



Backstage, the costume and wardrobe staff must create order out of chaos.

REALITY CHECK

There is likely no costume designer anywhere who is not wildly enthusiastic about his or her job. That is not to say that there is not a downside to costume designing. "Costume design isn't all glamour and frippery and shopping expeditions," says costume designer Deborah Hopper. In fact, many days can be mundane and decidedly unglamorous, such as waiting forever in line at a department store trying to return all the garments that did not work out, or being faced with a roomful of dirty rental costumes that must be quickly cleaned and examined before shipping back. As costume designer Vin Burnham puts it, "The 'slog' element is all part and parcel of the job. ... The good thing is, every day will be different. Take the rough with the smooth."

Under the Radar

"The work of a costume designer is backbreaking, never ending and, with the exception of awards season, usually uncelebrated," says costume designer Cherise Luter. Costume designers often go unrecognized, in comparison with the attention given

to actors, directors, and producers. Oddly, many well-known costume designers prefer to have their work go unnoticed. Edith Head once said, "My motto is that the audience should notice the actors, not the clothes." Costume designer Tyler Kinney of Boston agrees that costume designers and their work often get overlooked. He says, "The director and the set designer will always be mentioned, and it is 50-50, I would say, as to whether the costume designer is mentioned. I never know if that's a good thing; I take it most of the time as a good thing, because my main job as a costume designer is to make the appropriate choices and not to distract from the language or the story telling, but to enhance it. Sometimes, if my work slips under the radar, I will take that as a job well done." Although many say an audience should not be distracted from the story by the costumes, it can nonetheless be upsetting to work so hard and yet go unnoticed.

Budget

People are attracted to costume design in order to express their creative and artistic talents. However, being creative is not the whole story, and in many ways costume design is a very practical job. A lively imagination is a necessary skill, of course, but so is being able to manage a budget and stick to a schedule. By virtue of being in a creative atmosphere and working with other creative people, it is wise to be patient and flexible. Costume designers all seem to say that nothing ever happens when it is supposed to and things change all the time. One of the biggest problems with unpredictability is having to work with a tight budget.

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While there are numerous large and well-funded theater companies where costume designers' budgets are more generous, most high school and community theater companies operate with very tight budgets. When producers reduce small budgets even more, it is often the costume designer's budget that is one of the first to get cut. After all, rights fees for the plays can't be changed, and costs for the printing of programs, tickets, and promotional items are fixed.

Leaving actors or other inexperienced people in charge of costumes can lead to some costuming disasters. Sometimes when the budget is cut back, theater companies try to save money by hiring a costume designer at the last minute, giving the designer no time to absorb the script or get to know the characters well before going to work. "A costume designer's responsibilities in pre-production are so much more than most people," says director Raz Cunningham. As costume designer Patricia Dane points out, "So what do you do if you have a limited budget? You do the best you can!"

Challenges

When the costume design calls for mind-boggling costumes, costume designers must use their technical abilities along with their imagination. Tony Award-winning costume designer William Ivey Long has amazed audiences as well as other costume designers for his work on a theater production of *Cinderella*. The script called for Cinderella to change from her dirty rags into her ball gown on stage with no blackout. The costume change in front of a live

audience was a huge challenge, and Ivey's ingenuity has left people marveling. He designed the costume so that the ball gown was intricately folded inside the dress of rags and Cinderella's hair and crown were hidden under her dirty scarf and wig. As the actress spun around under her fairy godmother's magic wand, she unwrapped and unfolded the ball gown hidden in her ragged dress. She pulled off the scarf and wig and stowed it under her ball gown, all in just the moments it took to spin around once. (To see the change, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R2SHKtRBYg>.)

All costume designers will face challenging costume requests, although high school productions will not require the sort of design challenges faced by Long. Costume designer Alyce Gilbert laments that young and/or new authors write plays that are more like movies, which means that scenes jump back and forth in time and more costume changes have to be done faster and more often. She says, "Years ago, actors had the time to go to their dressing rooms to change costumes between scenes. Now they cannot." Costume designer Long comments on the same challenge: "A quick change is four seconds. A fast change is, like, fifteen seconds. If you have a whole minute ... a minute is, like, glorious." To accomplish these rapid costume changes, costume designers must make use of what is known as **costume rigging**, using special hidden fasteners, wires, magnets, pull strings, and more. Many elaborate period costumes are designed to be walked into because rushing a gown over an actor's head will muss up hair and makeup. Likewise, costume designers have to design



Dressers help actors make quick costume changes.

pants to be walked into in order to avoid the actor's shoes getting stuck inside.

