

CREATING A PERIOD SILHOUETTE

By Marie Anne Chiment, Stage Directions Magazine, July 2003

Named for its originator, Frenchman, Etienne de Silhouette, the art of creating "silhouettes" was all the rage during the 18th and 19th centuries. These portraits involved a process by which candlelight cast the sitter's shadow onto a sheet of paper. The artist would trace the shadow onto black paper, cut it out and paste it to a light-colored background.

As a costume designer, I use the idea of silhouette as a tool whenever I design period costumes. Each period has its own special signature silhouette. I've learned over many years of creating period costumes that a solid understanding of a period's silhouette not only aids in the design and construction of costumes but can also save time, money and frustration along the way.



Figure A: (from left to right) *Le Fetes D'Hebe* (ballet), 1750; *The House Of The Seven Gables* (opera), 1850; *Grease* (musical), 1950

To begin, let's look at three examples of period costumes from productions I have designed. In Figure A we see line drawings of three couples from three different centuries. The first couple from the opera/ballet *Les Fetes D'Hebe*, represents costumes worn in 1750. The second couple, dressed in costumes from 1850, is from the opera *The House of the Seven Gables*. The final couple, dressed in late 1950s costumes that I designed, rock 'n' rolled in the national tour of the musical *Grease*. Each couple represents a young man and a young woman as they might dress for an afternoon social gathering. The line drawings include details of hairstyle, dress, accessories, and shoes.

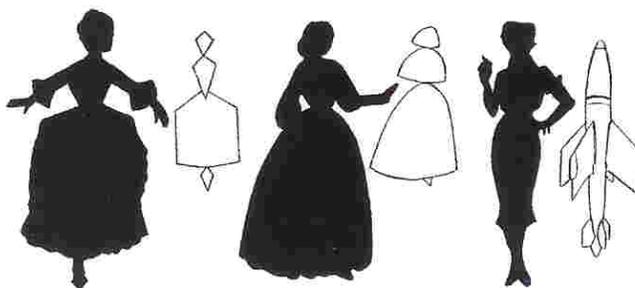


Figure B: (from left to right) 1750, 1850, 1950

Next, let's move our attention to Figure B, a silhouette version of our three ladies. If you block out the details and look at just their costumes' silhouettes, you will see the differences come into sharp focus. Freed from the distraction of detail, you can now recognize the key elements that create each period's signature silhouette.

To simplify the idea of period silhouette further, I have reduced each lady's costume to a series of simple shapes. I begin by noting the size and shape of the head, the torso, the hips and the feet. Where is the costume at its widest? At its most narrow? Pay close attention to where on the body the greatest mass occurs.

Notice how the torso of the 1750 woman looks like an ice-cream cone balances on a basket, while the 1850 woman resembles a series of graduated bells or drooping flowers. Another fun way to deconstruct period silhouettes is by comparing it to man-made items from the period's architecture or technology. Let's compare our 1950s gal with a rocket of the period. Can you see a similarity between her hips and the rocket's body? The sharp points of her collar and cuffs echo the rocket's wings. By looking at period costumes in this new way, we can train our eye and gain a better understanding of both the garment and its period.

Once we have a design that makes sense on paper, it is time to begin the process of turning our 2D silhouette into a 3d costume. You can

think of your efforts so far as creating costumes for a paper doll. Now you must imagine your paper doll coming alive in three dimensions and rising from the page. In order to realize the wonderful signature silhouettes we discovered in Figure B, we must devise a way to expand and contract the actor's body. It is time to bring on the foundation garments.

Foundation garments such as corsets, petticoats and bustles are worn under the costume, and may not seem important on first consideration. Unless your production has an "underwear scene" written into the script, chances are that the audience will never actually see these secret silhouette enhancers. For this reason (and the fact that they can be uncomfortable), some designers try to do without foundation garments altogether. This is a mistake. A period costume without its foundation garment is like beautiful birthday cake icing without the all-important cake underneath for support.



Figure C: (from left to right) 1750, 1850, 1950

Figure C shows what foundation garments will support our three ladies in style. Notice how the 1750 corset does, indeed, look like an ice-cream cone, just as the 1850 corset has all the languorous curves of a flower. The 1950 "bullet bra" reinforces the idea of the sharp, pointed nose cone of the '50s rocket.

Moving down the body we see the wide hips on our 1750 woman are the result of her wearing a pannier ("basket") ties at her waist. Ladies of the period not only wore these canvas contraptions under their petticoats, but often used them to carry small items like their sewing. Our 1850 lass wears a crinoline or petticoat of stiffened tiers of ruffles to support the bell shape of her skirt. Our 1950s gal minimizes her waist and smoothes her hips with a formfitting girdle and a one-piece fitted slip.

Having scrutinized the signature silhouette from neck to ankle, let's move on to the head and feet. Hairstyles and shoes are an obvious tip-off to period. Your gown may be picture-perfect, but if the hair and shoes are wrong, the entire costume looks off-balance.

When designing the hair to complement your period ensemble, pay close attention to the size and shape of period hairstyles. Where does the hair lie close to the scalp and where does it stand away? In Figure A, notice how the largest mass of hair on our 1750s lady is gathered up high at the center back of her head, whereas our 1850s woman carries her hair mass low at the nape of her neck. The bouffant "do" on our 1950s chick creates a kind of bubble around her head.

Shoes and boots can be a fun way to give your costume that special signature silhouette. As you review your footwear research, make note of the shape of the shoe's toe and heel. When shopping for your show, keep your eyes open for shoes and boots that match or resemble your period's footwear. Shoe manufacturers put out an enormous selection of shoes each year, and many styles can be adapted to serve as period footwear. Remember that a leather-soled shoe with a heel will feel and move differently than a rubber-soled tennis shoe. Be sure your actors are rehearsing in the correct shoe. This can add a subtle dimension to actors' comfort in developing their roles.

Getting your cast members to wear the appropriate foundation garments, shoes and wigs isn't always easy. I suggest you invite your actors to be a part of the process. Share your period research with the cast. Show them paintings and photos of the period as well as the silhouette exercises you have done in preparation for the production. Most importantly, have shoes, hats and foundation garments available for cast members through the rehearsal period. The longer your actors have to familiarize themselves with the look and feel of their period clothing, the smoother the transition to dress rehearsals will be. You may find that the same actors who complain about the restrictions of period clothing, corsets and shoes will later thank you for providing them with the key that helped them to "find" their characters. With practice you will be able to use period silhouette to bring any bygone era to life.