



A DAY AT THE OPERA

BY CHRIS KOSELUK

The opening notes of *Salome*, the fourth production of LA Opera's current season, won't be heard for another seven hours. Yet the wig and make-up department, located on the floor below the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion stage in downtown Los Angeles, is already abuzz with activity. With a cast that includes six principals, four dancers and 15 supernumeraries, including an executioner, there's lots of prep to do. Either a wig or beard is being attended to at each of the five workstations throughout the Build Room.

Each piece will be meticulously cleaned, restyled and, if necessary, recurled for tonight's performance—the third of six occurring throughout February and March. Before the performers arrive for their 5:15 p.m. call, nine sets of prosthetic nipples and eight large sheets of tattoos will have been generated. Sometime during the afternoon, a severed head will be touched-up.

Photos by David J. Winkler, special thanks to the staff of the LA Opera, photos also by © 2012 John F. Winkler, LA Opera

“WE BUILD IN-HOUSE, APPLY IT AND
MAINTAIN IT—THE WHOLE THING. WE’RE
ONE CREW DOING IT ALL.”

— BRANDI STRONA



Overseeing it all is wigmaster Darren Jinks, who has headed the wig and make-up department since 2006. “This show has a lot of prep,” he says. “All the tattoos have to be cut. The nipples have to be pulled out of the molds. Some need to be gold-leafed. Everything you see is created on-site. We mix our own powders, do all our own prosthetics.”

LA Opera, the fourth largest company in the United States, is known for its bold reimaginings of traditional operas. It has lured the likes of William Friedkin and Woody Allen to direct, set stories in the 1920s and 1950s, and staged such offbeat fare as an adaptation of David Cronenberg’s *The Fly* and a version of *The Magic Flute*, featuring characters modeled after Buster Keaton, Louise Brooks and Nosferatu.

And so, it’s no wonder that prosthetics, nipples, molds and even tattoos come into play in this retelling of composer Richard Strauss’ *Salome*—which initially debuted in 1905.

“There’s not a lot of traditional stuff anymore,” observes Jinks. “LA Opera is doing projects that aren’t as stuffy.”

And this means the make-up also has to be cutting edge.

“I didn’t know that opera could be so awesome,” says

associate wigmaster Raquel Bianchini, standing at her station in the Build Room. “I had this old-school idea with the overdrawn make-up and bad wigs, which is so opposite of what we do.”

What they do covers the hair and make-up spectrum. Jinks’ core team of seven includes Bianchini, second-in-command for everything hair-related; Brandi Strona, the crew foreman; lead stylist Linda Cardenas; and senior wig and make-

up artists Renee Horner, Lisa Reitano and Nicole Rodrigues. Closer to curtain, 12 more artists will arrive for the show’s multiple applications.

“Most people don’t understand theater make-up, specifically opera,” says Strona. “We build in-house, apply it and maintain it—the whole thing. We’re one crew doing it all.”

“You get more creative opportunities,” adds Bianchini. “Styling,

building, everything.”

Except for the lead stylist, everyone has training as a hair-stylist, make-up artist and wigmaker. This allows crossover when needed. Jinks makes an effort to shuffle responsibilities, though he admits he’ll often play to an artist’s strength.

“Lisa is really good with men’s wigs. Nicole is good with the leading ladies’ wigs,” says Jinks. “You show skill for



BACK ROW FROM LEFT: Renee Horner, Darren Jinks, Brandi Strona.
FRONT ROW FROM LEFT: Lisa Reitano, Raquel Bianchini, Linda Cardenas, Nicole Rodrigues



Artists and actors pack the make-up room in prep for curtain call

something, sometimes you get pigeonholed.”

Salome may be today’s focus, but the department is always thinking with forward momentum. Jinks admits he usually has 10 shows floating around in his head. While he might be kidding to a degree, plans for future shows are always in various stages of development. For example, preparations for their next production, *Tales of Hoffman*, are in full swing.

