



dear john

Q
A

What are the challenges involved in playing a lead role in a major historical drama?

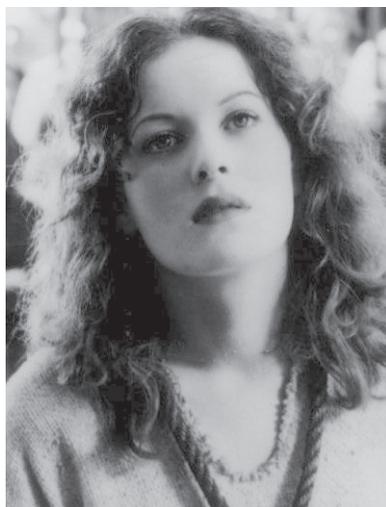
Unless you've read the book that inspired the film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, you may not be aware that Quasimodo was just one of a cast of thousands of characters in the original version.

It took the definitive screen performance of Charles Laughton as the tragic bellringer in the 1939 film classic to establish the role in the public mind. The actor also inspired the late Lionel Bart's own musical version of the play, which premieres finally in London this month.

The talented young actress who plays Esmerelda in the show faces a considerable challenge playing a part made famous by Laughton's co-star.

So who better to invite to the Dear John belltower to share their thoughts than Zoe George – who opens soon at the King's Head, and her 'predecessor', a true movie legend – Maureen O'Hara, who made her Hollywood debut in the RKO classic.

what the experts say...



Maureen O'Hara

Born Maureen Fitzsimons, on August 17, 1920, in Ranelagh, Ireland, Maureen O'Hara has been dubbed 'The Queen of Technicolor' and, as one of the biggest stars of the Golden Age of the Hollywood studios, has appeared in many classic films. These range from *Miracle on 34th Street* and *Rio Grande* to *The Quiet Man*. Her 2004 autobiography *'Tis Herself* was a *New York Times* bestseller.

"As a young actress, I was under contract to Charles Laughton and his business partner Eric Pommer. So when they came to America to make *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* you could say I came along as 'baggage'. Mr Laughton insisted that I was cast as Esmeralda so I arrived, went right into wardrobe and right into the movie.

"We didn't go on location to Paris – the sets were all built out at the RKO ranch in the San Fernando Valley, and they were magnificent in every detail. When I first saw them, I was astounded. There were little streets, back streets, the cathedral was magnificent. Many years later, I went to Paris and went to look at the cathedral and

the surrounding streets. That set at RKO was a perfect replica.

"The famous make-up was a co-operation between Charles and Perc Westmore [one of the most highly-esteemed make-up men in Hollywood]. It was a terrible chore to have that done every morning. Charles had to start at three o'clock in the morning and then work all day in that dreadful heat. Then at night, when you're worn out and hot and sticky, it all has to be taken off – and then the poor make-up man has to clean it and prepare it to put back on again in the morning.

"Sailor Vincent and Dick Crockett were the two stuntmen who did the dangerous things for Charles. I did two tremendous stunts in the film with them. One was when Quasimodo came down on a rope, took me from where I was going to be hanged, and swung me back up again. Then, after we were up in the cathedral, Quasimodo held Esmeralda up to the crowd below to show that she was safe. Afterwards, I looked and there wasn't even a board in front of the drop. If Dick Crockett's arm had wiggled or swivelled, I would have fallen hundreds of feet down – that's how I learned to always trust the stuntman."

Zoe George

Zoe George is a 24-year-old Welsh actress whose professional debut was the lead role in the new musical *Swansea Women* by Lyn Mackay in 2010. She then went on to play the role of Martha in the Welsh national tour of *Spring Awakening*. Most recently, she played Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin* last Christmas at Bristol Hippodrome.

"With mum a dancer and dad a musician, I was brought up surrounded by the theatre and music. I attended a local theatre



school where I began my training in performing arts. After I completed my A levels, I went on to do a law degree at university and after graduating in 2010, I decided that my heart was in theatre and performing. I was brought up on all the Disney films, so I was familiar with

the lighter version of the story, but once I knew I would be playing the role of Esmeralda in the new musical, I immediately went out and got Victor Hugo's 1831 novel to do some homework. I also listened to some of Lionel Bart's other work such as *Oliver!* and in researching the character, I knew I needed to select audition pieces that would show innocence, street wisdom and beauty, all the while staying fairly clear of the Disney portrayal.

"To successfully perform a historically based show such as *Quasimodo*, I think it's imperative to stay true to the times of the piece and the particular region. In the stage version we don't have extensive and highly-detailed sets which is why our director Robert Chevara places great emphasis on the extreme poverty in Paris in 1465, as well as the constant sense of desperation, vulgarity and grotesqueness throughout the piece, not only physically, but in the way our characters think and therefore behave."

dear john sums up...

Although our two Esmeraldas are talking about performances more than 70 years apart, what is clear from their observations is that ultimately it is the people not the details which bring history to life. Magnificent as the detail in the classic 1939 film version remains (even to the modern CGI-jaded eye), it is the performances from Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Hara and the rest of the cast that have made the film a classic. In the case of the stage version, the challenge is to use performance to make real the environment which may not be physically represented on stage. In the context of making things real, I'd like to thank Maureen O'Hara and her family for allowing us to share her memories of working on the Laughton classic and especially June Parker Beck the editor and archivist of the official Maureen O'Hara magazine. The Facebook page (address below) is well worth a visit, not only for those interested in Maureen's career history but also in the history of the golden age of Hollywood as a whole.

John Byrne is an entertainment industry career adviser. Details of career advice sessions, workshops and copies of *The Right Agent Right Now* ebook are available from www.adviceforperformers.com. *Lionel Bart's Quasimodo* is at the King's Head Theatre, London, from March 20 to April 13. Visit www.kingsheadtheatre.com. Zoe George is represented by Regan Rimmer Management (telephone 020 7189 8323). The Maureen O'Hara Magazine may be found at www.facebook.com/pages/Maureen-OHara-Magazine-on-Facebook-Official-Site/131269913567989