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period _____

Dirty tricks

A guide to distressing clothing

BY KANDACE MCGOWAN

PEOPLE HAVE QUIRKS in their everyday clothing: an old spaghetti stain here, a frayed hem there. But too often, a character's costume onstage looks new and perfect, which can block the character's personality from shining through to the audience. Adding wear and tear to a costume is an easy way to take a production to the next level, and all it requires is a simple distressing kit with common ingredients.

The process of making a costume looked lived-in is called distressing. Many costumes (especially newly sewn ones) benefit from a quick distressing process. Students can learn a lot from the exercise, not only about costuming techniques but also about character development. To determine which costumes need work, it's necessary to analyze the context, resources, and quotidian habits of the characters who will be wearing them.

Dissecting the world of the play

Shows such as *Les Misérables*, *The Crucible*, or *Annie* have very specific worlds, and the costumes help define those worlds. In *Annie*, for example, the orphans are extremely poor and live in a dirty 1930s orphanage. Their costumes should reflect this. By distressing the costumes, the audience can comprehend the orphans' poverty at first glance.

Questions to consider: Are the characters people of means?

Would they have access to clean clothes or the ability to clean their clothes? Is there running water to rinse off a character's hands or face? Is the weather hot, meaning the characters might be sweaty?

What are the contextual conventions of appearances? What message do I, as the designer, want to send about the dirt and grunge in this world?

Kandace McGowan and her students distressed costumes for their 2015 Sehome High School production of *The Crucible*.

PHOTOS BY LAURALISE MCGOWAN

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What you'll need

A simple distressing kit can be created using the common, readily accessible materials listed below.

- Sandpaper
- Scissors, a meat tenderizer, or a rough blade
- Unsweetened tea
- Nylon stockings
- Cheap instant coffee
- Cinnamon, curry, and other dark-colored spices
- Shoe polish (the small tins)
- Baby oil
- Acrylic paint in browns, coppers, and greens
- Spray bottle
- Old rags
- Gloves

Generally, clothing made from natural fabrics, such as cotton, linen, leather, denim, or knits, can be distressed. Polyester, pleather, and other synthetic fabrics will not distress as well.



Not all grime is equal. It is important to consider what the characters are doing while wearing their clothes. In *The Crucible*, John Proctor is a farmer, and he says he spends all day seeding his fields. So, his boots and the hem of his pants should definitely be caked with mud. This is where character analysis gets fun: Look for small clues in the script, and talk with the actors about their character work. This will guide where and how you distress a character's clothing.

Questions to consider: What might make the clothing dirty — dirt, dust, sweat, or grass? Do the characters wear clothing that might get caught on something and rip? Do they regularly walk through muddy streets, causing their hemlines to get splashed? Might there be places where the clothing has been repaired or patched?

Just like real people, characters should have a relationship with the clothing they wear. Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* begins the play as a prisoner, and he clearly hates that uniform and what it represents. He wouldn't care if it had stains or dirt on it, and he wouldn't be able to clean it even if he wanted to. On the other hand, orphan Annie often dresses in an iconic red sweater, and, although she lives in a dirty place, she loves that sweater and tries to take care of it. Determining how characters feel about the clothes they wear will dictate the way they will get dirty (or not) during their daily lives.

Questions to consider: How old is the clothing, and how long has it been worn? Do the characters like their clothes and try to take care of them? Can they buy new clothes, or do they have to repair the clothes they have? Do they have the means and resources to make such repairs?

