

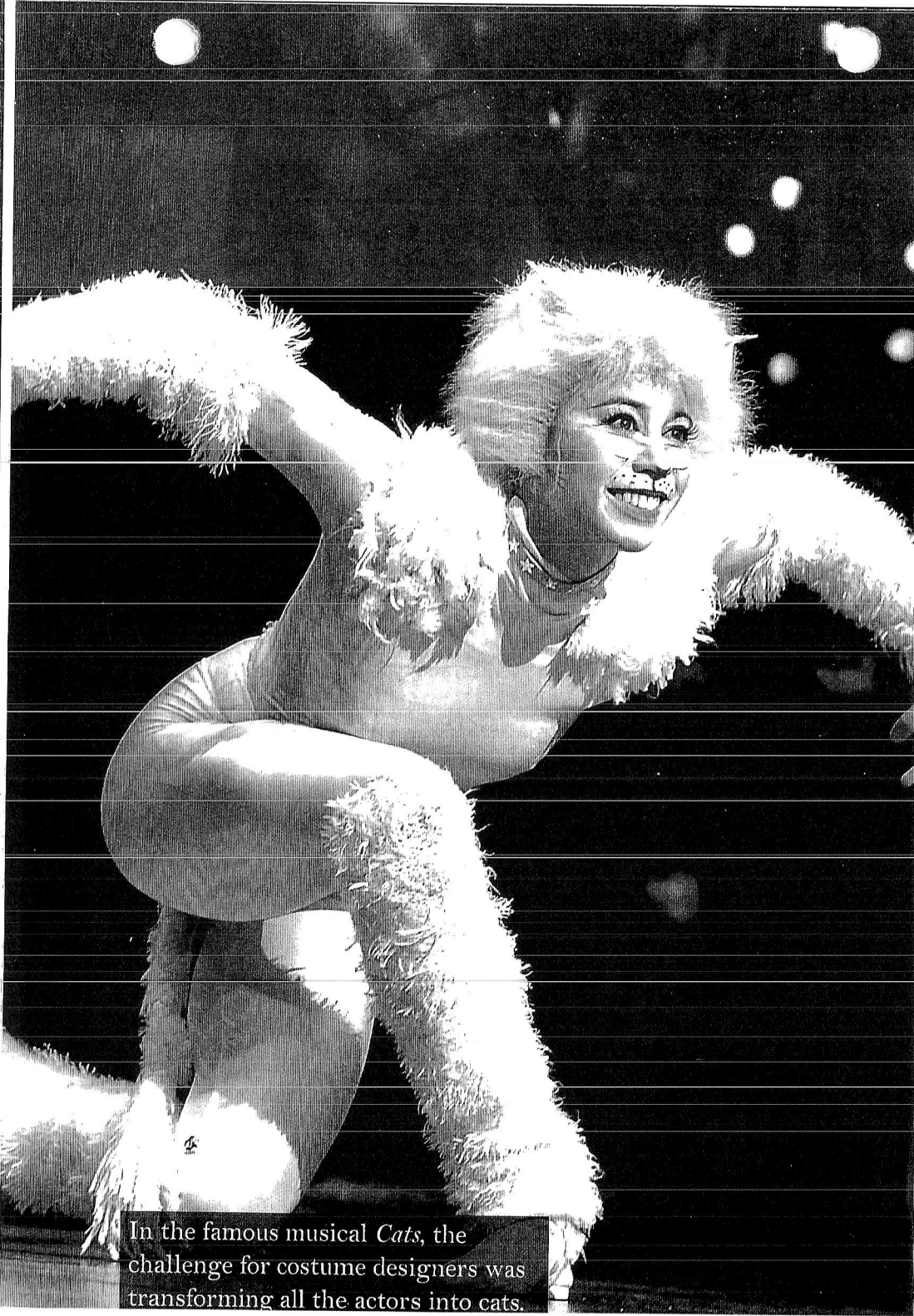
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# HAVING WHAT IT TAKES

**T**he curtain goes up and the action begins. The audience sits back to relax, enjoy, and be entertained. Meanwhile, the people onstage and the people backstage have been working at a frenzied pace designing, rehearsing, and collaborating. Besides actors learning lines and taking stage directions, theater troupes also prepare scenery, lighting, sound, props, and costumes. The costumes? Costumes are not created simply by operating a sewing machine. Costume designers must interact with every part of the production and employ a variety of skills and techniques. Costume designers interact with stage managers, set designers, sound and lighting engineers, and the actors themselves to get a clear idea of their responsibilities to the production.

