



CHAPTER 7

Costume Design: Character, Period, and Function

To me, there always seems to be a kind of divine madness about costume designers, and no wonder. They spend much of their time mucking about in character's brains, peering at their everyday life, thumbing through mythical closets and faraway dresser drawers. As costume designer Celestine Ranney puts it, "I make clothes for imaginary people."*

While scenic design focuses on Grand Statements and lighting builds Mood and Atmosphere, costume design takes a more personal, more individual road. Costumes depict Character. The costume designer is trying to give the actor a home for the character, a place in physical space, a garment that restricts and reveals the actor as it would the character. The costume should help the actor move as the character would move, giving the actor another tool with which to create the role. "Clothes make the man," the saying goes, but perhaps it is more accurate to say, "Clothes reveal the man." Costumes take the inner workings of the character and put them on the outside. They are like X-ray machines.

Costumes must also knit together well with the other design elements. If the set, lighting, and costumes are not of the same "world," the show will feel disjointed, although the audience might not know why. Furthermore, the color in these three elements must be complementary, so the actress in the beige dress doesn't end up in front of a beige wall and completely disappear.

Of course, all the design arts exist to tell the story, and costumes are no different. It is not enough to see an eighteenth-century nobleman wearing an

*Quoted by Tara Maginnis on *Costumes.org*.

embroidered waistcoat. We must see a desperate eighteenth-century nobleman who has lost his fortune and donned his last threadbare waistcoat as he comes courting, seeking a bride's dowry that will reverse his fortunes and make him a true man once again, a force to be reckoned with, a courtly presence unmatched in power and influence.

Or something like that.

The work doesn't stop there. Even more than scenery (and way more than lighting), costume design expresses a certain snapshot of historical time: a Period. When signing up to a new project, one of the very first questions from the costume designer will be, When is it set? The silhouette, shape, texture, and accessories of any garment are dependent on fashion, and fashion goes hand-in-hand with time. Costume designers, therefore, tend to be history buffs. They must know general trends in clothing—like bustles, top hats, and skirt lengths—plus tiny little details like the fact that purple dye used to be very costly and was, by law, forbidden to everyone but the emperor. They must know that the opening of King Tut's tomb sparked an explosion of Egyptian-themed clothing. Costume designers have to know about revolutions, scientific discoveries, cultural traditions, and all sorts of other phenomena that affect the design of clothing. Therefore, researching the period of the play is of tremendous importance.

Of course, every aspect of design has its practical side as well, and the costume designer's work is grounded in the reality of the human body. Every piece of art the costume designer makes must be displayed on a pre-existing shape. It must fit that shape, reveal or hide that shape as necessary, and not impede any of the actions that shape wants to take in the course of arguing, sword-fighting, wrestling, lovemaking, eating, or doing jumping jacks. Some characters dance, some sing, some strip, some climb stairs or ladders, some have to fit through doors and some have to change clothes in an awful hurry. Costume designers, therefore, must design clothes that serve whatever function is required of them by the play.

Let us take a look at how costumes reveal character. Then we'll talk history and, finally, we'll get practical.

Character

The playwright's words are the beginning of everything, so, like every other designer, the costumer starts with the script.

How to Read a Play Like a Costume Designer

Like the other designers, a good costume designer will read the play through once without worrying about the practical details, simply letting the emo-

tions of the play flow out of the text. Once she has a handle on the overall story, she will go back and begin to answer specific questions:

Where does the play take place? What country are we in? What city? Are we indoors or out? Which rooms are we in? People might dress differently in the bedroom than in the kitchen.

When does the play take place? What year? What *time* of year? What time of day? Is it a warm summer evening or a crisp fall morning? What is the weather like?

What is the world like where the play takes place? What kind of government? What kind of church? What are the character's social beliefs about everyday conduct, relationships, marriage, sex, children?

What happened before the play began?

What type of action does the play call for? Will the characters be tumbling around on stage? Is there fighting? Food? Sex?

What kinds of clothing references are in the text? These might be very direct, as when a maid asks a gentleman for his hat, or they might be inferred if, for example, a character remarks that someone looks "all dressed up."

Who should the audience be focusing their attention on? Who are the protagonist and antagonist? Who are the supporting characters? Visualize the scene in your mind and think about where you would want the audience to be looking at any moment. It is the lighting designer and the costume designer that direct focus around the stage. The lighting designer does it with intensity of light; the costume designer with color and style. When Mame enters on the arms of ten black-tuxedo'd gentlemen, the last thing you want to do is put her in a black evening gown. A bright red dress lets the audience know they should be looking at her.

