

A solid back line



Stars of musical theatre assemble in rehearsals for the next festive performance at the Royal Albert Hall, London

Meeting a former James Bond, performing with Brian May and bouts of manic fundraising, it's all part of the job. **Jennifer Reischel** explains what it means to be part of the West End Chorus

Pencils and dictaphones are waiting at the ready, as a unique chorus of actors prepares to spring back into harry performance action on December 11 at the Royal Albert Hall. UNICEF ambassador Roger Moore is set to join forces with Jim Parker and Jeremy Lloyd's *The Wonderful World of Captain Beaky* and his Band. Family, young and old, will gather together to raise funds and recount magical poems with musical interludes – with the West End Chorus at the helm of this festive season celebration.

No strangers to the Royal Albert Hall, it will be our third appearance at this inspirational venue. The West End Chorus consists of a group of musical theatre professionals and was originally assembled for *Chess* in Concert by producer and director Hugh Woodbridge. Known for creating the successful *Night of 1000 Voices*, his slogan for the group is strong and clear: "I want an ensemble of versatile actor individuals with great singing voices and

strong musicianship skills to be the backbone of a production and a special feature. Not a bog-standard background chorus. I don't want 50 boring singers. I want a group of 50 individuals, each to perform as if a soloist with a backing group of 49."

Indeed, I realised back in 2008 that I had joined a rather unique bunch. Learning all the music for Act I in four hours and the staging/choreography the day before the performance, is all par for the course. Time is precious when you are doing it for the love, rather than for the money and fitting in Sunday practice time between day jobs, college lessons or your eight-show-weekly West End engagement. Invariably, members commonly depart rehearsals rather hurriedly to race across town to their Saturday matinee.

In April 2011 we joined Brian May and Kerry Ellis to perform Anthems, the "musical-theatre-meets-rock-concert" in aid of Leukemia and Lymphoma Research. The second outing to the grand hall had us milling around the makeshift

bar changing area like a, cramming in a last minute bagel while texting friends to meet us at Door 1 after the show. Make up and hair were speedily tackled, outfits prepped and primed and after-show party tickets packed into purses and backpacks. Last minute notes from the tech are being announced by the company manager as we complete a final lyric check and swigs of water are consumed. Twelve hours of group rehearsal time, 14 non-stop hours at the Royal Albert Hall – and 50 red charity research T-shirts.

We line up, and queued by the stage manager, burst through swinging doors and conquer a maze of corridors and stairs to finally hit the stage. As I assume my spot for the evening, I gaze out into the auditorium and am hit by a sea of people bounding with anticipation – Kerry Ellis debuts in concert accompanied by guest star Broadway legend Adam Pascal and string quartet Escala. It doesn't get much grander than that. The lights dim and the opening chords echo through the hall as we anticipate the first bars of the classic "The show must go on".

To benefit the Caron Keating Foundation for the 2010 Christmas season we joined Cantabile – The London Quartet along with The Pavao

String Quartet, Maria Friedman and Tim Rice. Then in June, we stop by St Paul's church in Covent Garden to raise funds for the Alan Jay Lerner Cancer Research Fund at the Royal Marsden Hospital and to honour the 25th anniversary of the death of this legendary industry figure. Red music folders at the ready, we spend early morning hours whizzing through With a little bit of luck in the Delfont Room, spurred on by conductor by David Firman to make it to The Actors' Church on time for our spot. Joining Sally Ann Howes, host Liz Robertson and other past *My Fair Lady* veterans on the stage for a memorable afternoon, we then continue the celebrations in the salon of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

Charity concerts such as these play an important role in raising the necessary public awareness to create life-changing financial and emotional support for those affected by diseases and hardship. And with December's concert looming, we have dusted off our music folders, prepared for eight-part-harmony-learning and look forward to joining in Captain Beaky's band at the Albert Hall in just over a week.

The Wonderful World of Captain Beaky and his Band is at the Royal Albert Hall, London, on December 11