

Guide to Costume Design

Your role may range from providing a pantomime cow (relatively simple - honest!) to costuming a cast of thousands (probably 20) for a period drama or musical. There is room for almost every approach to design, given the combination of an enthusiastic director and a realistic budget. Consequently this section can only provide the general information and advice with which to begin, together with ideas for where to get further help or advice.

The production team

If any aspect of your task is unclear, ask about it as early as possible. Discovering that you have also been appointed as make-up designer and props manager two days before the show is the last thing that you (or the rest of the production team) will need! Try and keep up to date with all areas of the production by attending production meetings, working closely with the set and lighting designers (whose work will seriously affect the results of your own, and vice-versa, on stage) and attending rehearsals wherever possible. Similarly, use these occasions to give the other members of the team, particularly the director, an idea of what you're doing. Hackneyed as the concept may be, a successful show is the result of concerted teamwork and the costume designer is expected ultimately to produce an effect, co-ordinated with the set and lighting, to enhance the work of both actors and director. If convinced of an idea, by all means argue your case, but sufficiently in advance. Compromise, sometimes over your whole design 'concept' can be demoralizing, but is occasionally necessary; and it is always less traumatic if it happens well before the first performance. It is a good idea to set yourself deadlines in all areas of your work, and endeavour to stick to them!

Budget

One factor which should be ever present in your thoughts (and in your reports to the producer) is your budget. Student productions rarely allow lavish expenditure in any area and so careful budgeting (*which is generally only possible after reading the script!*) is the mundane but vital first step in costuming a play. Check what you will be expected to provide (sometimes items such as make-up and wigs merit a special budget), and allow for a contingency of at least £10, along with possible transport and cleaning costs if you are hiring. Stockpile all receipts to present to your lucky producer. Whenever possible, invoice the production directly, or use production cheques for deposits and hire charges, to avoid causing confusion and increasing overdrafts.

Costumes

Now to the fun part, which is actually getting hold of the Gaultier-style bra or 12th century nun's habit (or both) on which you have set your heart. The first step (which is particularly useful for modern plays and finding footwear) involves chatting up the cast and anyone else you know to find out what you can borrow. The next thing is choosing whether to hire, make or buy anything that blackmail threats have not elicited. In all these cases, you will need to find out (by measuring, not just

by asking) each actor's vital statistics, preferably on a measurement sheet. (This is a piece of paper / card, with spaces for you to write in: the actor's name, sex and character; his / her measurements; what costume(s) you have chosen for him / her; any further notes.) This will impress directors and intimidate actors wonderfully whilst providing you with a useful summary of information. For period costumes or those you are making, detailed measurements such as shoulder width, hat size, underbust, calf, thigh and wrist may be helpful.

Buying costumes

Charity shops or factory reject shops such as QD are valuable sources of all sorts of items. Most are to be found on Mill Road or Burleigh Street. For any form of dancewear, Julienne & Porselli (Grafton Centre) will offer advice and a wide range of shoes and outfits.

Making

Unless you want something very specific, a time-wasting last resort. The ADC has a sewing machine and increasingly numbers of college JCRs have also been persuaded to invest. Children's fancy dress patterns (often available in adult sizes) offer very acceptable basic shapes, although for period pieces it is best to use specifically designed patterns.

Hiring

The place you need is **County Drama Wardrobe**, which has an extensive range of costumes for hire. Check with the designer on committee or the ADC Theatre management for details on how best to approach them.

Backstage

Arrangements for the get-in will be made at production meetings. The get-in is your chance, together with your wardrobe manager (if you have one), to move into the dressing rooms and make adjustments to the costumes. It is vital throughout the production to keep the dressing rooms as tidy as possible and to 'encourage' the actors to do so. (Bullying, blackmail and bribery have all been known to work, if asking nicely fails.) Keep stocks of safety pins, cotton, needles and elastic in the dressing rooms at all times and make sure that both wardrobe staff (whom you will have to recruit) and actors know where to find them in case of emergency. Gaffer tape is also worth its weight in gold in costume crises, but can usually be borrowed from other technicians. If you will need to be backstage during the performance for costume changes, wear black clothing and check what else will be happening with the stage manager and floor crew.

The Tech, Dress and Show

When the actors arrive for the technical rehearsal, each should be given responsibility for their own costumes and any problems relating to costumes or costume changes should be discussed. If necessary, practise any complicated quick changes during the Tech. If you have a large cast or costume plot, keep updated lists of alterations and changes in a prominent place. Many actors will be self-sufficient if given the opportunity, leaving you to deal with the almost inevitable last-minute crises.

If possible arrange to watch the Dress Rehearsal from the auditorium and take note of any glaring faults, difficult changes or possible finishing touches. In many productions you may be working up to the last possible minute, so try to make time for rest and food during both the Technical Rehearsal and run-up to the Dress Rehearsal.

It is a good idea to ensure the maintenance of costumes, make-up and make-up remover throughout the run and to check any potential changes to the costume plot with the director. When the show closes, you will probably need to enlist members of the cast to help with the get-out; ensure that the dressing rooms are left in as civilized a state as is possible and that all your costumes are ready to be returned. Before returning hired or borrowed costumes, remember to undo any alterations that you have made, and return them clean and on time!

So how do you start?

Now that you have some idea of what costume design involves, you could apply to help with the Freshers' play (staged at the ADC Theatre, usually in the 6th week of Michaelmas term). If you have not already done so, subscribe to the technicians' email list. You will begin to receive emails asking for people to work on the technical side of all sorts of shows; simply reply to the person named in the email, stating that you'd like to apply as Costume / Make-Up Designer for their show. If the show is fairly simple, positions are usually allocated on a first-come first-served basis, so you have every chance of starting out this way. New designers are always welcome, and it is possible to apply to shadow a more experienced costume or make-up designer on a show; this is an excellent way to learn the details of the job.

If you have any questions about getting involved, then contact the committee designer via the ADC noticeboard or email [designer@cuadc.org].

Further Reading

The Staging Handbook, Francis Reid, Second Edition, A&C Black, London, 1995