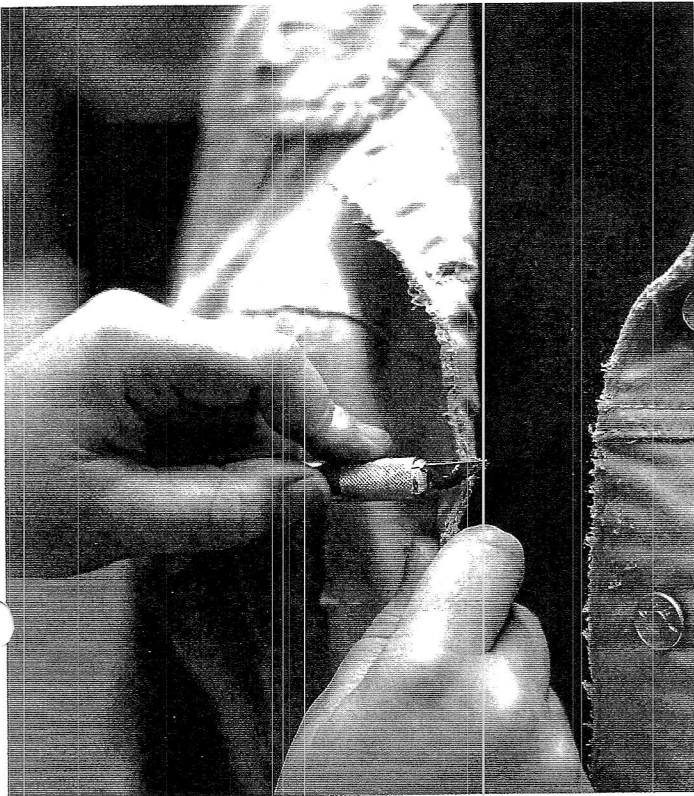
DIY distressing

Now that you've analyzed the play and understand the world in which your characters live, you're ready to begin distressing. These simple steps will give you beautifully be-smirched and worn-in results every time.

Shred it

Your goal here is to damage the fibers within the garment. As people wear clothing in their normal lives, the fibers of the fabric naturally begin to break down and stretch. This is what makes your favorite pair of jeans so comfortable. In distressing a costume, you want to speed that process along.

A simple way to make your garment look worn is to wash it in warm to hot water with heavy materials (like



After a few washes in hot water with heavy materials, use a hobby knife or other blade to shred the fibers of your garment.

towels or jeans) multiple times. You can also wash the garment with old sneakers or tennis balls. This will start to break down the fibers and make the garment look old and faded. One tip: Be careful of shrinkage. Read the garment's care instructions and, if necessary, either wash more times in cooler water or start with a larger size than you need. Make sure the clothing will still fit your actor.

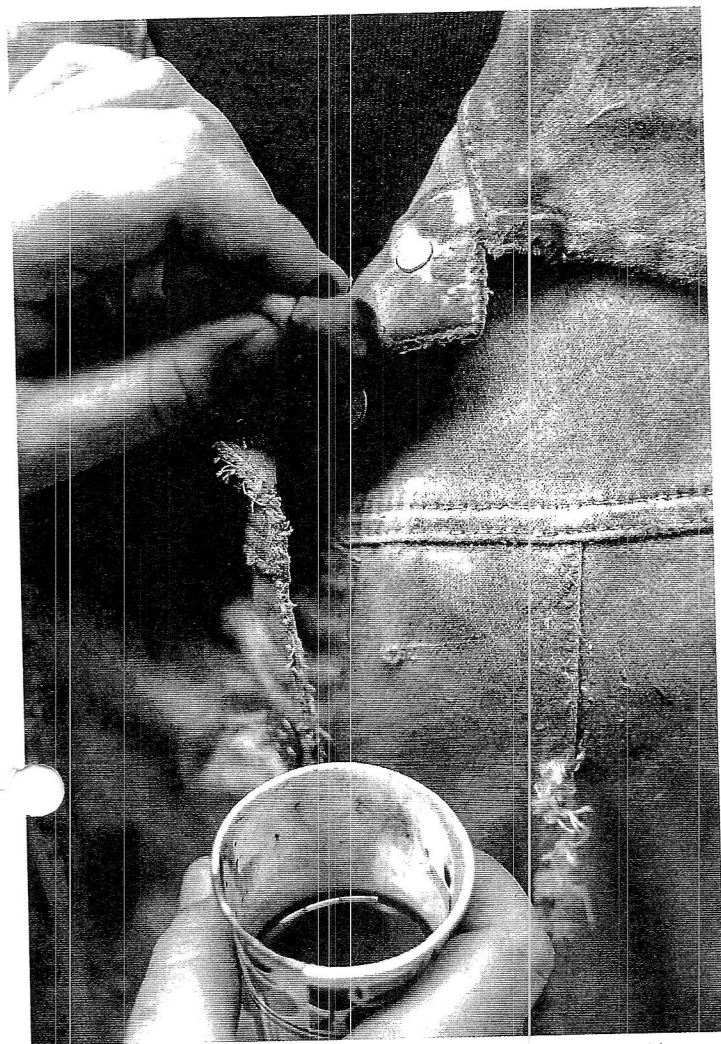
Next, use sharp objects to tear into the fabric. Try scissors, a razor blade, a big rock, or anything that will cause damage. Drag your tool across the garment in the areas that need to be worn. Pay special attention to hems or places where the fabric is stitched together. You want to destroy the fibers, so go ahead and use your strength. Don't cut anything with scissors directly, because the holes will look too tidy. Use a blunt tool to rip the fabric and shred the edges so that they fray. Feel free to get creative and find tools that work for you. Some people even drive their car over a costume to make it dirty.

