes to the jewelry - - everything is clip-on. Any way we can cheat with a costume, we actually do."

Sometimes a performer will not make the change in time due to a costume sticking or another performer knocking over his or her chair. If he or she fails to appear, the other performers "will change the spacing in a way so that it will not be noticeable that a dancer is missing. Sometimes a performer will come on in the middle of a number because they have got themselves sorted, then everybody will shift back to where they are supposed to be and it should happen in a way that the audience does not notice."

The cast does two performances each night. Between performances there is a little time for a rest. However, the costumes have to be re-set to expedite the quick changes that will have to be done during the second show.

Afterwards, costumes have to be brought to the laundry. The next day, the dressing room areas have to be prepared so that the guest entertainers who will be performing that night can use them. This involves taking costumes back to the storage area and making sure that any remaining items are out-of-the way.

Days that do not have a show in the evening are somewhat more leisurely. While, there are still rehearsals and workouts, the cast is not formally assigned additional duties. "Years ago, we used to have library duties, a maximum of 10 hours a week per person. Because of our production shows and how many we do during a cruise, [now, during a typical voyage,] they won't give us any extra duties because it is too much work." Still, the cast can be seen doing such things as helping out during immigration inspections by directing passengers which line to stand on etc. They also are models at jewelry and fashion shows. Provided it does not interfere with rehearsals or preparing for shows, "if the cruise staff is looking for some help and they need an extra hand we are more than willing to do it."

In the evenings, the cast is allowed access to the ship's public rooms. However, there are rules limiting which rooms that they can use as well as behavior in those rooms. For example, they cannot stand at the bars or sit in large groups. They must wait until all the passengers have been seated before taking a seat at a show. "At the end of the day, this is our job and we are not here to cruise. Passengers pay to be on here, to have these privileges, we do not; we are here to work."

The cast also mixes with the rest of the

ship's crew. "It is nice to meet people from different departments because you cannot eat, breathe and work with the same people all the time. It is nice to speak to other departments, make friends from different countries; there is such a wide range of nationalities here."

As dance captain, Ms. Summers is entitled to her own stateroom equipped with a single bed, wardrobe, television, DVD player, a small refrigerator and a bathroom. "It is quite nice actually, enough space. It is small - - with 1,000 crew on here I wasn't expecting a massive room. I don't have a window - - the window is turn on the television on and see the view from the bridge."

Performing

Performing on Queen Mary 2 is in most ways similar to performing on land. The production values, the technical equipment and the physical plant are on a par with those in first tier theaters on land. "Ships used to be quite low down [in the show business hierarchy] but now the standard of production shows is quite high." Consequently, while appearing in Broadway or West End productions is the pinnacle, working in a show on a passenger ship is not far behind.

Still, there are some differences. On land with the possible exception of the top hit shows, the number of people at a performance will vary with the day of the week with the audience being rather thin on say a Monday evening. On QM2, the cast can expect to have a minimum of 500 people watching each performance.

Another difference between performing at sea as opposed to land is that the ship, the theater and the stage can and do move. QM2 is a remarkably stable ship and thus there are passengers out and about looking for entertainment even in rough seas. "If it is really bad, we won't do a show. If it is a happy medium, we might take out high lifts where the boys are lifting the girls. It is too dangerous. If a boy stumbles and drops the girl, she is injured. We simplify it. We may take out the number of turns, instead of doing two, we may only do one. If it is bad I tell [the other dancers] just be careful, I'd rather you did a little less energy and not hurt yourself than go full out and suddenly I've got four dancers with broken ankles."

After a performance on a rocky sea "I find my legs hurt because you are fighting against it. You can be walking up a hill and running down a

hill - - it depends on which way the ship is rocking." If a performer jumps, he or she does so expecting the floor to meet his or her feet at a certain point. However, if the ship is rocking, the floor may make contact with the dancer's feet sooner than expected or later than expected, which can lead to injuries. Still, "to try and stand still is harder than actually dancing. If the ship is moving and you are dancing, you just go with it."

Performing at sea also involves lifestyle trade-offs. A sea-going performer does not have her "own private life in that can't just go and clean your own kitchen. You don't have your own house and your own things." On the other hand, "being at sea is amazing because you get to see lots of different countries all the time. Here, you don't make your dinner, you don't make your lunch, you don't clean."

"I enjoy my job, I love my job. When they announce the Royal Cunard Singers and Dancers, I actually get goose bumps from it. I come off stage feeling such content and happiness with my job, I can't describe it."