“We’re always building two or three at once,” continues Jinks. “We started at Christmas with *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, which was set on the Orient Express—1920s make-up, hair. Fittings for *Salome* began while that show was running. Now we’re prepping *Hoffman*—between 80 and 100 wigs, circa 1830s.”

Jinks walks to the hallway outside the Build Room and motions to a row of shelves filled with hair pieces. “This is all *Hoffman*, ready to be combed out and styled. They’ll all end up with bows,” he says. “We’ve been working on it for four months.”

At one point Jinks comments to Bianchini, “I just got word I have to start budgeting, not for next season, but for the season after that.” He estimates work on *Salome* began over a year ago, when he created its budget. A \$140,000

one-act is modest compared to other productions. Make-up budgets typically run in the \$250,000 to \$300,000 range. Jinks is confident that the *Salome* figure is on target. He’s been doing this long enough that overspending is the exception rather than the rule.

Jinks landed his first LA Opera gig in 1998, just after moving to the city. He was lured back to fill in for the final show of the 2002-2003 season. Staying on, he became assistant wigmaster in 2005.

When his predecessor, Rick Geyer, left shortly into the 2006-2007 season, Jinks was offered the job. This marks his 11th season as wigmaster.

Bianchini is in her second season as associate wigmaster. She started as a freelancer. “I got a call from somebody who knew somebody who knew the opera really needed help with wigs,” she remembers.

“You have experience? Awesome. Get in here.” A year later, she was promoted to her current position.

Strona boasts 16 years with LA Opera. She interned in 2000 while attending Cal Poly Pomona. After graduation, she was offered an apprenticeship.

Salome’s design process began in May 2016. As with all LA Opera productions, it starts with the costume design-



Jinks explains tattoo prep to writer Chris Koseluk

er—in this case Sara Jean Tosetti.

“She did some beautiful renderings,” says Jinks, showing off a thick book featuring Tosetti’s sketches and research material. Taking these ideas, Jinks began sketching his own designs.

“Sara and Darren talked the mood. They wanted a motif to tell a story,” explains Bianchini. “And then we go for it and hope she likes it.”

Casting impacts the make-up and hair choices. Knowing last fall that Patricia Racette would play *Salome*, Bianchini was able to start her wig in October.

“It’s 36 inches down to the small of her back—textured hair, fully hand-tied, full lace front,” says Jinks. “That wig is like \$5- or \$6,000.”

Most of the wigs are made from human hair. Jinks believes it looks more realistic onstage. For *Salome*’s wig, the decision was made to use human hair on top and synthetic hair down the back.

“They wanted her to have a lion’s mane of hair,” explains Jinks. “Synthetic fiber gives this type of body.”

“If this were human [hair], it would fall and we’d have to reset it,” adds Bianchini.

When casting was finalized in January, Jinks realized where the challenges would be.

One set of challenges turned out to be with the Executioner. Tosetti envisioned a hairless head, and wanted the performer to wear a bald cap. But the character is bare-chested and there would be nowhere to hide the cap’s edge. He’s also covered in tattoos. Factoring in their application, the make-up could take over two hours.

Turned out the actor, Tripp Law, had dreadlocks, which are impossible to hide under a bald cap. Instead, Jinks opted to create a piece that extended to the waist. “We handmade all the dreads to custom match his hair,” he says. “When he first put it on, there was too much weight. There was a long R&D process to make it lighter. We added an extra strap under his hair.”

Jinks had never built dreads before. “To be perfectly honest, I went online and looked



Bianchini with wigs



LEFT: Tripp Law as Executioner. RIGHT: wigs and facial hair pinned to blocks



Details of Herodias wig



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE: Jinks and Danielle Richter apply tattoos to Katarzyna Sadej as the Page. Richter places custom wig over Sadej's waist-length hair.

it up," he says smiling. "There was this crazy English lady with a cold on YouTube. She was sitting there and she had them wrapped around her toe."

