

Costume Design Part 1

Costume Designer's Goals

Costume design is the **most personal aspect** of design. The costume designer must create clothes for characters that, on the one hand, reflect the ideas and goals of the play, but, on the other hand should look like the character chose the clothing in the same way you choose yours every day. Similarly, because we all wear clothes but probably do not design houses, audiences and actors will make strong, personal associations with what a character is wearing on stage.

The costume designer's goals are similar to the set designer's goals. These goals can be broken into five categories: costumes should help establish tone and style, time and place, and character information, and costumes should aid the performer and coordinate with the director's and other designers' concepts.

Costumes give information on the **tone and style** of a play. They may look just like what we wear today, or they may look like what people really wore at the time in which the play is set. Both of these would be **illusionistic** costuming. On the other hand, costumes might be representative of an idea in the play; for example, actors costumed in robes or unitards of various colors will establish a **theatrical** style. A different, stylized approach to costuming might also use some period elements mixed with contemporary dress; this would give the audience a flavor of a historical period without trying to create a full, theatrical illusion of another time and place.



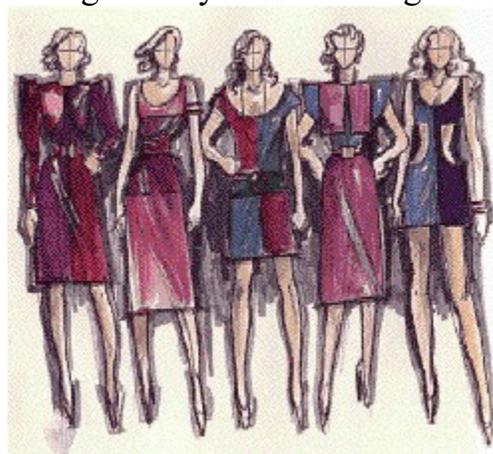
Costumes tell us a great deal about the **time and place** in which a play is set. Dresses with an empire waist made of light fabrics in light colors place us in the early 18th century, such as in Jane Austin's novels. Blue jeans with bell bottoms and painted or embroidered with many bright colors tell us a character belongs in the late 1960's.

Costumes give us **information on individual characters**, on the relationships among characters, and on groups of characters. First consider your own wardrobe, and what you would choose to wear on a job interview, on a big date, to wash the car, or to come to class. What you wear says a great deal about who you are and about what you are

intending to do. The same is true on the stage, but on stage we make even more associations with a character's clothing because we know it is specifically chosen for the play. If we see a woman on stage in a bright red dress, we will make associations with the dress's cut and color. For example, we might decide that the character is dressed for a night on the town. We might associate either

passion and love with the red color, or perhaps blood and violence, or perhaps images of the devil. If other characters on stage wear subdued tones or cool colors, then the character in red will contrast with the other characters. On the other hand, other characters in shades of red will be visually linked the character in the red dress. Similarly, characters will be visually linked on stage if they wear clothing with similar silhouettes or colors.

The costume designer **works closely with actors**. He designs costumes for that specific actor's body as much as for the role the actor is playing. For example, if a designer had planned the red dress mentioned above for the central female character in a play, but the director casts a woman with orange hair and freckles, the red dress will no longer have the intended effect when worn by that actress. A more complimentary color will be chosen. Similarly, costumes can be used to



enhance an actor's height, girth, natural coloring or to draw attention to any part of the actor. In the end, the actor must be comfortable wearing her costume: the work of the actor and of the designer can be undermined if an actor is uncomfortable in the clothing or does not know how to wear it and move in it correctly. For example, actors today must practice walking around in full length, hooped skirts or in a top hat and tails so that the character can appear to the audience to be comfortable in such clothing.

Finally, the costume designer must **support the director's concept** and must work with the **other designers** to create a coordinated visual effect.

Costume Designer's Tools

Like the set designer, the costume designer has two sets of tools: the elements of visual design and the practical material needed to create costumes.

As discussed in the last chapter, the elements of visual design are line, mass, composition, space, color, and texture. The costume designer uses the design elements somewhat differently from a set designer. The first important element of a costume is its **silhouette**, which combines its line and mass. Silhouette is the fastest way to identify the time and place of a period costume. Silhouette also tells what parts of the body are emphasized, hidden, or displayed by the clothing. Contrast a Restoration woman's silhouette with a woman dressed to go out today: the Restoration woman wore an enormous skirt with underskirts and panniers to increase its mass yet wore a bodice with an extremely low, wide neckline; the woman today might wear a mini skirt, heels, and blouse emphasizing the length of her legs. The Restoration woman would never show her legs, while few contemporary women would dare wear a Restoration neckline.