Therefore, when creating costumes for each character, you should know the following:

- Age
- Social class
- Financial position
- Marital status
- Health
- Moral beliefs
- Job
- Mental state
- Education
- Country of origin

All of the above information can determine what they would wear and how they would wear it. Costume designers must understand how these characters choose to reveal themselves to the world—their habits, their place in society, their career, health, education, and so on and so on. They will do much of the same research as the actor, and may end up knowing as much about the character as the actor who plays him. The director should also be

sharing his ideas for the character early on, as the designer will want to build on them. This relationship is most useful when it goes both ways, of course. A costume designer will often discover tasty details in her research that may influence the director's conception.

Costume design often dips into metaphor, whether the audience notices it or not. One production of *Hedda Gabler* envisioned her trapped in her fate like a prison inmate, so her costumes were all tightly laced like straitjackets and decorated with thin stripes. Whether or not the audience understood the metaphor directly, the costumes confined and restricted the actress, giving her a valuable tool to create this tortured character. These sorts of metaphors often hit the audience on a subconscious level as well, though they rarely realize it.

One way that a costume designer can influence a performance early on is with the introduction of a costume prop. Costume props are things like umbrellas, pocket watches, boas, canes, and so forth. If the prop is an interesting choice, it can become the center of a great deal of business in the hands of a creative actor and a clever director. These sorts of props need to be provided early on, so they can grow in personality throughout rehearsal. Give Mame that boa early on, and you may find her weaving the male chorus line into it by opening night.

Costume designers are often looking for a "keynote" piece for a costume: a single element that expresses the inner workings of a character's mind. It might be Madame Arcati's exotic turban in *Blithe Spirit* or Henry Higgins's frumpy, slightly out-of-fashion suit coat in *Pygmalion*. It could be as simple as a piece of jewelry or as elaborate as a suit of armor. This single signature piece can offer guidance throughout the design period, much as a single piece of scenery or furniture can keep the scenic design process on track.

The director generally comes up with an overall stylistic theme—"a flashy carnival spectacle," "a bizarre Fellini film," "a fascist diatribe," "a wacky comedic romp," "a passionate romance novel," and so on. This helps the designer get a sense of style for the show. This shared style helps hold the visual style together onstage, so that all the characters look like they are part of the same story.

Besides revealing a character's inner workings, costume design can often help the audience to follow the story. If a play is packed with characters, a designer may create a sort of color-coding for the players. This set of lovers is in blue, that one in orange, and so on. The usefulness of this technique is in direct proportion to the potential for confusion in the story.

An Exercise

I think you know where this is going. That's right, to a closet. This exercise is best done with a friend, because it can be hard to see yourself objectively.

Have your friend reach into her closet and pull out twenty articles of clothing: shirts, dresses, pants, skirts, bathrobes, underwear, whatever. Tell her to get a good assortment, but concentrate on the ones that she wears most often. Lay them out on a bed, the floor, or a couch so you can see them all.

Take a good, hard look at these clothes. What do they say about her? Do you see a common color palette? Are there shapes and textures that run through them? Try answering the following questions about your friend based on her clothes:

- How old is she?
- What is her financial status?
- Is she married?
- What does she do for a living?
- What is her attitude about her own body?
- Is she involved in a romantic relationship?
- Is she shy? Confident?
- Where did she grow up?

Ask yourself: If she were a character in a play, how would these clothes reveal her personality to the audience?

Period

Choosing a period has a tremendous influence on the costume but, interestingly enough, getting it a little wrong isn't a disaster. Costumes serve characters who, in turn, serve a story. Unless you are doing *The Abe Lincoln Story*, you can fudge the years a little in most cases. Period is not just about historical accuracy. It is about putting the play in a place in time that fits the story. It's not enough to say *when* the play is taking place. You must answer the question, "Why then?"

In some cases, period is determined for you by historical events depicted in the story. If the family owns slaves, it will be challenging to set the play after the Civil War. (Actually, now that I think about it, that might lead to some interesting political theater.) In other cases, a play will set itself in a period because of a style of language. Nobody really talks like Noel Coward these days (more's the pity) so setting *Hay Fever* in the present might be a bit unsettling.

What really sets a play in a period, however, are the issues that are treated in the text. When Orson Welles directed his brilliant *Julius Caesar* in 1937, he set the play in the then fascist Italy, not because he liked the uniforms, but because he wanted to make a statement about the abuse of power and the

ultimate failure of political will among the liberal ranks. Shakespeare's plays seem to endure being set in all sorts of periods, in fact. Seeing an Elizabethan *Hamlet* these days is almost a novelty.