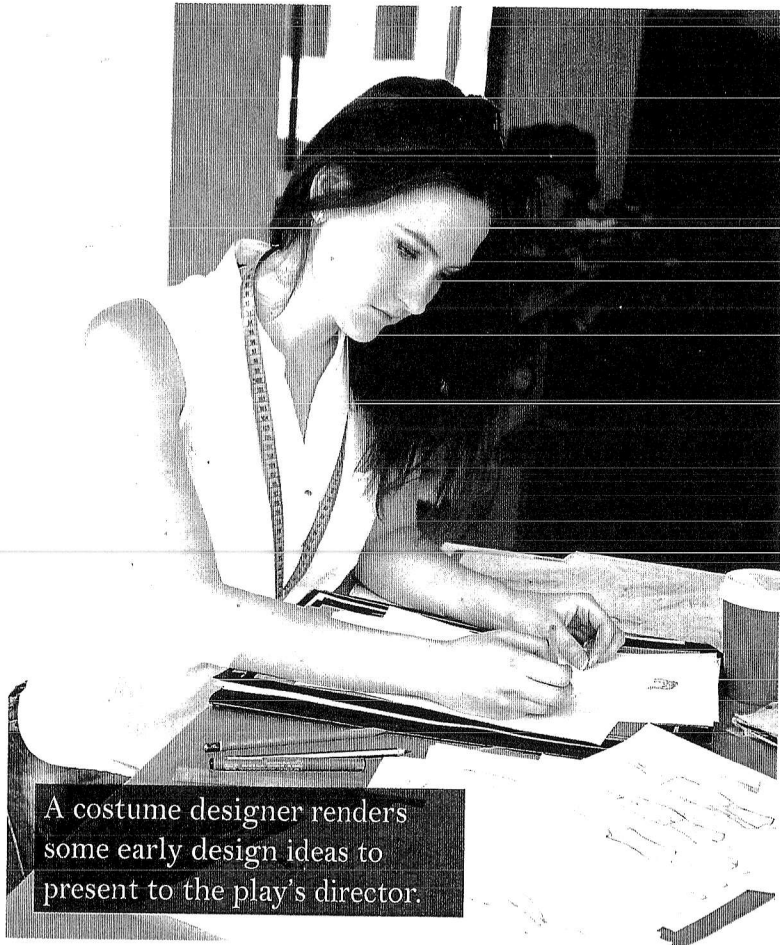
## Vision

Costume designers require many skills and talents to be successful. Foremost, costume designers must be capable of vision, or understanding the big picture. On the other hand, costume designers must also be capable of carrying out the smallest details.



In the famous musical *Cats*, the challenge for costume designers was transforming all the actors into cats.

What natural talents do people have that can lead them to understand the scope of the role of a costume designer? People are attracted to the job in order to explore their interests in many fields, such as drawing, fashion design, drama, **textiles**, jewelry making, sewing, and more. Not every person considering taking on the job of costume designer needs to be an expert in every aspect of the role, but it is important for each to develop a thorough knowledge of the fundamentals.



A costume designer renders some early design ideas to present to the play's director.

## Communication

Costume designers must have good communication skills. They need to be very familiar with the script and be able to grasp the essence of the characters in order to communicate with the other theater members involved in technical production. Costume designers begin by absorbing the workings of the production—sets, scripts, characters, lighting, and so on. Once the costume designer has studied the actors and the production needs, he or she must have the verbal, as well as technical, skills to communicate design ideas clearly.

What skills are useful in communicating costume designs? There are numerous technical skills involved in costume design, but starting with a basic appreciation for theater history, literature, music, and dance is the foundation for communicating costume design with others. Sharing knowledge and the enjoyment of the theater arts enables all members of the troupe to better interact.

Costume designers also need to show leadership ability. In most productions, the costume designer will manage a team. Sometimes, there is a costume assistant and/or a group of volunteers and interns. In other situations, there may be many departments that a costume designer will oversee: the costume shop, where the costumes are made; the wardrobe department, which keeps inventory of the costumes, prepares them for the actors backstage, and repairs, cleans, and stores the costumes; and sometimes hair and makeup stylists.

## Rendering

For a costume designer, a basic skill is the ability to draw, or render, an idea or concept. **Rendering** is not an exact reproduction of the costume but rather an interpretation of the costume. Many costume designers make use of design software, such as Adobe Photoshop, Corel Draw, or software created specifically for costume or fashion designers. But there are just as many costume designers who prefer to sketch their designs by hand, using colored pencil or watercolor. Some designers use a combination of skills—sketching by hand and digital drawing. Many also sketch their designs and then scan them into a design program, allowing them to quickly make changes to things such as color or fabric **texture**.