A costume designer considers **composition** on several different levels. She composes a single costume, she creates a composition of a single character over the duration of the play, and she composes how the entire cast should look when on stage together at any moment of the play. Usually a central character will change radically through the play's action (Oedipus blinds himself, Nora in *A Doll House* decides to leave her husband) and the character's successive costumes should show the character's evolution. Factors that a costume designer considers when composing the costuming of the entire cast might include putting the leading characters in more noticeable clothing, working within a restricted color palette, or demonstrating relationships

among characters through silhouette or color so that some look good and some silly together.



Space is less a factor for costume designers than set designers, because their canvas is always the human body. **Color** in costumes functions similarly to color in set design; it has its four properties, we associate certain colors with comedy versus tragedy or with other kinds of moods, and color must be used with less subtlety than in life to compensate for the distance

between audience and actors.

Texture in costume is slightly different from set design. The first element of texture is in the fabric itself: satins are smooth and shiny while lace is light and highly textured and tweed is heavy and highly textured. On the stage, plastics, leathers, furs, feathers, and other materials may also be combined with fabric. Two dimensional texture is provided by the fabrics' patterns: paisley, plaid, and polka dots have a busy visual texture, for example. Many costumes are composed of multiple fabrics making up multiple articles of clothing plus accessories, making an elaborate visual texture.



Movement is an element of visual design only in art forms that move through time (video, film, theatre, kinetic sculpture) Costumes must move with an actor through space, and the amount of movement should reflect the character and action of the play. Light or loosely woven fabrics move more freely than heavy or tightly woven fabrics or than other costume materials like leather or plastic. Consider the Romantic ballerina's tea length tutu of gauze versus the armor worn in a Shakespearean history play.

Practical Tools

In a more practical sense, the tools of the costume designer are the **fabrics** or other materials out of which costumes may be created; the various methods of putting costumes together, such as **sewing** machines or hot glue guns; and the **bodies of the actors** themselves, because no costume will make it onto the stage without an actor in character in it.



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Costume Design Part 2

Costume Designer's Process

A costume designer's process parallels the set designer's process, but with many important differences.

1. **Text analysis:** the costume designer looks specifically at the characters, the characters' actions, how the characters change through the play, the times and locations of the play, and the style of the play.
2. **Production meetings:** the costume designer must also work within a director's concept for the play, which may shift the time, place, or style from that indicated by the playwright, and coordinate with other designers' ideas.
3. The costume designer may present initial ideas in the form of **thumbnail** sketches, color **palettes**, fabric **swatches**, or pictures drawn from outside sources.



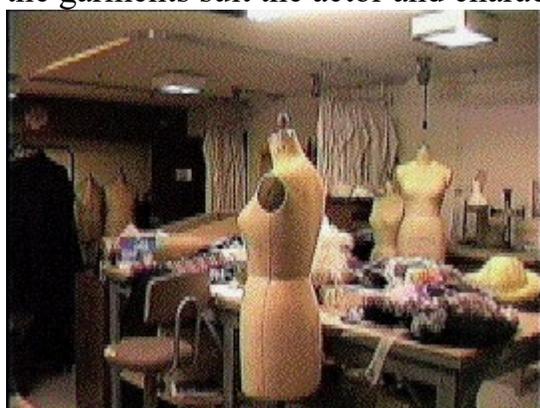
4. Once final designs have been approved, the costume designer creates **renderings**. Unlike the set designer, who may create only one rendering if the play takes place on a unit set, the costume designer normally creates a different rendering for each costume. Sometimes one character will be drawn in various costumes in one rendering, or several chorus members might be combined in one rendering. Costume designers' renderings include swatches, or small samples, of each fabric to be used in the costume.

5. The costume designer gives the **renderings** to the costume shop for **use in constructing the costumes**. Thus, renderings may also contain verbal instructions. The designer may also sketch other views of the costume to aid the shop in building the garments, for example, an elaborate bustle on the back of a skirt would

need a separate drawing if the rendering showed the skirt from the front. Outer garments or accessories might also be sketched separately. The costume designer does not provide the equivalent of the set designer's elevations or working drawings because costumes must be cut and fitted to the actor's body, not simply the designer's specifications.



6. The costume designer does not usually build or buy the costumes; this is the job of the costume shop. A designer will attend **fittings** when actors try on the work of the costume shop. The designer may make adjustments at that time, depending on how the garments suit the actor and character and the actions that character engages in onstage. For example, dancing or swordplay require very flexible costumes, which might be achieved either by enlarging a costume or using fabrics which move easily, like stretch knits. A single costume for a single character usually requires multiple fittings.



7. Designers join the entire group of artists, in the theatre where the play will open, during technical and dress rehearsals. Normally, sets, lights, and sound are handled in **tech rehearsals**, and the costume designer comes in for the **first dress rehearsal**, which is when costumes and makeup are added. Sometimes, when the costumes are elaborate, the designer, costume shop foreman, and director watch a **costume parade**. A costume parade is when actors come out singly or in groups in their costumes outside the context of the play, simply to examine the look of each costume, its appropriateness to a scene, and how groups of actors will look together.