Because of her historical knowledge and clothing sense, a costume designer can actually be a great deal of help in choosing a period. Smart directors will consider including her in this decision.

There are also times when it is useful to strategically ignore the period. For example, if you are setting *The Merchant of Venice* in the Italian Renaissance where Shakespeare envisioned it, you might discover that all Jews were required to wear a bright yellow hat at that time. Personally, I don't recommend putting your lead character, Shylock, in a big yellow hat. People will think you are doing *Curious George*, and speculate during intermission if Shylock's mischievousness at the zoo is what got him in trouble. In this case, ignore the period and find another hat for your lead.

From time to time, a director will throw the idea of period out the window, insisting that "This play takes place in no particular time." This is a problematic decision, for two reasons. First, it often turns out that the director *does* have a particular period in mind for most of the characters, but wants to cheat mightily with a single character to make a point.

Tweet! Five yards for not trusting your designer.

If you want to plop a French maid costume in the middle of a prison camp, it's your call, but don't yank the entire work out of period to do it. Challenge your designer to embody the idea of a French maid costume into a prison uniform. If you provide her with the tools she needs—a clear understanding of the character being paramount—you will be amazed at what comes out of some people's sewing machines.

The second reason that "no period" is problematic is that it sometimes means "no clue." Directors will decree that a play is about "universal themes" that transcend time and place, and thus each character should wear what suits him individually.

Tweet! Fifteen yards for delay of production while you figure out your concept.

Sure, love, hatred, passion, jealousy, rage, and all other emotions have been with us since time began, but that doesn't mean that they have always been felt and treated the same way. These emotions do not make a theme by themselves. Plays are about relationships—between people, between people and places, between people and society, between people and time. When you ignore period, you risk setting your play adrift, not only in time, but in concept.

I didn't say you couldn't do it. I didn't say you shouldn't. I just said it's tough.

A period doesn't necessarily have to be a particular year, however. It could be the world of a particular painter, for example, or a fantasy book. Vincent Van Gogh's late paintings have no particular year, but they do have a particular look and feel. The same might be said of *The Hobbit*.

Now that I have that out of my system, let's look at what the past gives us to work with. While history does not always give us the benefit of clearly defined periods, Western historical style basically breaks down as follows:*

- Prehistoric and Babylonian
- Ancient Egyptian
- Ancient Greece
- Ancient Rome
- Byzantine
- Barbarian Europe
- Medieval Europe
- Italian Renaissance
- Sixteenth Century/Northern European Renaissance
- Seventeenth Century
- Eighteenth Century
- Regency and Empire
- Victorian Era
- Edwardian Era
- 1911–1920
- 1920s
- 1930s
- 1940s
- 1950s
- 1960s
- 1970s
- 1980s
- 1990s
- 2000s

Note that, in this list, historical periods tend to get shorter as we move further forward in history. As it gets closer to the present day, the periods tend to subdivide more. If you are doing a show in the Edwardian Era, you don't have to worry so much about the differences between early Edwardian and late. If you are doing a show in 1982, however, you can get busted for rolling out an outfit that didn't make its appearance until 1988.

First and foremost, period determines the **silhouette** of the costume, that is, the overall shape of the garments, irrespective of color, texture, and fabric. In any given period, there is a choice of silhouettes. The designer will pick the one that is appropriate for a character, then build it with one of the fabrics that she has chosen for her palette.

Function

Actors move. There's no way of getting around it, and we wouldn't even if we could. It is the dynamism of the live performer that makes theater a wonderful experience.

*Thanks to Tara Maginnis of *Costumes.org* for this list

That dynamic performance, however, can create some headaches for the costume department. As I said in the introduction, a costume can be a tool, even a toy, for an actor to use and play with to discover a character. Those toys, however, should be built to match the level of punishment they are going to get. You wouldn't play baseball with a long-stemmed rose, and you shouldn't stage a fistfight in costumes that weren't built for it. One designer I know always goes by the rule, "Dress up singers, Strip down dancers," which basically expresses a general philosophy about how clothes must serve the action.