"Darren is very good at discovering different ways of doing stuff," says Bianchini. "He'll look at something and think, 'Oh, I can figure that out.' A couple of days later, he's like, 'OK, we've got it.'"

Strona adds, "And then he teaches it to us."

Katarzyna Sadej, who plays the Page, presented an entirely different challenge. The mezzo-soprano's long, blond hair flows to her waist. The character is gender-neutral, with short, boyish hair.

Jinks came up with an idea that not only hid Sadej's voluminous hair, but also used it to their advantage.

"We constructed a normal wig foundation, except that it has a reinforced strip up the back with holes cut out," explains Bianchini, who engineered and built the wig. "And then we made pouches to hide her hair. The pouches are made out of Power Net so they were really stretchy."

When secured in the pouches, the hair anchors the wig. There is zero chance of it falling off.

The unique design also evenly distributes the weight of the hair. "It is actually one of the most comfortable wigs I've ever worn," said Sadej during her make-up application. "Usually, I get a headache. I actually like this."

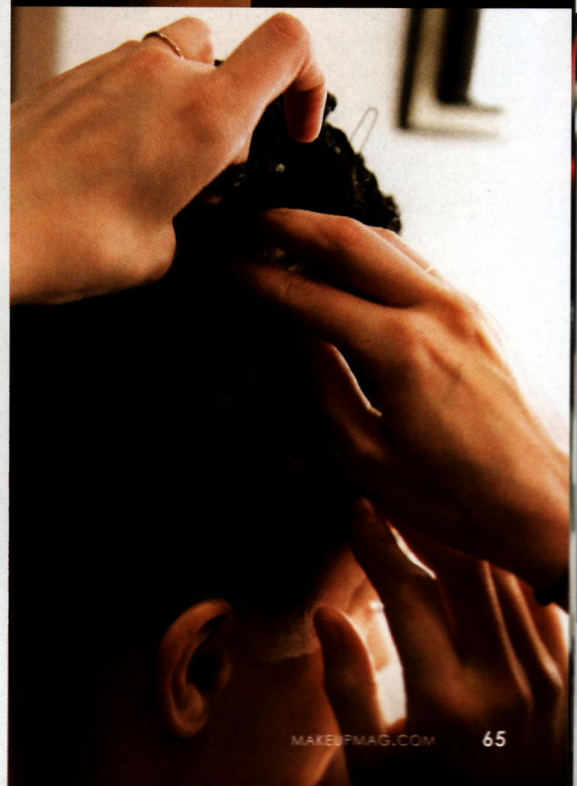
In January, the department met with the performers. Jinks used the opportunity to work on the tattoo design.

"We had Tripp in for a fitting, surrounded him in Saran Wrap and drew on it," says Strona.

"Department members came in and discussed the designs," adds Jinks. "Tripp was sweating bullets because he was all wrapped up as we debated."

"We tortured him," jokes Strona.

But they got what they needed. The drawings were scanned and finalized. Using these templates, Strona creates tattoo transfers before each performance.





FROM TOP:
Prosthetic
nipple creation
and final look

"This is acetate that we stippled Pros-Aide on," says Strona, as she generates a tattoo sheet in the Run Room. "That's what makes the tattoo sticky against the skin."

Next, comes the prosthetics. "I am the nipple runner," Strona says with a laugh as she pours a mixture of Smooth-On's Skin Tite silicone into a mold. "It's a three-minute pot life and a five-minute set life. In eight minutes, you've got nipples."

Jinks sculpts all the prosthetic molds. The nipple molds were actually created for an earlier production of *Rigoletto*. "We just had to cast them in the right color for the person," continues Strona.

Eight performers wear prosthetics. They can only be worn once. An extra pair is run, just in case. Strona used 3M's Tegaderm to attach them. "It's that clear medical tape that holds an IV in place," she explains.