Historical Conventions of Costume Design

Of course actors have always worn costumes, but the job of costume designer evolved only in the **19th century** with the general theatrical trend toward **historical accuracy**.

While in rare cases a set designer might create costumes, like Inigo Jones' fanciful costumes for the Stuart Court Masques in the early 1600's or Jean Berain's costumes



for the spectacles of Louis XIV's court, in most cases costumes were **left up to the actors**. In Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, each actor in the company provided his own costumes. Except for certain conventional costumes for characters like Ancient Romans, Shakespeare's company wore contemporary clothing of as fine a quality as they could afford. The company was given the cast-off clothing of the aristocracy and thus had a small stock of costumes belonging to the company. Hirelings and apprentices, who were not sharing members of the company, were probably costumed from this stock wardrobe. Audiences did not expect historical accuracy in costuming, but they did want visual splendor.

The practices described for Shakespeare's company lasted for hundreds of years. It often led to strange character inconsistencies; for example, a famous actress who commanded a high salary could appear in the best gown in the whole play, even if she were playing the maid within the story of the play.

A few companies in the **18th century** experimented with historically accurate costuming of period plays. This was mostly done to draw an audience, as an extra piece of publicity about the play. In these cases, it was usually the set designer or an actor-manager who selected the costumes. Often, only the lead characters were costumed in period clothing.

In the 19th century, accuracy to the time and place of the play slowly became the normal means of production of period plays. **Books** of plates depicting costumes of

various lands through history were published by the middle of the century, making it easier for theatre companies to copy old or foreign styles of dress.



With the rise of the director toward the end of the 19th century, the role of the costume designer was firmly established, even for **contemporary plays**. Directors by the end of the century wanted the costumes to be appropriate to character as well as to time and place, and this required the artistry of the costume designer.

In the 20th century, costume design for the stage and cinema has often been stoutly **realistic**, even when the style of scenery and lighting is stylized. Some kinds of productions, like musical comedies, musical reviews, science fiction, and children's theatre allow the costume designer more imaginative freedom. This century has enlarged the range of resources for the imaginative designer: a variety of synthetic fabrics, furs, and plastics can be used to make costumes for *Cats* or *Star Trek* aliens, for example.

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Costume Design Part 3

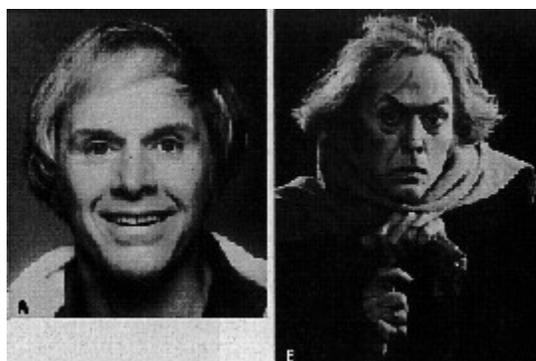
Make-up Design

Sometimes make-up is designed by the costumer, sometimes there is a separate make-up designer, and sometimes actors are responsible for their own stage make-up. In shows with more complex make-up needs, a make-up designer is more hired.

Make-up has three purposes on the stage: 1) to **make the actor's features visible**, 2) to create character, and 3) corrective purposes.

Because stage lights tend to wash out an actor's face and because greater distances between spectators and actors makes visibility difficult, all actors wear makeup on stage. A **base** gives the face color and evens out the facial tones; stage bases may be water-based, greasepaint, or pan sticks. **Eyeliners** and **rouge** for the lips and cheeks are also used by all actors. While greater distances call for more saturated colors, in a smaller theatre actors will use less make-up and colors that resemble their natural tones.

Makeup may also be used to **create a character**. Smaller character effects include changing the shape of eyes or eyebrows, aging the face and hands, or adding facial hair. Different countries and time periods also had different notions of beauty; by following these with make-up design, make-up can help to establish period and time for a character. Consider silent film actress Clara Bow's "bow" shaped lips, or the heavy liner and bright colors used on the eyelid by women of the 1950's. Larger effects may be created with putty or prosthetic devices (latex foam or plastics), such as building up the nose and chin with putty for the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*, or building entire prosthetic heads



and limbs for the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Other character effects might be bruising, bullet holes, scars, or disfigurements.

Corrective makeup is used to help an actor look his or her best on stage. The actor uses highlight and shadow to enhance the bone structure and features of the face toward standard proportions.

For both character and corrective makeup, the most common techniques are **highlighting/shadowing** and stippling. Highlighted areas will stand out, whether or not they follow the normal structure of the face, and shadowed areas will recede from



view. **Stippling** is pressing the makeup onto the face rather than wiping it, and it is used to give texture to the face and to blend together areas that have been highlighted and shadowed extensively. Alone, it can be used to create a "5 o'clock shadow." Stippling

may be done with sponges or brushes.



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