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**How to Apply Basic Makeup for the Stage**

by[**Angela Mitchell**](https://www.thoughtco.com/angela-mitchell-bio-2638364)

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While larger groups or organizations will include a stage makeup artist, if you're performing for a smaller group or venue, it's not unusual for you to be expected to do your own makeup. In some cases, a [makeup artist](https://www.thoughtco.com/professional-stage-makeup-artist-advice-2713152) may 'design' the look for your production, and you will then recreate that look on an ongoing basis for performance.

Either way, it's essential to learn the art of applying stage makeup and to be able to [do so skillfully](https://www.thoughtco.com/stage-makeup-mistakes-to-avoid-2638644), and in service to the character, you're playing. It's also important to use real, professional stage makeup created for the purpose. Popular [brands](https://www.thoughtco.com/top-stage-makeup-vendors-and-suppliers-2638629) include Ben Nye, Mehron, and Kryolan.

A Step-By-Step Guide to Applying Basic Stage Makeup

1. Wash your face thoroughly, taking extra care to exfoliate. Follow with a toner, and moisturize afterward to create a clean, smooth base for your makeup.
2. Apply your foundation in a color that both matches and evens out your skin tone. For reddish complexions, choose a foundation with a slight golden or yellow undertone. However, even for warmer complexions, remember that the stage lights will tend to wash out or add a 'colder' effect to colors, so go warmer in tone wherever you can to counteract this (unless the character you're playing is meant to be wan, sickly or ghostly, in which case, stick with cold, pale tones!).
3. Use a sponge or foundation brush to apply your base, for more even coverage. Make sure to blend evenly into the hairline, at temples, and slightly below the jawline. Take extra care that your jawline color blends naturally into your neck -- there's nothing more distracting than someone whose face contrasts starkly with a neck that's a completely different color.
4. Stage lighting tends to 'flatten' a face and remove definition. Add contour, character, and definition to your face using a darker cream. Go darker for whatever you want to 'recede' or hollow on your face. Enhance cheekbones with color that starts just below the cheekbone itself, and which is concentrated in the 'hollow.' Start the color at the point in your cheek that is slightly outside the center of your eye, then back on each side.
5. Reduce plumpness and strengthen your jawline by adding color in a direct, subtle line of shadow from chin to the bottom edge of each side of your jaw. Add shadow to the eyes by using cream along the curve of the socket.
6. For a wide-eyed, open look, add highlights using pale cream colors to the center of the lids and browbones.
7. Line the eyes with a thin, firm line above the upper lashes, and with a thinner line below the lower ones. Widen and deepen the line from the center of the eye as it sweeps outward on each side. For dramatic or colorful roles, use black, thick lines. For men, younger performers, or those seeking a more natural look, use browns, experimenting with shades to emphasize the eye without looking overdone. Carefully extend your eyeliner up and outward beyond the edge of your eye. If you do this properly, when the eye is open wide, this line merges with the line of your lashes, simply adding a subtle lift and openness to the eye.
8. Emphasize the eye sockets with more shadow, as needed, as well. Use liberal mascara and/or false eyelashes, as desired.
9. Draw natural, firm brows with a high arch (a good arch on the brow really frames the face).
10. Line the mouth with a firm, dark line that enhances the natural shape of your mouth. Don't go overboard here -- the object isn't to create a completely different mouth shape but to strengthen what you have naturally. Use a color that's in keeping with your character -- a lighter one for the men, or in the women, for a more natural or innocent character, and a darker deeper tone for a femme fatale or more dramatic character.
11. Powder your entire face thoroughly. It will 'set' your makeup and provide a more naturalistic finish. Reapply powder as needed throughout the show.
12. In dress rehearsals, get feedback on your makeup from house level, to see how it plays, and tweak as needed for more or less boldness in your application.
13. After the show, remove your makeup no matter how tired you are, for the health of your skin (not to mention your pillowcase!). Use a cream or oil-based makeup remover on the eyes (not soap), and a good cleanser on your face.
14. Use an astringent or toner on a pad or cotton swab to fully remove any last traces of makeup. Finish with a good moisturizer.
15. You now have two choices: Get some rest, or start all over again by applying your everyday makeup so you can go back out.