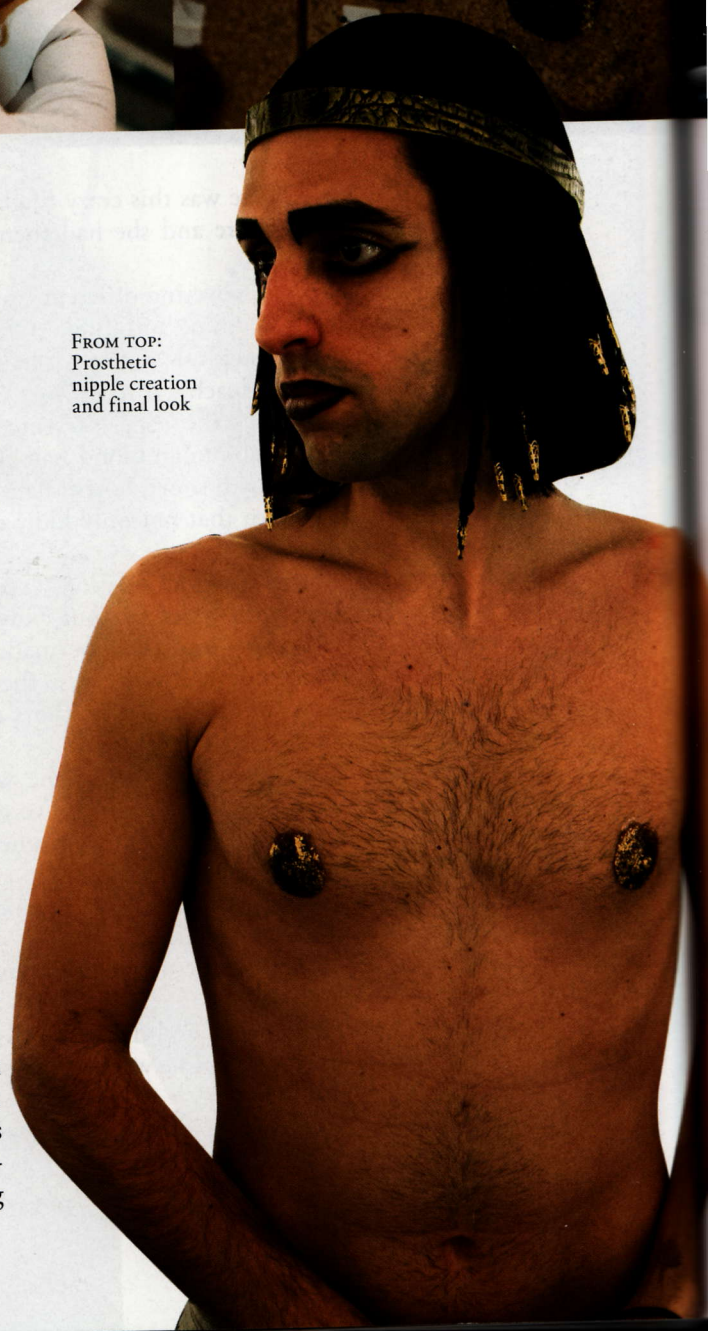
The men's nipples are covered with gold leaf and then underpainted with an aqua color for shadowing. This adds depth when seen at a distance. The ladies' nipples go under sheer bras, which are then covered with a sheer costume piece.

Responsible for the department's administrative duties and paperwork, Jinks jumps at the chance when a unique make-up opportunity arises. In *Salome's* case, this meant the severed head.

"Let me do it," Jinks jokingly says in a whisper, pretending to mask his enthusiasm.

A key element to the story, the head belongs to the prophet Jochanaan, aka John the Baptist. After he scorns *Salome's* profession of love, she orders his death (hence, the need for an executioner). She sings her final song holding his head in her hands.

