

Kong



The world premiere of the musical *King Kong* is set to thrill Melbourne with 500 costumes on show, all with a story of their own, writes **SALLY BENNETT**

YOU can almost bank on a modern-day musical to build to the kind of ending that redefines the term “grand finale”. Just as athletes are driven by gold medals and developers by tall buildings, the makers of blockbuster stage shows have their quest for a finish so flamboyant the applause brings the house down.

The world’s first stage adaptation of one of the most iconic films, *King Kong*, threatens to redefine all that has gone before it. The Global Creatures production, premiering at Melbourne’s Regent Theatre next month, begins with a 15-minute show tune that takes in the entire cast and more than 100 costume changes. And that’s just the beginning.

King Kong — which has taken over every inch of the Regent for a record six months of pre-production before opening night — is huge, in every conceivable way.

Costume designer Roger Kirk, part of the international creative team, is still astonished when he takes in what is unfolding on stage.

“I’m here working on it and I walk in and see things

that make my mouth drop,” he says. “I don’t think anyone has ever seen anything like it before.”

Kirk has travelled the world to find the perfect fabrics and designers to create the 500 costumes that will be seen on stage. For *Weekend’s* exclusive preview, the hands-on designer was found in the foyer of the Regent with a black jacket and quick-unpick in his hands, working alongside those hunched over a bank of sewing machines.

Having created costumes for long-running shows on Broadway and the West End — *42nd Street*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Hugh Jackman’s *The Boy From Oz* — Kirk hit the ground running with contacts from London to New York to India to Bangkok.

“I have shopped the world for this,” he says. “Everywhere you go you’re looking for something different. Some things are expensive

and some things are cheap. If you see something and you think you can do something with it, then you buy it, whether it costs \$200 a metre or \$5 a metre. That jacket with the ribbon all over (No.1) was on the \$5 throw-out table at Spotlight in Sydney.”

Melbourne actor Esther Hannaford, who performs the lead role of Ann Darrow, says it’s not just Kirk’s work ethic and amazing

creations that have impressed. She says every cast member has been made to feel as though the costumes have been created especially for them.

“We’ve all spoken about this, how he makes us all feel really good, even though we’re all different body shapes and types,” she says. “He doesn’t just say, ‘This is a girl costume, put it on’.

“He has such a good eye



couture



and such attention to detail that he knows how to make everybody look great. And if you feel good on the inside, then that comes across on stage too, I think. He's done the most magnificent job."

One of Kirk's secret weapons has been a New Yorker known in the costume trade as "Killer", who makes the famous wings for Victoria's Secret runway shows.

From her small studio in the Big Apple, Killer has created the huge feather fans that are brought out by the female ensemble at the end of *I Want To Be Loved By You* (No.3).

Other influences have included Lady Gaga and Beyonce, whose attention-seeking fashion statements have been woven through the 1930s look and feel of the show. Kirk created the "gorilla girl" outfit (No.7) after seeing a photo of Beyonce in a fur-like jacket.

"I've turned it into a showgirl version. The whole back of it is sequinned and beaded like a silver-backed ape," he says. "In the opening of Act 2, when Carl Denham's spruiking his show with King Kong, his monkey girls are dancing with him. They're very sexy and modern."

First look:

1. Amy Campbell as a rich lady for the song *We Three Kings*.
2. Chris Ryan performs the lead role of first mate Jack Driscoll.
3. Hayley Martin in a dancing costume for *I Want To Be Loved By You*.
4. Andrew Cook as a club patron.
5. Adam Lyon in the role of ambitious filmmaker Carl Denham.
6. Esther Hannaford performs the famous role of Ann Darrow.
7. Melanie Hawkins as Carl's gorilla girl.

The Spotlight jacket (No.1) has pushed-up shoulder pads inspired by Lady Gaga. At the other end of the style spectrum, a picture of 1930s Hollywood starlet Gene Harlow in a beaded dressing gown was the incentive for that worn by Hannaford (No.6).

"What I've tried to do is give you a flavour of a period — a '30s and '40s silhouette — but with modern-day references," Kirk says.

Kirk's first involvement in *King Kong* was nearly four years ago, when he was asked to meet with director Daniel Kramer. A few months later he had the job and the leap from page to stage began in his mind.

His designs have been driven by the ever-changing script rather than the film, taking in everything from the original 1930s movie, to the contemporary music in the stage show to the ground-breaking technology, including a 1.1 tonne, 6m King Kong puppet.

"I've been working on it for about three years, but you have to start with the script. That determines everything really, and it kept changing, so the costumes kept changing," Kirk says.

"We had a workshop last September. After that I had

a final script so then I sat down to finish the whole thing. Then I was off to New York and India to have costumes manufactured. A lot of it is made in Australia, and we also used a Bangkok company that makes costumes for films all over the world, for some of the men's costumes, such as suits and overcoats.

"Most of the hats we bought for the boys (Nos. 2, 4 and 5) are all hats you can buy now that give you a '30s look."

But Kirk's biggest hurdle for the production was one he had never encountered. The never-before-seen technology involved in the set meant many everyday fabrics simply didn't work under such different stage conditions.

"I'd send down six pieces of fabric and all I'd get back is 'no'," he says. "There was no rhyme or reason why one fabric worked with the projections or why it didn't. But it's all worked out. The result is quite staggering."

The world premiere of *King Kong* opens at the Regent Theatre on June 15. Bookings: ticketmaster.com.au or 1300 111 011.