Let's All Get Along

"People are not always at their best under extreme pressure and stressful conditions or when they are exhausted. The work can sometimes push people to their limits, so you will doubtless encounter tempers and irrational behavior when the heat is on, usually when there is no time left and still mountains to move. It happens on every job," warns costume designer Vin Burnham.

The Crew

In the frantic final weeks and days of a production, there is always so much to do. Everyone tries to

do their part, but many have difficulty staying on schedule—especially if there are classes to go to and homework to be done. This only upsets someone else's schedule. What this means for a costume designer is that much of the last-minute details—sewing, embellishing, cleaning, repairing, altering, fitting, renting, shopping, and more—fall to him or her. Any student volunteering for the high school play should be prepared to do all of these tasks.

Many designers say that when it comes to schedule changes, the costume department is rarely accommodated. Fortunately, most costume designers know their way around the costume shop and wardrobe and can do many of the last-minute tasks themselves. In the weeks leading up to opening night, a costume designer can expect to put in very long hours, often working every day. School projects should be completed weeks before any scheduled performance. Designers must arrive before the actors to prepare for them and then leave after the actors to collect the costumes, inspect them for damage, repair them if necessary, clean them, check them against the inventory, and store them in their designated places for the next day.

Higher Ups

One of the more frustrating relationships costume designers can have is with producers and others who want to have a say in how the costumes should be designed. Very often this "design by committee" occurs in period productions. Everyone seems to have an opinion of what the historical costumes should

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look like, and producers and those providing money have a stake in the play's success. Many costume designers feel that each historic production should not be an exact recreation of one in the past but rather should have a fresh interpretation. Sometimes it is hard convincing the boss. Costume designers have a heavier workload with period productions. It is a challenge to engage modern theatergoers with plays set in the distant past. Costume designers make every effort to design period costumes that give an impression of the period, while making the costumes seem familiar enough that a present day audience can focus on the character and not the clothing.

Actors

Costume designers all have a favorite story about the challenges of working with actors. While some actors are appreciative and cooperative, some raise objections about the costume, and costume designers must either reach a compromise, concede, or as a last resort, call in the director to decide. Costume designers emphasize that they are making costumes for the character and not for the actor, meanwhile reassuring the actors that they do not want to dress them in uncomfortable, inappropriate, or ill-fitting clothes.

There are many ways actors can irk costume designers. For the most part, actors are considerate, but some are not. Some of their aggravating behaviors are:

- Showing up for fittings dirty or wearing strong perfume or cologne. Not only does it soil the

costume, but costume designers spend hours in very close proximity to an actor when fitting and modifying his or her costumes.

- Not showing up on time or scheduling enough time for fittings.
- Removing tags from purchased garments before final decisions can be made, preventing the costume designer from returning the item.
- Altering or changing a hairstyle or facial hair without consulting the costume designer.
- Insisting on wearing their own clothes.
- Waiting to take issue with a costume until the last minute, leaving the costume designer scrambling to adjust the costume.
- Not telling the costume designer in a timely fashion about any damage or malfunction of a costume—broken zipper, rip in seam, lost buttons, hem coming undone, etc.
- Not bothering to account for all their costumes, jewelry, props, and accessories before leaving for the night.
- Going straight to the director with a costume problem, rather than speaking with the costume designer first.
- Insisting a costume will not work before trying it on and letting the costume designer make an assessment.

Taking the Heat

Every actor has a “most embarrassing moment on stage,” and often it can be because of a costume malfunction. So, in effect, the costume designer has a “most embarrassing moment on stage” as well. One actor described her moment: “But, what happens when you look down, and realize something with your costume has gone wrong, terribly wrong? That magical moment turns into horror. Do you scream and run off stage?” Well, in this actor’s case, it was her skirt. She was in a production with other dancers, and her skirt kept falling down. Every time she moved her arms she surreptitiously tugged at her skirt. At last she thought she had the problem solved by stepping behind a taller actor and yanking her skirt up. But once she came offstage, she realized she had tucked the back of her skirt inside of her tights, and not only that, but her tights had a hole which grew larger with every step. Of course she was mortified. But so was the costume designer.