Cast in Smooth-On Ecoflex silicone with an interior of Smooth-On Soma Foama, the head was originally created by the prop department. A sculptor fashioned a mold based on Tómas Tómasson, who plays Jochanaan. It was then turned over to Jinks to finish. He added hand-punched eyebrows and lashes. Bianchini created a duplicate of the wig





Tómas Tómasson as John the Baptist

Tómasson wears and attached it to the silicone head.

Wanting the piece to have teeth, Jinks cast a set. "These are actually my husband's teeth," he says as he holds up the head. "He knows. I sent him a picture at work. 'Look what I made. By the way, the teeth are yours.'"

The head came with a big, hollow opening at the neck. Props plugged it with a piece of sea sponge.

"I thought, 'I have to finish that,'" continues Jinks. "I cut another sponge in half and stuck it in the neck. I spatulated Smooth-On's Skin Tite silicone on it to build it up and make it look like the trachea and vertebrae. The sponge gave it great texture—this nice meatiness. I then painted it with some lighter reds, some yellows and covered it with blood. It may not be completely anatomically correct, but it works."

Jinks uses Pale Night Productions' Perma-Blood. "When it goes on, it looks like raspberry jelly," he says. "But it dries to this gorgeous cranberry-ish color, just like fresh blood. It looks great onstage."

Racette requested that holes be drilled in the side of the head. "She wanted to stick her thumb in it and hold it up to the audience," continues Jinks. "After they were drilled, it looked horrible. I had to reconstruct the ears."

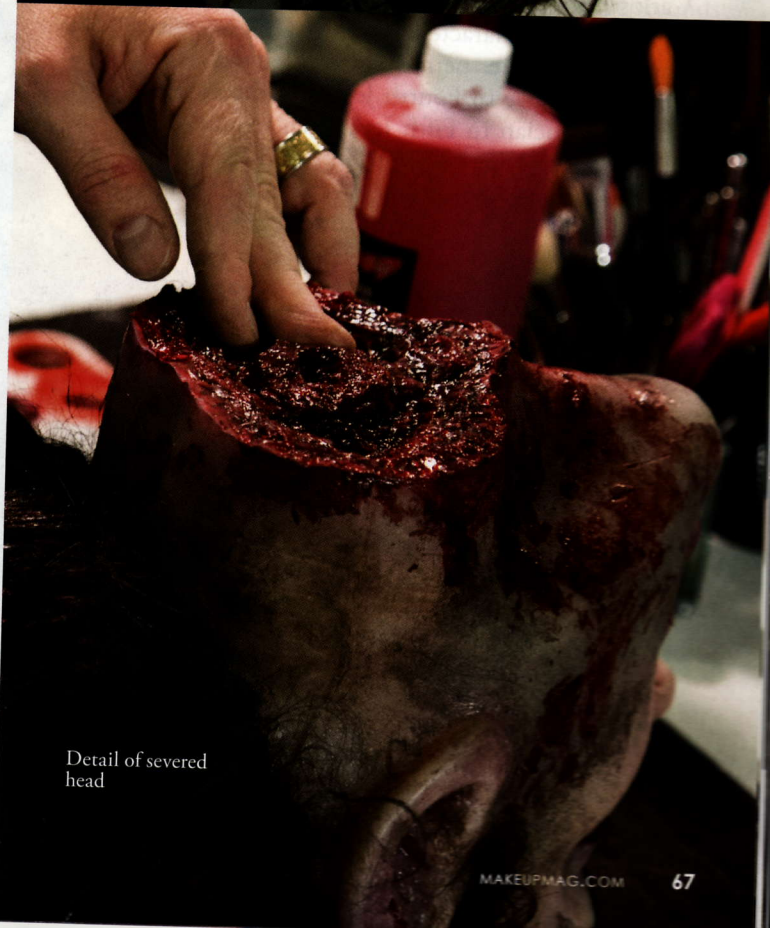
Jinks' favorite accessory is a kickstand fitted to the back of the head. "So it doesn't roll into the pit and kill some poor orchestra person," he says.

