

Enter the world of His Dark Materials

The latest exhibition at Swansea's Glynn Vivian Art Gallery offers an unprecedented opportunity to see costumes and props from the BBC/HBO His Dark Materials series – and Jenny White is dazzled...

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FROM the alethiometer and the Subtle Knife to the benches Lyra and Will sat on in their parallel worlds, the latest exhibition at Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea is a joy for anyone who loved Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy and the BBC/HBO adaptation of the books, the third and final series of which is about to be aired.



Spanning two floors in the gallery, the show includes everything from tiny details such as Lyra's notebook from Jordan College up to huge props including Mary Malone's "cave" and fixtures and fittings from the Magisterium.

His Dark Materials follows Lyra Belacqua (Dafne Keen), an orphan who lives in a parallel universe in which human souls manifest outside the body in the form of animals called daemons.

We first meet Lyra as a baby, left under the care of the scholars at Jordan College by her supposed uncle, Lord Asriel (James Mcavoy). The trilogy follows her extraordinary journey through the many worlds of His Dark Materials, pursued by the religious authority, the Magisterium.

Aiding her on her journey is Will Parry (Amir Wilson) and her own daemon, Pan (voiced by Kit Connor). The cast also features Ruth Wilson as the formidable Mrs Coulter, Lin-manuel Miranda as aeronaut Lee Scoresby and Simone Kirby as scientist Mary Malone.

The majority of the series was filmed at Wolf Studios Wales in Cardiff, which utilised its six stages to create the multiple worlds of His Dark Materials, from the sprawling streets of Cittàgazze to the snow-covered north and the palace of the armoured bears on Svalbard. As is usual at the end of filming, all the costumes and props were set to be mothballed, but Chris Worwood, one of the directors of London and Cardiff-based IJPR, the company that handles the publicity for His Dark Materials, had other ideas. Knowing how iconic Pullman's creations have become, he wanted people to have the opportunity to see the props and costumes from the series close up.

"I felt it should be seen and somebody suggested I contact Karen Mackinnon, exhibitions curator at the Glynn Vivian," he says. "I emailed her thinking she would say something like, 'Maybe

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in 10 years' time,' but instead she came back and said, 'How can you make this happen?.'

"It became a bit of a passion project and, when the Glynn Vivian team came down to the studio to see what we had, it all started to come together organically. I wanted people to be able to get up close and personal with this stuff."

One of the most interesting parts of the show is the costumes worn by the main characters, all arranged in chronological order. In particular, Mrs Coulter's costumes are fascinating – not only are they beautiful, they also demonstrate how her character develops from a sparkling, glamorous "child catcher" figure towards a more masculine presentation as the action builds.

The costumes were designed by Caroline Mccall, who is also known for her work on Downtown Abbey. When preparing her pitch for His Dark Materials, she conceived Lyra's world as a midcentury version of our own.

"It's a world that's governed by the Church – so I felt it would be a world without contraception and therefore women's role would be very different from ours," she says. "Also, the Magisterium are the people with technology, rather like the space race, which suggested a 1960s feel.

"I produced a lot of art and mood boards – ideas for places and people – and went for my interview,

and when I met Joel Collins, the production designer, my ideas completely fitted in with his."

She adds that one of her favourite parts of the project was working with Ruth Wilson on the development of the Mrs Coulter character.

“The cast are all fantastic and I think you can tell when you’re watching it, that it was a really collaborative process,” she says.

His Dark Materials producer and production designer Joel Collins adds that Philip Pullman was closely involved in the design process.

“He was very involved with the story and with the visual side of it,” he says. “If we went in a different direction to something in the book, he was always part of that process – everything from the alethiometer not being round to the mid-century tone of Lyra’s world, which in the book has more of a Victoriana feel to it. We decided to slightly shift that to an edgier mid-century for a younger audience, which Philip loved.

“We settled on a timeline in history that could give us something really visually stimulating – brutalism, dynamic architecture, really strong characteristics to help us enjoy telling the story and wouldn’t really be distracting, but could give us a really great launchpad for the look and feel of everything.”

The amount of detail the designers went into is extraordinary – for example, they built the whole town of Cittàgaze at Bad Wolf’s Cardiff studios.

“It was one big set – we built a humongous town,” says Joel. “People would come and just get lost in it. That was a huge and exciting achievement that took years to create.”

The attention to detail was so intense, it even extended to things that would never be seen on screen. Underneath the plaster, the bricks of the Cittagaze buildings were shaped like interlocking angels.

Similar loving attention was given to the design of the alethiometer, which appears in the show. As mentioned by Joel, its casing is square, not round as described in the book – partly for a modernist look and partly because Joel felt that since Pullman wrote the book, the idea of a circular compass has been used in a lot of other fiction. Seen up close, it’s an amazing piece of workmanship – and the cogs and dials actually work.

“It’s very heavy and it’s a beautiful thing to hold,” says Joel. “We had several versions, including varying degrees of mechanical ones.”

It is, he says, his favourite item in the show – and it’s exhibited alongside the Subtle Knife and the Amber Spyglass.

“The show is extraordinarily exciting and a very proud moment for all of us who made it,” he says. “It’s good to know the show is going to carry on in different ways and give people the pleasure of exploring some of the complexity of the stuff that we made and see the reality of some of these items and costumes.”

■ His Dark Materials: World Building In Wales is at the Glynn Vivian Gallery until April 30, 2023. More details at www.glynnvivian.co.uk

■ The His Dark Materials series will return to BBC One and iplayer from Sunday, December 18.

