

COSTUMING FOR THE LONG HAUL

by Marie Anne Chiment, Stage Directions, February, 1999

It's one of the trickiest costume problems: designing costumes that will last a long time. How do you create costumes "for the long haul" -- for a repertory season, a long run, an extended tour, or annual production?

Here are some of the tricks I have learned from years of designing costumes for opera companies, theater festivals, and national touring companies. They involve effective planning, design, construction, and maintenance. Each component is important, but the first -- planning -- is absolutely essential.

Before you put pen to paper, try to find out as much as possible about the show's special needs. Here are questions to ask the producer and the members of the production team before you design. The answers to these questions will profoundly influence your design decisions. They also will save you and your crews endless time, money, and headaches.

ASK THE PRODUCER:

1. How long is the run of the show and how many performances per week?
2. How big is the costume budget?
3. Is there a separate wardrobe crew and budget for maintaining the costumes during the run of the show?
4. Does the theater have its own washer/dryer and dry cleaning facility or will the laundry need to be sent out?
5. If the show is touring, what is the laundry situation in each of the theaters on the tour?
6. Will the original cast members stay with the show for the entire length of the run or will they be replaced with new actors at some point?
7. If a new actor takes over for an injured cast member, what costume does he or she wear? In a non-union situation the understudy may wear the injured cast member's costume. But in many union situations, actors may not wear each other's costumes. Complete duplicates of the costumes and wigs may be needed for the understudies.

ASK THE DIRECTOR/CHOREOGRAPHER:

1. How much physical action will there be in the show? Is there stage combat or clowning? Extreme movement means added perspiration and added wear and tear on the costumes.
2. Will there be any quick costume changes? A smart designer will "design in" special rigging for any costume that requires a quick change. A very smart designer will be sure the rigging is simple to operate and as foolproof as possible. Try to design the costume so the performer can put it on and take it off without the help of a dresser.
3. Is there any dancing in the show? Make sure you understand the type of dance movements the choreographer has in mind before designing. Have the choreographer demonstrate the movements while you watch. If there is partnering, find out what kind of lifts and spins will be done so you can design a costume that will not get in the way or pose a danger to either dance partner.
4. Are there any special needs such a blood appearing on a costume or actors getting wet? Consider these needs early on. Duplicate costumes or special maintenance may be needed.

ASK THE SCENIC DESIGNER:

1. What is the floor treatment for the show? Very smooth surfaces can cause slipping unless dance rubber is glued to the soles of the shoes. Very rough surfaces can wear out even heavy dance rubber in a matter of weeks. If the choreographer has any movements that require dancers to spin on their bottoms or slide in a reclining position, a rough floor texture could seriously damage the costume.
2. Is the stage raked? If so, how steeply? Are there any stairs? You may wish to re-think stiletto heels if the stage is raked or the set design includes steep stairways.
3. Where are the entryways the actors will use to gain access to the stage? How big are the openings? You'd hate to find out at dress rehearsal that your beautiful hoop skirt couldn't fit through the door.

THE BREAKDOWN:

Once you understand your show's needs, you can make your costume breakdown chart, either by hand or as a computer spreadsheet. List all the characters in the show down the left side of the page. List every act and scene across the top from left to right as headings for columns. Remember to include any intermissions. By drawing in the horizontal and vertical lines to each row and column you end up with a graph.

Go through the script slowly, carefully noting with an x or slash in each box where a character appears in a scene. It takes some time and concentration but eventually you will have a visual representation of the entire show.

Now further refine your chart. Going character by character, put a "1" for the first time each character appears onstage. This represents their first costume. If the character only has one costume for the whole show you may go on to the next character. Every time a character changes costume, put a new number in the box. Count up the number of costumes worn by each character and put the total in the far right column of their row. You now know how many costumes each character wears in the show. Then add all the numbers in the right hand column and you'll have the grand total of how many costumes will be needed for the production.

This is a visual representation of where and when costume changes occur, who has the most changes, and how many costumes are in the show. I make multiple copies of my breakdowns and give them to the director, stage manager, costume shop, and wardrobe crew.

Having a clear, concise costume breakdown of the entire show on the road has two big benefits. It helps the dressers know where and when they are needed to assist with costume changes. It also saves your wardrobe master countless hours of explaining the workings of the show to each new set of dressers.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION:

I like to have an actor's headshot and measurements handy when I design. Knowing an actor's distinctive characteristics -- a bald head, or a tall, lanky build -- can inspire your design and be a jumping-off point. If you have no way of knowing ahead of time who will wear your costume, then design for flexibility.

I often consider construction even as I am in the process of designing a costume. But long haul costuming requires special construction considerations. First, it is important to buy quality fabric. Always buy yarn dyed or color fast fabrics; this means the color has been chemically bonded to the threads during the manufacturing process and should not wash out or bleed. Fabric that will be washed and washed hundreds of times needs durability. If the color isn't locked into the fabric properly, it will wash out over time. It is always better to find a fabric that is the color you want on the bolt rather than trying to dye it yourself.