Design renderings are not detailed drawings but rather sketches that suggest how a costume or garment will fit or how it will look as the character moves about. While many designers draw figures well, some do not, but that does not put them at a major disadvantage. For those who do not opt for computerized drawing, many use body outline sheets, called **croquis**. Croquis templates come in a variety of body shapes, positions, and angles.

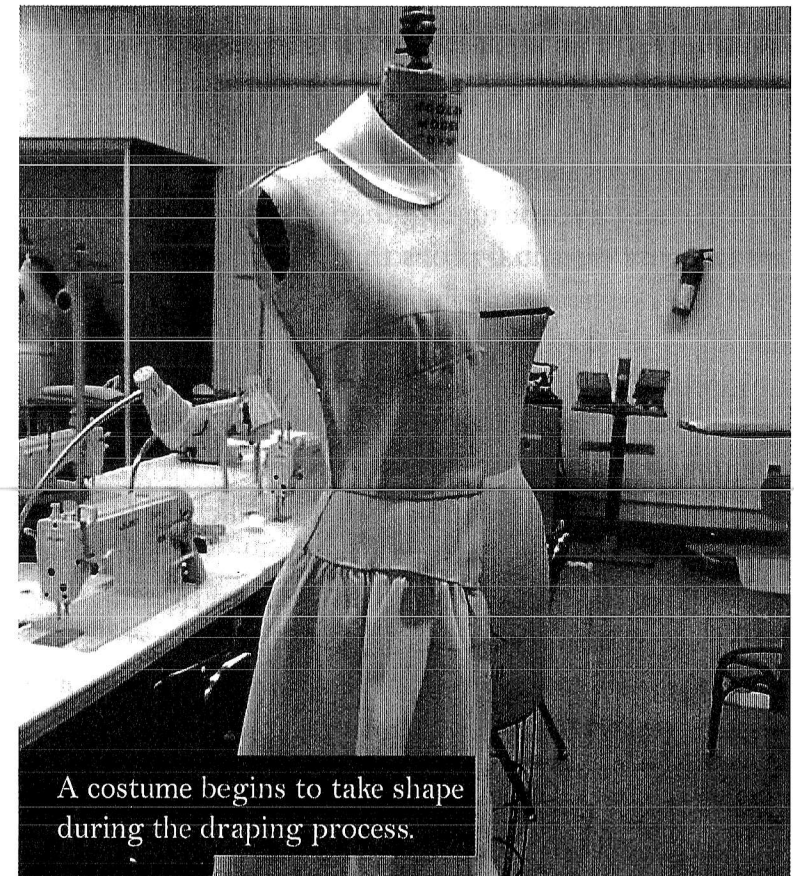
## Crafting the Costume

After the design and rendering stage, costume designers draw on their crafting skills. Designers draft and cut out patterns, machine stitch, hand stitch, paint and dye fabric, tailor, glue, and embellish their garments. They also fashion hats and other

headpieces, such as masks, helmets, or wigs.

Sometimes a costume requires specially designed shoes or other footwear. Many fantasy and science fiction productions call for specialized additions, such as wings, horns, spines, or tails. Costume designers also design and fabricate jewelry.

A key skill to develop is **draping**. Draping uses inexpensive fabric, such as muslin. After drawing the pattern, the costumer cuts it out in sections using the muslin. The muslin pattern pieces are then pinned onto a dressmaker's dummy to form an example of the shape and style of the garment.



A costume begins to take shape during the draping process.



## Other Skills

Besides having the skills to create and make art, a costume designer needs to have the ability to organize. Theater work is often very hectic, and a different deadline seems to loom each day. A costume designer has to know how to schedule costume and wardrobe staff (if there is a staff), director's meetings, actors' fittings, shopping excursions, vendors' calls, and more, all the while making sure there is an adequate amount of time for actual design work.

Record keeping is another organizational task that needs to be done with concise detail. Designers keep files that contain information on how the costumes are constructed, the materials used, and how to care for and store costumes. Designers have to keep track of each individual costume—when it is worn, how it is worn, and by whom, together with any accessories, jewelry, and personal props that go with the clothes. Costume designers also record where the costume and its accessories are stored and where they will be located backstage during the performance. Every item must be carefully labeled and put into inventory. Many scenes call for groups of people or crowds, and there is individual paperwork for each of those costumes and costume changes as well. Although scheduling record keeping may seem too time consuming in the course of a busy day, many different people—costume and wardrobe staff, the director, and the actors—will rely on the information.