Tips

1. When playing to small venues, go for just slight exaggeration -- don't overdo it. For larger venues, go with a slightly darker foundation, and more exaggerated lines.
2. Meanwhile, if you're playing at a small venue or an intimate three-quarter round, keep your makeup fairly subtle and 'street' worthy.
3. Use real stage makeup, real greasepaint. Yes, it's oily and thick-feeling. But it's the only thing that will stand up to the heat of the lights and the stress of performance. Water-based makeups will fade and run quickly under the lights.
4. If you're playing younger, use contour makeup skillfully to make your upper eyelids rounder. Open up the eyes with liner, and emphasize the apples of the cheeks, not the hollows. If you are playing a gaunt, old, or frail character, be sure to shadow and contour the hollows at temples, eye sockets, cheekbones, and jawline, as well as the lines on either side of the nose from nose to mouth.

# Theatrical Makeup

By Elizabeth McLafferty

Thousands of years ago, people in many parts of the world discovered that powdered pigments mixed into a base of wax or grease could be used to create striking effects of personal adornment and transformation. The survival of that practice is reflected in a common term for theatrical makeup, "grease-paint." Select types or styles of makeup were often used for special occasions, which could include going to war, celebrating stages of life, and religious festivals. The latter often included performative aspects, such as dance and reenactments of mythical events. Modern theatrical makeup therefore is heir to a very ancient performance tradition.

## Ancient Theater Traditions

Some ancient theatrical traditions have relied on masks for the creation of visual characters; others have relied on makeup for the same purpose. In Asia, for example, one can point to the masked theater of Java and the elaborately made-up Kathakali dance theater of southwestern India, or the masked religious dances of Tibet and the strikingly masklike makeup of the Peking Opera and related theatrical forms in China. In Japan, the Noh drama is masked, while Kabuki drama employs extravagant makeup.

## Stage Makeup

Ancient Greek theater was masked, but later European theater usually used stage makeup to create characters, heighten facial features, and compensate for the effects of stage lighting. (The Italian Commedia del'Arte, which continued to employ masks, was an important exception.) Until well into the twentieth century, performers were expected to do their own makeup, as they were expected to supply their own stage costumes. The professional theatrical makeup artist is a modern phenomenon, as is the theatrical costume designer.

### Purpose

Theatrical makeup is inseparable from the act of performance itself. The aim of theatrical makeup is to delineate and enhance the role of a character and to give performers an additional tool for conveying the characters being performed. Stage makeup is often used to create visual stereotypes or clichés that will be readily understood by the audience. Stage makeup is usually much more colorful and graphic than ordinary cosmetic makeup. When viewed closely, it can seem excessive and exaggerated, but it works when the performer is on stage being seen at a distance by the audience. Theatrical makeup itself is also heavier, more dense, and more strongly colored than ordinary cosmetics, and it is often produced in the form of lipstick-like waxy crayons or pencils. For many performers, the act of putting on makeup is an important part of the ritual of preparing for a performance; it allows the performer to move psychologically into the role of the character as the makeup is being applied.

## Modern Makeup Artists

Makeup artists are employed today in a variety of roles, and they often specialize in, for example, theatrical makeup, cinema makeup, fashion photography and runway makeup, or special effects. Regardless of specialty, they typically require years of training and practice to perfect their skills. Special effects makeup is particularly prominent in the world of film, but has also played an important role in the success of many popular Broadway productions, such as Jekyll and Hydeand Beauty and the Beast. In the film trilogy The Lord of the Rings, the prosthetic feet worn by the hobbits were made by a team of special effects makeup artists. Hundreds of pairs were made, as a new pair had to be worn daily by each actor in a hobbit role. In executing such assignments, makeup artists have to draw on skills in sculpture and other plastic arts as well as in the use of cosmetics.

## Establishing a Character

Whether in the dramatic makeup of a horror film or the powerful aesthetic appeal of the unique makeup employed by the Cirque du Soleil, makeup plays an important part in establishing the characterization and impact of a performed role. Baz Luhrmann's successful films of Romeo and Juliet and Moulin Rouge, and his stage production of La Bohême, owed a significant part of their theatricality and audience appeal to his production team's careful use of makeup techniques that evoked a period style. As these examples indicate, by the early twenty-first century makeup in different theatrical and fashion genres began to cross previously rigid barriers. The world of film, especially in special effects, has had a profound impact on the development of new techniques of stage makeup, and today theatrical makeup shows up regularly on fashion catwalks as well. Recent fashion shows by Dior and Givenchy, for example, have been notable for their strong sense of theater. Fashion makeup artists have begun to borrow liberally from traditional stage makeup techniques to create striking new designs that help to showcase the fashions on display. Meanwhile, theatrical makeup is enriched by new developments in film, fashion photography, and other media.