Here's what the costume designer wants to know about how a costume will be used:

- *Does the actor need to dance, fight, climb ladders, or otherwise move in a highly physical way?* In this case, the seams may need to be strengthened. The costume may also need to be cut with more room around the joints, so the actor can move smoothly. Long trains on dresses may want to be reconsidered. Obviously, different types of dancing (tap, ballet, folk, etc.) will require different shoes.
- *Does the actor need to sing?* Singers need more room around the diaphragm, and may find it difficult to sing in corsets.
- *How big are the doors?* Women have worn some pretty bulky stuff through history, and you really don't want your rehearsal to grind to a halt because the four-foot-wide bustle skirt won't fit through the three-foot-wide door. The same goes for furniture. Ever seen what's underneath a hoop skirt? You will, if the actress sits down on a chair that's too small.
- *Is there food or drink involved?* Will this actor eat? Do they need to spill anything on themselves, have a food fight, or laugh so hard they shoot milk out their nose? These types of messes may affect which fabrics can be used. Protein stains will not wash out of some fabrics, and there may not be time or money for constant dry cleaning.
- *Will there be blood?* Never depend on the costume shop reading the play. They do, of course, but you should still let them know who gets stabbed and whom they will bleed on.
- *Will there be fast changes?* This is something the costume designer should be aware of well ahead of time, but it doesn't hurt to confirm it. People have different definitions of "fast," but I believe that any time an actor is in two consecutive scenes with two different costumes, it should be considered a fast change.
- *Does the performer need to dress or undress onstage?* This could happen for various reasons, from lovemaking to dressing for a joust. Any time

a garment is put on or removed in sight of the audience, the costume shop needs to know. For one thing, the fasteners that hold the clothes together must now be historically accurate. There were no zippers in Renaissance Verona. The costume shop can also do things to make the costume easier to remove or put on.

- *Does the costume need pockets?* Finding out during tech week that a costume needs a pocket makes costumers grumpy, and for good reason. It's always easier to install a pocket when a costume is being built.

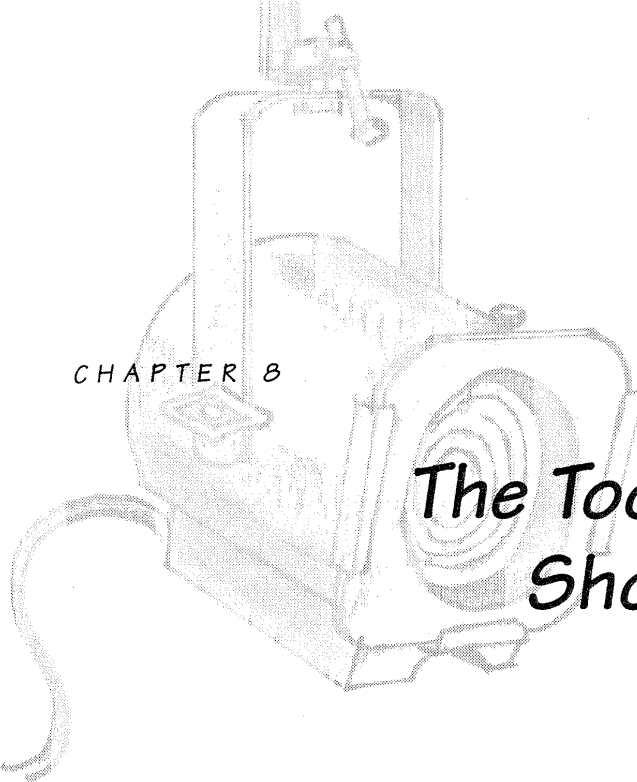
You can address many of these issues ahead of time by putting the actors in **rehearsal clothes**. Most costume shops can provide rehearsal skirts for period plays, as well as corsets, hats, and other period pieces that will seriously affect the actor's ability to move. In the vast majority of cases, you won't get the actual costume until dress rehearsal, but you should get something that approximates the size and weight of the actual item. Male actors should plan on wearing their own suit coats and everyone should plan on providing appropriate footwear for rehearsal. The shop can and should provide costume props, like fans, pocket watches, cigarette cases, and so forth, particularly if those props are involved in **business**, a bit of action that is meant to draw the audience's attention.

The most important thing about all these issues is **ASK EARLY**. It is far easier to accommodate all these things when you are still a month from dress rehearsal.

The Costume Sketch

All of this design work is of no use if it is not communicated to the director and the costume shop. Costume design is communicated in a series of sketches that start with rough thumbnails during the design period and culminate with a fully realized costume rendering that is delivered to the shop for construction. In the world of scenery, the rendering gives a sense of what the final product will look like while the set is built from drafted plans. The costume designer depends entirely on the rendering to communicate her design both to the director and to the shop.