In charge of Racette's make-up, Jinks' duties include combing out Salome's wig and mixing the body paint that makes Salome's skin shimmer during her dance of the seven veils.

Danielle Richter is in charge of making up the Page and Herod (Alan Glassman). This is Richter's first show



Jinks prepping John the Baptist's severed head for the stage



Detail of severed head



Gina Peggott
applying aqua
make-up to
a dancer



Marylou Hernandez
applying chin tattoo
to a dancer

as a principal artist. Other principals include Pall Hadobas, Stephanie Fenner and Jessica Mills. Working in individual dressing rooms a floor above the stage, they are somewhat isolated. To guide them, Jinks created comprehensive sheets detailing each make-up.

"It was about two shows before I did it without looking at the sheet," say Richter as she applies a tattoo transfer to Sadej's forehead. Her notes for Herod include: "Slightly pale/deep-set eyes/broken capillaries, with a layer of poorly applied make-up (rouge, drawn-on brows, heavily lined eyes, lips ... but not feminine) in a failed attempt to erase the ravages of a debauched life and recapture long-lost youth ... pathetic."

Carlos Enrique Santelli and Gabriel Vamvulescu each play two characters and require a quick change during the performance. Reitano takes Santelli from slave to Fourth Jew and Vamvulescu from Cappadocian to Fifth Jew. Each requires the application of a wig, beard and mustache. Having under 20 minutes, including a costume change, Reitano has her application down to three minutes per man.

"The beard ties under the wig so it goes first. It's also first because it's the most surface area," she explains. "I leave the mustache until last. It's the most itchy."

It's important to ensure the beard doesn't impede the singing. A misapplication risks a muffled baritone.


Across from the make-up department, the rest of the players are getting made up. As *Salome* is without a chorus, make-up has commandeered the dressing rooms to have extra space. Strona is making sure her crew of eight stays on schedule.

Nippled and tattooed first, the slaves have been sent to the stage. The soldiers are also out the door.

Shirtless, the dancers are getting a dusting of bluish-green Kryolan Liquid Body Makeup, topped by silver stippling. It catches just enough light to look as if their bodies have been silver-leafed.

Carlos Enrique
Santelli in final
make-up





Reitano applying wig and make-up to Santelli while Stephanie Fenner adjusts beard on Gabriel Vamvulescu

The Roman Guests, Egyptian Guests and Herodias Entertainers are looking more decadent.

The Executioner does not appear until 70 minutes into the performance, so his make-up is last. Strona oversees the application of his 17 tattoos. Allie Keck and Jeni Novak assist her. At 6 feet 3 inches, Law towers over the three women.

The tattoos must match up precisely and order matters. When she applied the collar first, Strona discovered they were low. By starting with the chest piece, everything else lines up perfectly.

Another trick to help the alignment is printing both sides of the transfer. The reverse side serves as a guide. "I flipped the image in the computer," Strona says. "Then, I put the paper back in the printer to get an exact mirror image."

Working as one, the team creates an Executioner in minutes. "I think this is the earliest we've gotten you done?"

asks Strona. "Right?"