Every costume designer has had costume snafus, such as this ill-fitting crown.

A costume designer takes the fall for something such as this. Although the actor was embarrassed in front of a live audience, the costume designer cringed inside as she questioned herself: Did she inspect the garment for the right measurement? What about the hole in the stocking? Was that there before the performance? It is the responsibility of a costume designer to prevent costume disasters such as this incident. But the beauty of theater is that everyone really is in it together. Once the embarrassment falls away there are lessons learned. The actor learned that she was resourceful and the costume designer learned to be more thorough about fitting the costume to the actor and being more aware of the conditions of the costume. As they say in the performing arts, "It's not how you fall, it's how you get up."

Family and Friends

Actor Kerry Hishon describes life in the theater and how it affects her personal life: "Not least of all, are the long hours and time away from my family, the drama, the stress ... sometimes I wonder why on earth I do theatre. I have gone weeks at a time where I hardly see my husband, the house becomes a disaster area, I'm exhausted and I run out of clean clothes and fresh groceries. Yet despite all that, I still do theatre!"

The pace for a costume designer during a production is almost nonstop, especially as the final days draw near. During productions, costume designers and the rest of the cast and crew are dismayed at the lack of available time left over for family, friends, and social activities.

The Blues

When the curtain closes after the final call, everyone—actors, technicians, designers, directors, and all the members of the crew—feel an enormous letdown. The theater is empty and there is no reason to jump out of bed early the next morning. Cast and crew alike feel a melancholy after working so hard together, for so long, and with so much enthusiasm. They have bonded so closely during the play's production and then suddenly it all just ... stops.

Many people in the theater say that they are seriously depressed for some time after a play ends. It is a natural response to having lost something so vital and so involving. Many cast and crew members cope by recognizing the strategies that can help them. For costume designers, the weight of all the scheduling, designing, discussing, fabricating, shopping, renting, and tending to hundreds of details is now gone. The smart move is to take a deep breath and enjoy a sense of relief from all the responsibility. Some costume designers say they feel pangs of regret for costumes they think they may have made too hurriedly or were the wrong color, shape, or just did not suit the character well enough. People in the business say "relax"—the audience surely did not notice, especially for a high school show with a limited budget, and the costume designer certainly gave his or her all to the production. Loneliness is a big part of the postproduction blues. The costume designer is part of a group of people who worked very closely together and had formed a unique bond. The costume designer, through fittings and discussions about

costumes, spent many long hours with each cast member individually and worked side by side with the backstage crew.

Maintaining friendships with non-theater friends and seeking them out after the play is over helps reduce loneliness. Many theater companies wait to have a cast party for a week or two after the show closes and all the excitement (and the letdown) has settled. The cast party is a great way to share the ups and downs of the experience and find closure, all the while strengthening the bond with the "theater family." A cast party makes it easier for everybody to move on.

Theater Etiquette

People in the theater share a code of ethics, or theater etiquette. It is an essential survival tool to be courteous with people who work closely together under multiple deadlines and have different roles and individual responsibilities. The success of any production relies on the cast and crew showing respect for each other's talents, time schedules, work, and creativity. Some etiquette rules to follow:

- Be on time.
- Forego all social activities that interfere with the production schedule and personal workload.
- Always inform the director in advance of an important prior commitment.

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- Do not leave the theater without the director or someone in the costume or wardrobe department knowing.
 - Never criticize a cast or crew member.
 - Accept both praise and constructive criticism gracefully.
 - Take good care of stage properties and costume shop tools.
 - Refrain from saying anything that might be misconstrued as insulting when fitting an actor. (e.g., "Your legs are too short for these pants, we will have to hem them.")
 - Remember everyone has a schedule and do not interrupt or interfere with others' time management.
 - Limit socializing.
 - After watching rehearsals, give any costume notes to the actor, not just the director or wardrobe manager.
 - Always have a planner, sketchbook, and pencils at the ready.
 - Do not move or borrow props or tools.
 - Always be gracious.