The rendering should depict the costume on the actor in a standing, full-body pose. Earlier versions that are done for the director will not include construction details, but the final version must contain all the information that the shop needs to build the costume. A rendering will often be accompanied by swatches, to show which fabrics will be used.



CHAPTER 8

The Tools of Costume: Shopping, Draping, and Stitching

Let's get one thing out of the way right off: costumes are not sewn. They are *built*. Saying a costume is sewn is like saying that sets are hammered; sewing is just one of the skills employed in modern costume construction.

As a costume design is coming together, the designer must make a decision between four avenues for each piece of clothing: *building, buying, renting, or pulling*. Costume designers choose between these four paths by employing the same formula that all designers do: money versus time versus available skills. Actually, it's all about money.

Buying is the most common option where contemporary clothes are involved. The options are limited to what is in the store, of course, but once you've found it, you've got most of your work done. Once you own the garment, you can also distress or alter it to your heart's content. Renting is a great option when you are doing period shows on a budget, but you can't change what they send you and it can be difficult to make rental clothes match clothes that are built or bought. Pulling a costume from stock is fast and easy, plus you can mess with it however you want. If you don't have it, though, you can't pull it.

Regardless of which path each costume is on, the first thing a designer does after a design is finalized is go shopping. A costume designer must have intimate knowledge of every clothing store, fabric store, secondhand store, and notions shop in a fifty-mile radius (not to mention the ones in New York and Los Angeles).

Let's go through these four paths, one at a time.

Building

Depending on how expensive your labor is, building is either the least or most expensive way to go. In an academic production, where labor comes in the form of credit-seeking students, both the cost and the skill levels may be low. If a professional shop is involved, both the costs and skills will be much higher. Building gives the designer the greatest control over the final product, as well as the sturdiest construction.

If the costumes are being built, the first stop is the fabric store, where the designer will collect **swatches**, playing-card-sized scraps of fabric that she can mix and match to find the right collection of fabrics for a range of costumes. Most costume designers collect swatches regularly, even when they are not working on a show. This habit helps them create a stock of colors and textures they can draw from when rendering their costumes. There is an old costume shop joke about a costume designer who dies and wakes up in a gigantic warehouse full of shelves, all of which are groaning under thousands of bolts of fabric of every description. Dozens of people are wandering around these shelves, staring up in wonderment. As the designer gapes at the untold bounty, she stops a passerby and says, "This is incredible. Is this Heaven?" to which the passerby replies, "No, this is Hell. There are no scissors."

After the swatching is done and the designer is ready to purchase fabric, she must figure out the yardage that she needs. Fabric is priced per yard, so the yardage times the price equals the cost of the fabric for the costume. The variety of available fabric is stunning, so one way of breaking it down is natural versus synthetic.

Natural versus Synthetic

This is not nearly as clean of a distinction as we would all like it to be. Rayon, for example, which most people would call synthetic, is actually made from wood. In general, however, natural fibers are things like wool, cotton, and silk, while synthetic fibers are things like nylon, polyester, and spandex. You can generalize about these groups and say that natural fibers are more expensive, easier to work with, and harder to keep clean and pressed, but every costume designer who just read that sentence has got her hand up in the air right now to tell me about the exceptions. The fact of the matter is, this distinction is only useful to a point. With that in mind, let's look at general groups of fabrics. All of the groups listed here have natural and synthetic subgroups as well as stretchy and nonstretchy variants. Furthermore, there is a fabric in every group that is fabulously expensive and another that is shamefully cheap.

- *Animal Hair*: Many types of wool including Merino, Corriedale and Leicester; also cashmere, mohair, alpaca, angora, camel, and many others. Luxurious, soft, and expensive. Can get warm on stage.
- *Sheers*: chiffon, organza, lace, and other lightweight, gauzy, see-through fabrics. There are both synthetic and natural varieties.
- *Naps*: plushes, fur, corduroy, and other thick, fuzzy fabrics. Remember that many sets are HOT, so these may be uncomfortable.
- *Shiny*: satin, taffeta, silks, and other fabrics that catch a lot of light and look dressy. Also many synthetic fabrics such as acetate.
- *Cotton and blends*: cotton is lightweight, breathable, and easy to sew, but gains durability and lower cost when blended with fabrics such as rayon, acrylic, or polyester. Linen, which is made from flax, a vegetable fiber, is similar but more durable, better-looking, and pricier.
- *Synthetics*: Nylon, rayon, spandex, polyester, and many, many others. Most are harder to dye and not as luxurious to wear, but much cheaper and easier to care for.
- *Plastics*: Synthetics, like vinyl, look shiny and colorful on stage but do not breathe and can be a pain to wear for long periods.
- *Twinkles*: Metallics, sequins, glittery, and showy fabrics, there seems to be no end of variety.