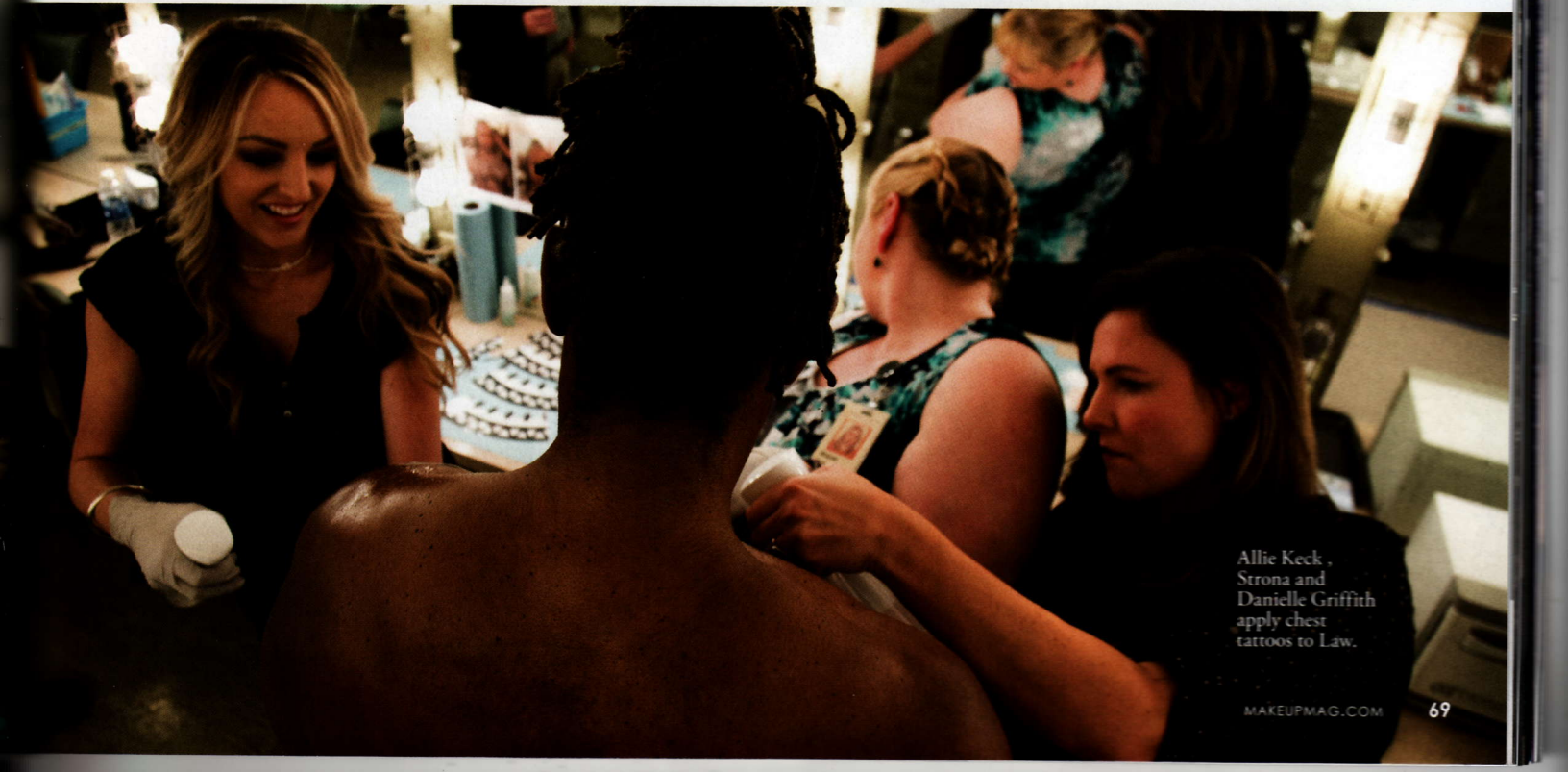
But that doesn't mean it's quitting time. After the final curtain, the make-ups need to be removed. Tattoos and nipple pieces add time to the process—up to 45 minutes for some.

"It's just like film. We're usually the first ones here and the last to leave," says Jinks.

But no one is complaining. Instead, the room is in high spirits because all has gone so well.

"I love live theater. There is nothing like it," says Strona. "There are 3,000 people out there and you have 30 seconds to do a quick change. I'm not going to jump out of an airplane. My adrenaline fix is a full costume, wig and a make-up change. And when you get it done and have five seconds to spare, that's the best." **MA**

See our online edition for more exclusive images of the LA Opera's Salome.



Allie Keck, Strona and Danielle Griffith apply chest tattoos to Law.