

COSTUME WORKSHOP IDEAS

By Katie Murphy

I don't know what age(s) you're looking at, but for the past 12 years I've costumed summer drama workshops for kids from ages 7 - 14. Here are some activities you can mull over.

If you can do a little make-up, almost all kids (especially the boys, who can be hard to engage) love applying fake blood and wounds, blackening their teeth, etc. You can cover basic make-up techniques and then do a little character work over the finished product. I've also found it extremely useful to teach older kids how to properly attach a wig and/or mustache (the sillier the better) in this class. Hey-- have them turn cartwheels, and the last one to have their wig fall off wins!

"Who am I" is a game played with a giant box of accessories and small costume pieces. Each member of the group creates a character from the box and the others have to make inferences about that character based on how they are dressed. This is akin to "playing dress-up" but, with guidance, it develops the concept of creating a character through costuming. You have to ask leading questions and make it clear whether or not you want them to copy characters from popular culture. The older the kids, the more subtle the costume pieces should be. You can get the conversation started by bringing in (or having them bring in) photos of some character "types."

"Quick change race" is fun for two or more teams of kids. One member of the team wears an overdressed costume and the object of the game is to be the fastest team to change them into a different over-dressed costume. It's great for teaching basic quick-change skills and all you need is a timer and some old clothes.

Out of frustration I developed "Hang it Up," which is another racing game. The kids compete to be the first to finish picking up a pile of clothes on the floor and hanging them up properly on the costume rack (you would not believe how many children I encounter who have no idea how to hang up a garment...some of them have never even worn a shirt that buttons up the front before!)

Making masks and simple hats are quick and creative projects. Animal masks are really fun, made from just about anything you have on hand. Whatever they are doing, I always have the kids draw their design first and then try to create it, as that reinforces how a costume designer works. If you have time, they can bring in research materials before they start to draw. It also reinforces the concept if they all draw characters from the same story (the biggest problem being that for every fairy tale you suggest, they will draw the Disney characters...I spend a lot of time explaining that there was a Cinderella before the one that wore the blue ball gown in the cartoon....) With hats, have them draw a design based on one of several simple shapes that you can help them make (cone, top-hat, crown, etc.) Older kids can make hats of felt or fleece (those silly "Cat in the Hat" style top hats are very popular these days--especially good project if some of them already know how to sew).

If you want to get older kids into some basic construction, vests are great. They are unisex and can be designed for just about any character (and some kids will actually end up wearing what they make, if it's cool enough). A simple, two-piece vest pattern teaches the concepts of how to size, cut, and sew, with only four short seams that can be sewn by hand. Embellishing and/or distressing the vest helps to continue the concept of creating a character through dress. You can also start with a finished thrift-store vest and have them embellish it -- faster and easier than trying to teach construction.