Most designers will decide which kind of fabric they are looking for, then go looking for the color or pattern that fits what they have in their mind's eye. When shopping for a show, many designers will avoid searching for a particular fabric for a particular costume. Instead, they are looking for a fabric that is within the style of the show. As Tara Maginnis, head of the costume shop at the University of Alaska, puts it, "I am always looking for a fabric that says, 'I want to be in this show.'" Designers will stock up on fabrics that feel right for the show, then parcel them out later.

Once the fabric is bought, the designer faces another fork in the road: *patterning* or *draping*. Patterning means that the shop must create a pattern from which they will cut the clothes. Sometimes these patterns are designed by taking apart existing garments and copying them, but in most cases, the **cutter**—the costume shop person who specializes in this area—must be able to look at the costume rendering, visualize each piece of the costume in her head and draw it out using the actor's measurements. It's an impressive display of three-dimensional visualization, particularly since the cutter is imagining how the pieces will connect in her head, without the ability to see how it comes together until it is time to assemble the whole thing.

It is possible to build a costume using patterns that were actually used at

the time, but in general, it is advisable to use contemporary patterns and adapt them to period costumes, rather than adapting period patterns to modern bodies and construction techniques. Recently, there has also been a trend from pattern companies, like Simplicity and Butterick, toward producing patterns for costumes. As fewer and fewer people sew their own clothes, these companies are trying to open new markets in theater companies and historical re-creationists. If you are building period costumes, check these companies' catalogs for useful patterns.

In order to drape a costume, the shop sets up a dressmaker's dummy that is the same size as the actor who will wear the costume. Some dummies are adjustable, and I'm just going to leave that joke alone. Draping is the process of laying fabric onto this dummy, building the costume up piece by piece, using the costume rendering as a guide. There is no pattern. The **draper**, as this person is called, must call upon her knowledge of clothing construction to determine which pieces go where. It's a bit like doing sculpture, and a talented draper is worth her weight in gold.

Both drapers and cutters often do the first version of the costume in muslin, a cheap but pliable fabric that can be used to make a mock-up of the costume without spending a fortune. Having a fitting in a muslin mock-up can be disorienting to an actor, who might walk into the shop expecting to be decked out in her Act Three ball gown, only to be unceremoniously safety-pinned into an itchy, off-white pile of fabric with extra pieces sticking out of it everywhere like Medusa's hair. Don't panic, it's only the muslin mock-up.

Once the draper has the costume looking like she wants it on the dummy and has checked it on the actor, she cuts the fabric into its final pieces, leaving extra fabric all around for the seams.

Whether the fabric pieces come from the cutter or the draper, the next stop is the **stitcher**, an expert in construction. Of course, in a small shop or one-person operation, one person might build the entire costume start to finish, but in a larger shop, these jobs are split between three people.

Buying

One might think that buying clothes would be the easiest way to do a show, but it ain't necessarily so. If you are buying costumes for a show, it generally means that the show is a contemporary one, and, when it comes to contemporary shows, everyone has an opinion. An actor might object strongly to a costume choice, saying, "My character would never wear that!" If you are doing *Merchant of Venice* in the seventeenth century, however, the designer can gently remind the actor that, yes, it looks a little strange to our eyes, but

that collar was the style in Venice at the time. Research settles a lot of issues on the spot.

If you are depicting people in modern dress, you will sometimes be shopping for things that could be built in an historical style much more cheaply. If your character is a wealthy New York socialite, it might be cheaper to fake a nineteenth-century evening gown than to purchase a modern one. Modern dress means a tighter standard of accuracy.

If your run is short and your relationship with the community is positive, you can often borrow certain kinds of garments, such as police or military uniforms, lab coats, waitress uniforms, athletic equipment and clothing, choir robes, clerical outfits, and so forth. Naturally, the shop and the actors would need to treat these garments with extra care, so that they can be borrowed again next season and, of course, the lenders should be given credit and/or advertising in the program.

Secondhand and thrift stores can be a gold mine for costume designers, even if you are planning on building a costume. These days, the price of fabric is high enough that it can actually be more cost-effective to build a costume out of an old garment than to buy the new fabric. Find something that is close at the Salvation Army and then cannibalize the fabric for your new costume.