When you cut out your pattern pieces be sure to leave plenty of seam allowance. Whenever possible leave at least one and a half inches to allow for letting out the garment. If you cut a bodice with one-and-a-half inch allowances at the center front seam, both side seams, and the center back seam, the combined allowance would give you enough fabric to enlarge the bodice by almost 12 inches. This is enough to accommodate most alteration needs.

Another trick is to lace your costume together. On a woman's period peasant bodice, for instance, you could stitch only the underarm seams and use grommets and laces to close up the center front and center back. If the woman gains weight, you can lace her a little looser. If she loses weight, just tighten up the lacings and the bodice will still fit. This technique works well for men's leather vests and doublets as well. Lacings can be used under the arms, at the center back seam, the center front seam, or any combination of seams.

Closings other than lacings include zippers, buttons, hooks and eyes, and Velcro. Use the strongest, sturdiest closures you can afford. Never use plastic zippers as they break and jam; use heavy metal zippers instead. They may not look as elegant as plastic or invisible zippers, but they are tough and reliable and will last throughout many performances. Buy buttons in bulk and send the extras on the road with the tour. Do not use fabric-covered buttons! They break down during cleaning and are hard to replace. Choose closures that are practical to use and easy to replace.

When using hooks and eyes down the back of a costume, sew the hooks on the right side and eyes or bars on the left side. Most dressers are right-handed and it is easier for them to hook right over left. The "male" or hooked side of Velcro is quite scratchy and always should be sewn onto a costume so it faces away from the actor's body. Sew the "female" -- or velour -- side of the Velcro onto the overlapping part of the costume so its soft pile gets pushed into the hooks when the costume is closed.

Just as you must leave plenty of seam allowance for expanding width, it is important to cut the pattern pieces with plenty of extra hem allowance to allow for extra length. A pair of trousers can fit actors of varying heights if there is enough hem allowance. With a very short actor hem the trousers with a deep hem and turn up a cuff. Let both the cuff and hem down as far as possible and the same trousers fit a much taller man. Cut skirts and petticoats with plenty of seam allowance. A good trick is to add a series of sewn tucks on the lower half of the skirt, which not only hides potential skirt length, but also gives the skirt weight and adds a decorative element.

Once your costume is assembled and fits your performer, double stitch all seams. With the wear and tear the costume will suffer during the run, a single row of stitches seems sadly insufficient. Crotch seams and shoulder seams are especially prone to "blowout" at the least opportune moment onstage. A few rows of stitching can avoid embarrassment.

Line and/or interline every costume. While the outer, or fashion, fabric is what the audience sees, it must be supported and protected from strain and perspiration if it is going to survive long use. The interlining is a layer of lightweight, absorbent fabric sewn or fused flat to the reverse side of the fashion fabric. Pre-washed muslin or a comparable fabric of cotton/polyester blend is the best, least expensive choice for interlining most costumes. This layer provides strength and absorbs perspiration before it can ruin the outer fabric.

The lining is similar to the interlining but rather than being sewn directly to the outer fabric is constructed separately and inserted into the garment after it is completed. Cut the lining slightly bigger than the garment to provide ease and compensate for shrinkage. Linings are attached to the garment at hem edges and special points of stress. Adding a lining and an interlining to a costume may take more time during the construction phase, but they will increase the life of the costume and cut down considerably on maintenance.

MAINTAINING THE COSTUMES:

Machine-washable fabric is the easiest to maintain. If you have a long-running show and a small staff, design costumes that can be washed and dried by machine. Hand washing is tedious and hand-washable costumes can get thrown in the machine anyway.

Dry cleaning is necessary for some types of costumes. Wool suits and heavily-constructed period costumes cannot be thrown in with the rest of the wash. Be sure these garments are lined so they can withstand repeated dry cleanings. Dry cleaning can get expensive and good service may not always be easy to find. You can stretch the amount of time between dry cleanings up to two months if you follow a weekly regimen of airing the costumes daily and disinfecting them four times a week.

To disinfect the costumes use a can of Lysol, a plastic spray bottle, and a bottle of vodka. Put the vodka in the spray bottle and use it to lightly mist the neck and armpit area of each costume every Monday and Friday before airing the costume thoroughly. Repeat the process every Wednesday and Saturday with the Lysol spray. Both the Lysol and the vodka will disinfect the costume and keep it fresh between dry cleanings. You may have an interesting time, however, explaining the need for vodka to your company manager.

FOOTWEAR:

Footwear can be a nightmare for long running show. Be sure every pair of shoes has dance rubber professionally applied to the soles and be sure the women's heels are braced. Dance rubber comes in three weights: light, medium, and heavy. The light-weight rubber is very thin and is meant for evening shoes. The heavy rubber is appropriate for heavily-soled boots. Most shoes, especially dance shoes, should be rubbered with medium weight Cat's Paw rubber.

If the stage surface is smooth, the dance rubber should last about six weeks. If the stage surface is rough or textured, and the performers dance, the rubber may need to be replaced as often as every three weeks, so it becomes another maintenance issue. The price charged by cobblers to "dance rubber" a pair of shoes can vary from \$6 to \$20 a pair. Make friends with your local cobbler and see if you can work out a deal based on bulk pricing.

A consistent maintenance effort, along with effective planning, design, and construction, will ensure that costumes meet more than the immediate production needs, but will last over the long haul.