

# Creator of the Universe

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A palace for Aladdin, Dickens's industrial Coketown and a wasteland for two characters to wait for Godot, are just some of Judith Croft's theatrical creations, so making a workshop for God to create His universe must be water off a duck's back.

"The inspiration for my workshop design came from Stephanie Dale's new script," said Judith.

Dale has recrafted the original medieval plays, which were written in the 14th century by Benedictine monks at the Abbey of St Werburgh (now Chester Cathedral).

"In *The Creation*, the first play, the role of God is taken on by a man, so he isn't majestic, he is just an 'everyman' character.

"Stephanie's angels are painters

**Chester Cathedral's magnificent nave is being transformed into a theatre set for the first time ever, in preparation for a two-week run of the quinquennial Chester Mystery Plays. JO HENWOOD talks to designer Judith Croft about creating a 21st-century set in a 14th-century building to tell stories that are as old as time**

and decorators working with dust-sheets.

"I see God as going to his workbench, looking at a maquette of a human and thinking 'Yes, I made that, I am happy with that' - there will be a few tools, perhaps a skull, a red rose.

"I want the audience to see God as a creator in a way that we can understand - as a human concept."

Dale's script is set in three time spans - the time of the Bible, medieval days and Chester in 2013 - and Croft says she took inspiration for the connection between the past and the present from Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*.

She said: "I love the concept that an idea can be thought again, that nothing is new. God is the ultimate recycler - after all he made Eve out

of Adam's rib."

Chester's historic Rows led to Croft incorporating various levels into her design.

"Much in the way that the original texts do, and Stephanie's new version, I wanted the set to reflect Chester," said Croft.

"The balcony level is inspired by Chester Rows."

When I arrive at the cathedral, builders are negotiating her set around the cathedral's massive stone pillars and I ask if the architecture has caused any difficulties.

"I don't see the space as restrictive in any way," said Croft. "The architecture enhances and enriches the set instead."

I can see that the Crucifix on the rood screen has been incorporated in the set but Croft will not be

drawn on how.

"I wanted to use it - the climatic scene of the mystery plays is the Crucifixion and it was important for me that the cathedral's stunning carved figure of Jesus is part of it."

A bigger challenge than any stone pillar is dressing the 300 community actors who are taking part in the plays.

"The budget for costumes is about a quarter of what I might expect for a production with maybe 20 professional actors so this is a perfect example of how reusing and recycling comes into its own!" she laughed.

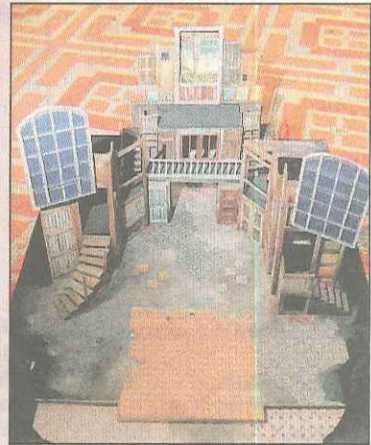
As I leave the set, giant film screens are being mounted aloft. I see from the set model that they have been cleverly designed to look like the windows of God's workshop. I can't wait to take a peek through.

◆ JUDITH Croft is resident designer at Manchester's Library Theatre and she designs Clwyd Theatr Cymru's rock 'n' roll pantomimes every year.

◆ THE Chester Mystery Plays, directed by Peter Leslie Wild, are at Chester Cathedral from June 26-July 13. Tickets from 01244 500959, www.chestermysteryplays.com or in person at Chester Cathedral.



**ORIGINAL DRAMA:** Writer Stephanie Dale. IC130613plays-11



**MYSTERY MODEL:** A model of Judith's set. IC130613plays-16

**WELL DESIGNED:** Judith Croft on the set in Chester Cathedral.

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