Renting

In some cases, it is best to rent a costume that has been built by someone else. This is most often, and most effectively, done when you are looking for an entire production, especially musicals and operas. It is best not to try to put rental clothes onstage with clothes that you have built. It can be challenging to make them look like they are in the same show, especially because you cannot alter rental clothes in any way. You can get away with putting rented uniforms or men's formal wear in an otherwise built show, however, because those things are pretty standard.

Rentals can allow you to save a lot of money, but you must be very cautious with the clothes. You have to tell *everybody* that the costume is rented and no harm must come to it. That means no spills, no tears, no alterations, no dyes, no nuthin'.

When you are setting up the rental, get a complete list of all the measurements that the rental house needs. You will need to take these measurements carefully from every performer who is wearing a costume and then hope that the rental house gets it close enough. If you are not familiar with taking measurements, the rental house can provide a diagram showing you where each of the measurements is taken.

Costume houses tend to gather out on the coasts, so look for one that is on the coast closest to you, either in New York or Los Angeles. If you are out in the heartland, it really isn't going to matter.

Pulling

Pulling clothes can be as much of an art as patterning, draping, or designing. A talented designer can look at a stock garment and see a world of possibilities. The ability to see the patterned waistcoat in the Renaissance tunic can keep your costs way down. If a show is going to be pulled, the designer will generally go through the stock before she does the renderings.

One of the most valuable kinds of stock that a theater can have is hats and shoes, because both are expensive to buy and shoes cannot be built.

The great thing about pulled clothes is that they are already yours, so you can disassemble, dye, paint, cut, and distress them to your heart's content. You can even stitch them together with other clothes, if you want. In this way, costume stocks keep turning over, year after year, providing season after season of *Mercutios*, *Blanches*, and *Mames*.

Fittings and Measurements

Very early in the production, the costume designer and her assistant will visit the actors to get measurements. This is more conveniently done at the first read-through, when the designer might also display the costume renderings. Measurement sessions can be a little nerve-racking for actors, especially those who battle their weight, but designers are firmly professional about taking measurements and it is usually over quickly. If you are an actor being measured, just stand still and let them do their thing. It is perfectly acceptable to ask that your measurements be taken in a private space.

Depending on the costume, an actor may have anywhere from one to five fittings, not counting the initial measurement session. The first one usually involves a costume that is not quite finished. Don't freak out if trim is missing, if the color is too bright, or if it doesn't fit you correctly. You are in the middle of an ongoing construction process and lots of things are going to change.

You are also, however, a member of the team that is creating this costume, so you should feel free to share information and make respectful requests. The shop wants to know how the costume fits you, so take the time in the fitting to move around with it on. Stretch your arms and legs out as you will onstage. If your character walks or sits, you should do that in the fitting, after first warning the crew. You don't want to find out the hard way