A word of caution: Distressing looks unnatural when people place rips or dirt patches in random places that don't align with the authentic wear and tear of clothing. Consider how a garment can actually be torn or get dirty. Knees, elbows, hems, and sleeves are excellent choices. Go back to your character analysis to guide you.



Edges (including collars, seams, and the ends of sleeves) wear faster and should get more attention during the distressing process.

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A cup of diluted brown acrylic paint smeared across a garment with a rag can help complete the dirty look.

Make it dirty

Now, you want to add grime to the garment. If you have a bright white fabric, you can use unsweetened tea to dull it a sickly yellow color. You can dip the entire garment into a bucket of tea or just splash it. This is an optional first step that can create a foundation layer to build on.

To create dirt or mud, fill a nylon stocking with instant coffee and tie the end in a knot. Use it as a puff and hit the fabric with it, then smash it into the fabric using your hands or a rag. Smear spices like cinnamon or curry into hemlines and seams. If that isn't dark enough, you can use an old sock and shoe polish to add color. Feel free to experiment with a variety of ingredients to create the perfect type of dirt for you.

Next, mix brown acrylic paint and water in a cup. You want approximately 75 percent water and 25 percent paint. Use a rag to lightly smear the paint across the garment, again focusing on seams and edges. You can also mix a dark green color and dab it on knees and elbows to create grass stains.

If you want a character to look sweaty, dab baby oil onto areas where a character would naturally sweat. It will soak into the fabric and stain it, creating a gross, shiny look. Necks and armpits can get really dirty, so don't skimp on the baby oil.

The key is working in layers. Don't panic if it doesn't look perfect right away — keep shredding and staining until you like what you see. Remember to view your garment under stage lights while sitting in the audience to get a true feeling for what it will look like onstage.

Dry and set

Unlike Broadway productions, most high school shows only have a few performances. However, you still want your costume to last through the entire production. Use a hot hair dryer to set any paint and help it sink into the fabric. A clear coat of spray paint can also help set other ingredients