Near the top of any list of skills needed by a costume designer is the ability to work with a specific, and usually a very tight, budget. Managing money is

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a major responsibility. Nearly all costume decisions require budget considerations. Should this costume be made or rented? Can a less costly fabric be used? Is it possible to add or take away accessories in order to make a costume appear different in another scene, or is a new costume necessary? How much of the budget should be set aside to pay for any unexpected or last minute costume needs? Expecting the unexpected is a very necessary skill. Finding solutions and being flexible are musts, as is being able to work well under pressure. This pressure comes not only from deadlines but from the needs of the other members of the theater company.

## Research

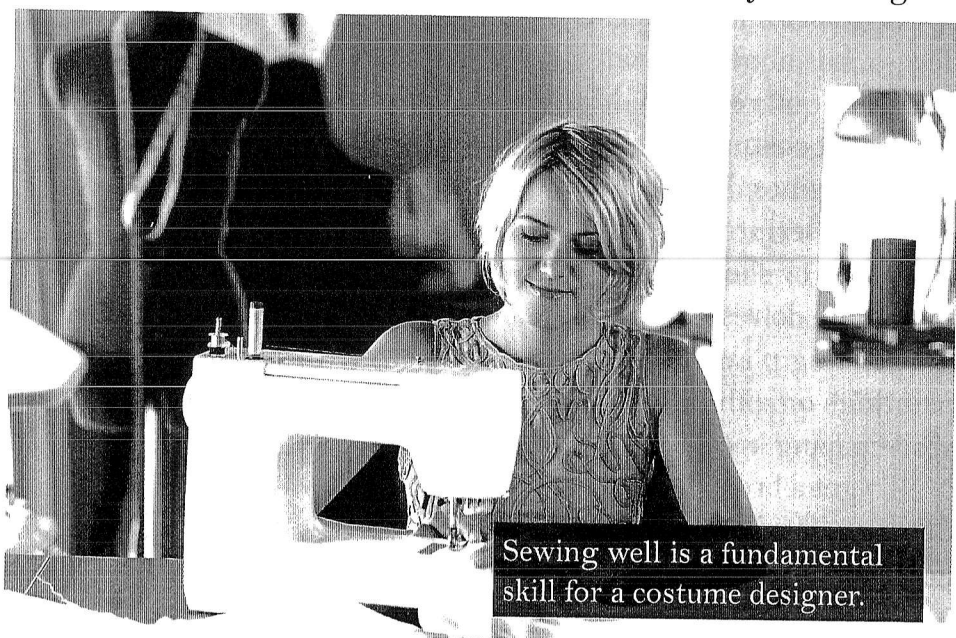
Research skills are essential to designing and developing costumes. Designing, rendering, and crafting costumes are the outward display of costume design, but none of it can happen without serious time spent on research. Many begin their research by looking at costume books and theater and film books and magazines. Very often the costume designer is given the script in the early part of the production so that he or she has the time to study the script, think, and do research. A valuable form of research is attending plays and movies, as well as viewing paintings on exhibit in museums and galleries, all the while paying special attention to the costuming.

To get a broad background of costuming, check out illustrated books about historical eras, other cultures, and special dress styles. Some examples include:

- Ancient societies, such as Greek, Mayan, or Egyptian
- Ethnic dress, such as West African, Peruvian, Hindu, Native American, Polynesian, or Inuit
- Historic, such as Shakespearean, Roaring Twenties, Chinese, or Persian
- Special groups, such as military, religious, or fantasy figures

## Practice

Practice in making costumes is the best way to decide whether or not costume design is a good fit for you. Drawing and sketching develops rendering skills. It is always a good idea to carry around a sketch pad or notebook. Spend a little time each day sketching.



Sewing well is a fundamental skill for a costume designer.

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Scroll through books and magazines for interesting figures or garments to copy. Given extra time, such as on weekends, try to take some time drawing in more detail and using colored pencils or watercolors. Understanding how colors work together is key for a costume designer.