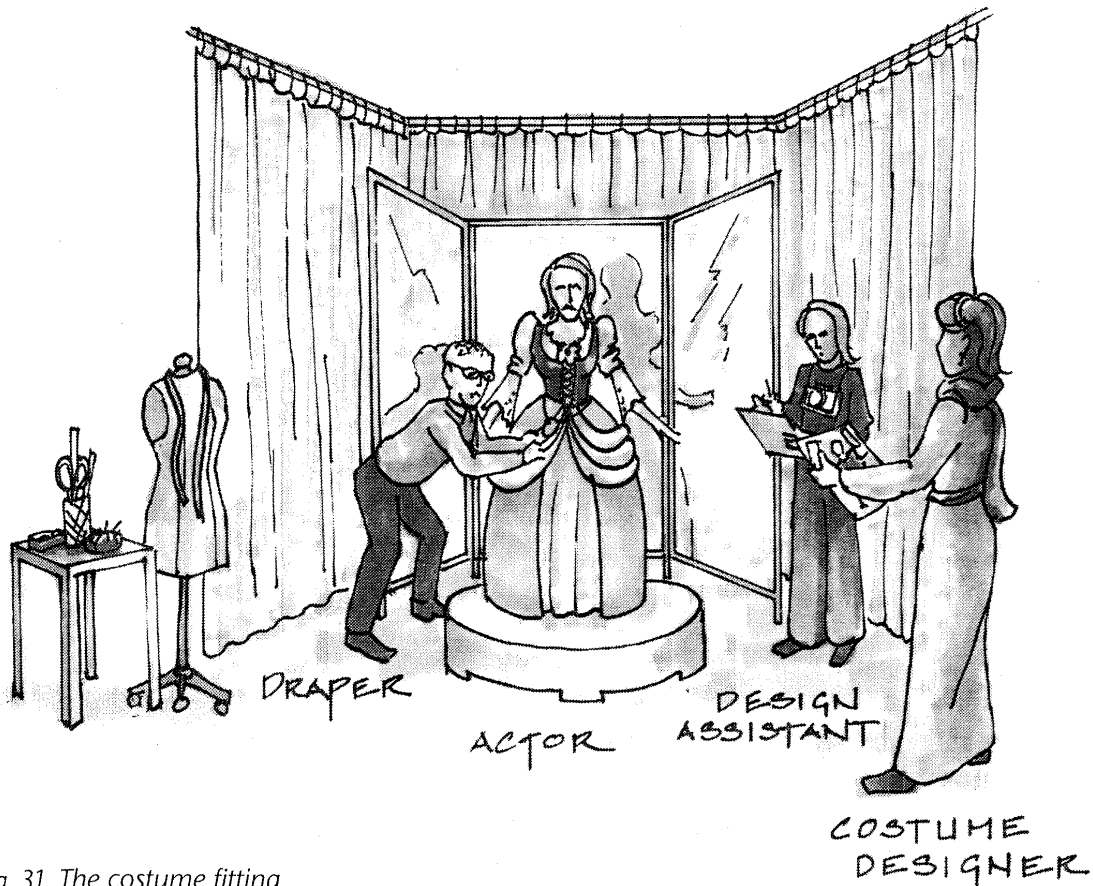


Fig. 31. The costume fitting

that there is a pin stuck in the butt of those pants. Let them know if the costume is binding you anywhere and if it is comfortable. The time for this conversation is *NOW*, not at dress rehearsal. It's a good idea to take a look at the costume rendering during the fitting, as the garment you are wearing might not resemble it yet.

One conversation that seems to take place a lot during the fitting starts with the actor saying "I wouldn't wear this!" First of all, remember, *YOU* are not wearing it; your character is. Second, remember that this design was agreed on between the designer and the director, so if you disagree, it might be because you have a different concept of the character than the director does. Ask respectful questions of the designer if you don't understand her choices, but serious disagreements should be taken to the director, not the designer.

Actors should also remember that the shop has a lot of fittings to get through, so try to keep the process moving.

Fabric Augmentation

Once the costume is built, the shop isn't finished. Besides attaching trim and fasteners, the costume artisans often augment the fabric by dyeing, painting, distressing, or otherwise texturing it.

Dyeing and painting both involve putting color onto the costume. Fabric dye actually seeps into the threads of the fabric and permanently colors it. Dyes and dyeing technique vary depending on what kind of fabric is being treated, so, if you are interested, get one of the many books on dyeing as a guide. Many dyes are hazardous to work with as well, so pay attention to safety warnings. Paint sits on the surface, which gives the costume more vibrant color but makes it less washable. Sometimes a costume is too bright on stage, so it must be dipped in a lightly brewed tea to “take it down.”

Distressing is a general term that simply means to make a costume look older and more beat up. Costumers might grind dirt into it, wash it repeatedly, rough it up with rocks, slash it, or otherwise make it look like it’s been through hard times.

Dealing with Hair

The first piece of advice I can give any actor is to forget about having a memorable hairstyle. The first thing they’re going to do is make you cut it. Men, keep your hair a neutral length. Forget about dreadlocks, ponytails, shelves, mohawks, or any other unusual style. Insisting on keeping a style like that will shorten your list of possible roles considerably. Women may keep their hair long or short, but stay away from funky colors and braids. Musicians may (and should) ignore everything I just said.

If you are going to need a wig, remember that wigs come in synthetic and human hair. Synthetic wigs usually look more fake and are harder to style, but they cost much less. Human hair, however, can be a good long-term investment because it can be styled over and over for years to come. Above all, don’t put human hair wigs on stage with synthetic. One will call the lie on the other. (The same goes for fur, by the way.) Any wig looks like a wig when it first comes out of the box, so they all have to be styled before they are ready for the stage.

One Final Note

For many actors, the most important person in the theater is their dresser and/or their makeup person. Like a lot of things in the costume area, this is an intimate relationship, dealing with issues of body, appearance, and ego. One longtime actress told me, “The dresser is either my enemy or my best friend.” If you are an actor, recognize that this person is here to help you, and deserves your respect. If you are a dresser or a makeup artist, remember that it ain’t gonna be you out there doing your thing in front of hundreds of people. Acting is hard.