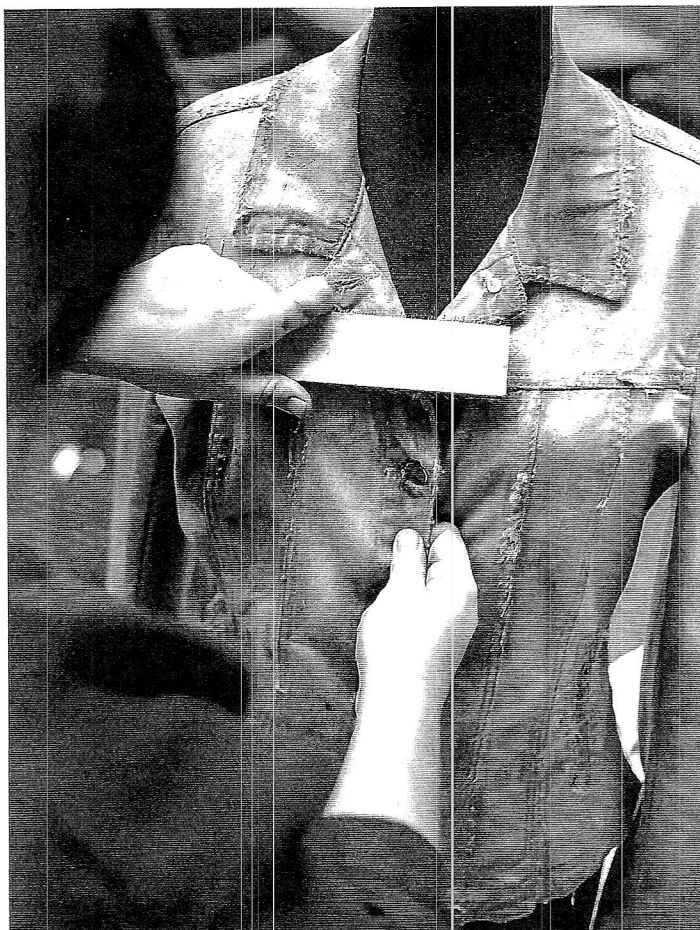
To help your grime set, use a hair dryer or even a coat of fabric-safe clear, gloss finish spray paint.

to ensure they won't rub off or disappear. Plan on having your actor wear an undershirt so that the garment stays fresh longer.

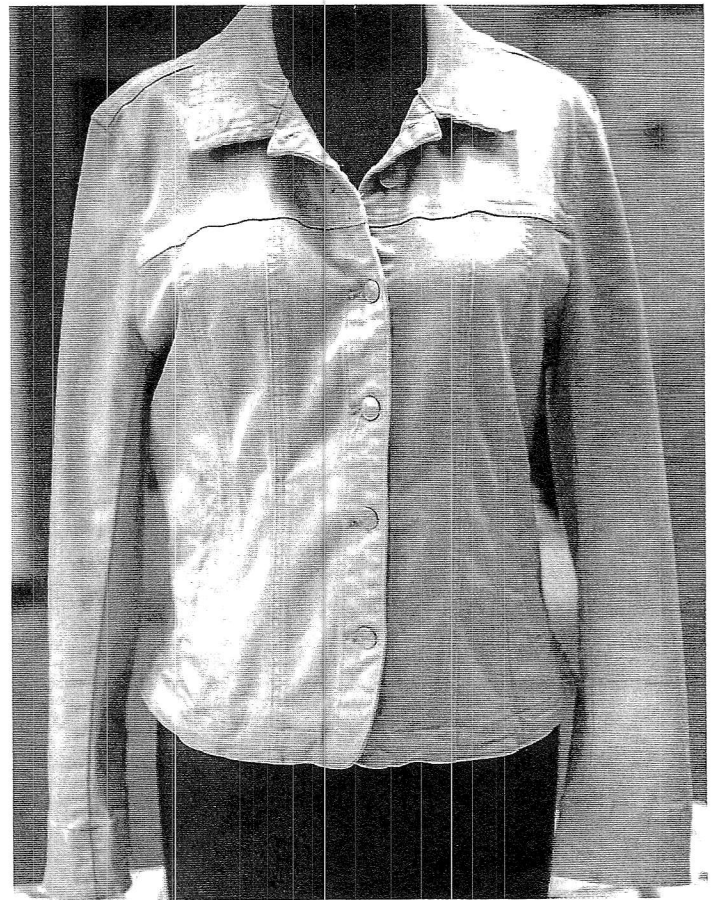
Sanding

The final stage is to sand the garment, which will grind the materials into the fabric and make it look more natural and balanced. Ideally, place the garment on a dress form or mannequin and pull downward on the fabric. You can also use a table.

Once you're finished, congratulations! You've just created a distressed garment that is ready for the stage. **T**



Use a sanding block to blend the effects.



These before-and-after shots (right) demonstrate the riches-to-rags effects of good garment distressing.