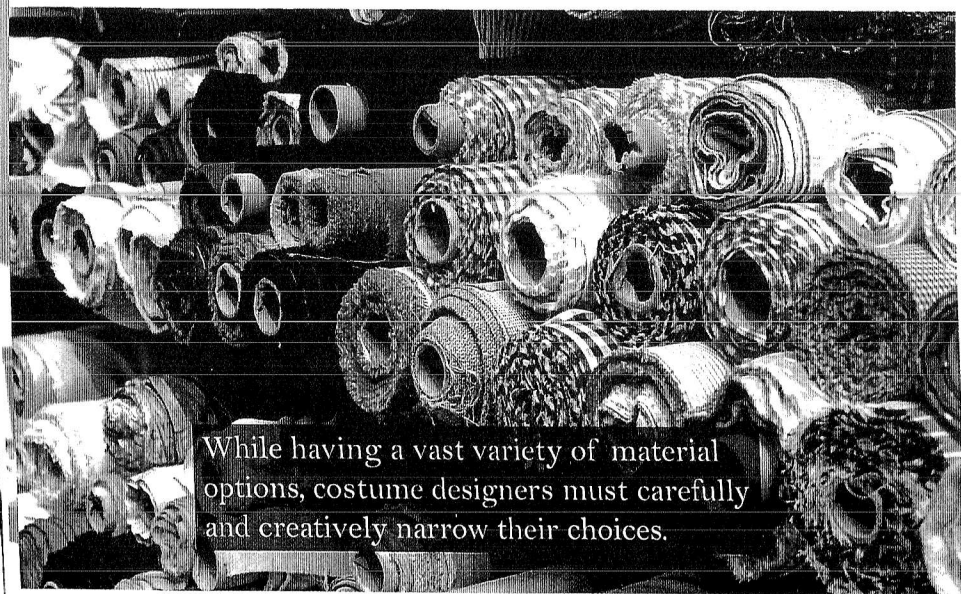
There are many how-to craft books on patternmaking, hat making, and jewelry making. There are books that teach the art of sewing, from machine sewing elaborate ball gowns or superhero costumes to smaller tasks such as making button holes or stitching on fringe. There is no need to spend a lot of money buying new fabric and **trim** when practicing patternmaking and sewing. Shop at thrift stores and buy used clothes, sheets, bedcovers, or curtains to cut up and reuse.

Through practice, many people find they are attracted to a certain style or skill. Some may find that tailoring men's clothing is satisfying, others may prefer historical costumes. Some people discover they enjoy fabric finishing. There are many craft books and magazines that focus on textiles. Painting, dyeing, and otherwise surface treating (such as **distressing** a fabric to make it look old) require a lot of steps and take a lot of practice.

After designing and constructing a few costumes from scratch, choose a play with a minimal amount of characters and costume changes and try to design costumes for all the characters in the play. The job of a costume designer is to create an overall impression, and the best way to practice doing so is designing a collection of costumes. Costumes in a play should relate to one another, by being either coordinated or dramatically in contrast.

## Extra Activities

Most high schools have art classes, and many community programs offer classes to the public in drawing, sewing, and jewelry making. Artists often teach private drawing classes. Many sewing stores, fabric shops, and arts and craft shops also hold demonstrations and classes. One of the most entertaining but time consuming and exhausting parts of the costume designer's job is shopping. Shopping might seem easy, but actually, it can be a challenge. To experience how shopping plays its important role, make a plan to create a few costumes for a play and see what items can be found that might be useful, or could be altered to be useful. It is not necessary to buy anything on these shopping excursions, but visiting department stores, specialty clothing shops, small boutiques, and thrift stores, and taking notes or snapping photos is a good way



While having a vast variety of material options, costume designers must carefully and creatively narrow their choices.

to practice. Examine how garments are made and what details are interesting. Consider different ways the garments could be dyed, painted, altered, decorated, or broken down into usable sections. Be sure to take notes and try making quick sketches while at the store. Good costume designers do not copy directly from other designers' work, even if they are designing for the same play. However, costume designers are inspired by each other's work, which is why looking at books, magazines, and the internet, or attending plays and seeing movies, is very helpful.

Visit arts and crafts shops and fabric stores often. It is important to become familiar with the tools of the trade, such as needle sizes and types; different types of thread, cording, and yarn; measuring tools such as hem rulers and measuring tapes; sewing machine attachments; and other sewing notions—beads, sequins, padding, elastic, zippers, snaps, magnets, and buttons. Get to know different types of sewing machines—machines that do basic stitches, sergers, or high-end computerized machines that can do dozens and dozens of stitch types.

If the high school has a drama department, becoming part of the technical crew and doing costume design and construction would be fun and beneficial. There are also many community theaters that would appreciate the services of someone willing to help with costumes, sewing, and wardrobe. Some larger cities have theater troupes that offer internships. They often offer little or no pay, but they are nonetheless valuable and provide enormous on-the-job learning opportunities, besides being a rewarding experience.