

Wear it today, change it tomorrow

Building alterability into costumes

BY LAURIE L. KURUTZ

IT'S ALWAYS FRUSTRATING when you find the perfect-looking garment from your costume stock, only to find that it is too small and can't be altered to fit

your actor. Often the only choice you have is to add yet another coat, pair of pants, hat, or other piece of clothing to your ever-lengthening list of "costumes

to build." Plus, you have to figure out how you can afford the additional material and labor—costs you would have saved if only the garment had been built with future alterability in mind. Now's the time to change your thinking and methods. With a few simple techniques, you can start building costumes for now *and* later.

Let's begin with a shift in your focus. We all know how easy it is to get caught up with the short-term frenzy of "I have to get this show done *now!*," sacrificing long-term benefits we might have gained if we had taken the time to think things through. My high school drama teacher used to say, "Why is there always enough time to do a task over, but there's never enough time to do it right the first time?" There *is* time—at least in regards to costuming—if you master the techniques I'm about to describe.

Seams on the sides

Whenever you begin planning the patterning and construction of each garment, always think about how you can add easy alterability. Usually this is accomplished by leaving large seam allowances in strategic places. Choosing *where* to put the larger seam allowances is key. It requires some careful thought. It might be tempting to simply let out the center back seam on a jacket pulled from costume stock, but that alteration merely changes the fit across the back of the garment. Additionally, this jeopardizes the "balance" of the garment—meaning that the fit and breadth of the garment's back is no longer in proportion to the front. For example, on many coats and jackets, even if the center back seam on the body can be let out, the collar usually does not have a center back seam to be let out as well. When this is the case, the newly altered center back seam must be curved in a radical arc back to

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the original seam line at the collar seam. This curved seam can create a “hunch-back” effect across the upper shoulder blade of the coat, which may not be the desired fit—unless the costume you’re altering is for Quasimodo.

A better approach to alterability is to do the majority of the letting out or taking in of a garment at the side seams. This approach retains the balance of the garment, letting the front and the back out equally. In planning the patterning and construction of any costume, make sure to include a side seam, even if its placement is not always historically accurate. The audience will rarely notice it, since the side seam is under the arm and hidden by the sleeve. Sacrificing a bit of historical accuracy is a small price to pay for building up your theatrical costume stock with easily alterable garments.

The amount of seam allowance to leave in a garment at the side seam depends on several things. Leaving a seam allowance of two inches on the front side seam and two inches on the back side seam will permit you to let out the entire garment a total of six inches. Here’s how that math works out: When cutting the garment, add a two-inch seam allowance on the front and back on both sides of the garment. To let out, re-sew both side seams with a half-inch seam allowance. This alteration lets out each side of the garment three inches, giving you the six-inch total for the entire garment.

Six inches is the maximum to let out a garment, otherwise you risk throwing the proportions out of balance. However, there are always variables to consider. For instance, if the garment is made of thick fabric, you can reduce the overall bulk by scaling back on the amount of seam allowance. Or, if it’s made of sheer fabric, you may want the seams to be as small and unnoticeable as possible. The goal is always to maintain the integrity of the garment, and have alterability as a benefit.

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ALL PHOTOS BY SARA WEINGUST



AN EXAMPLE: BUILDING ALTERABILITY INTO A DOUBLET COAT

The key to easy alterability is to make sure that the entire garment is alterable. If you have a side seam in the body of the garment to let out, you need to make sure the other parts of the garment are alterable at exactly the same position. A doublet is a coat-like garment worn in the Renaissance and Elizabethan eras. In the finished doublet worn by the actor on page 15, the garment has been made alterable at three side seam points: the body, the sleeve, and the waist peplum (the peplum is made of overlapping tabs of material at the doublet’s waist). Now, let’s examine in detail how to build alterability into the doublet.

THE SIDE SEAM

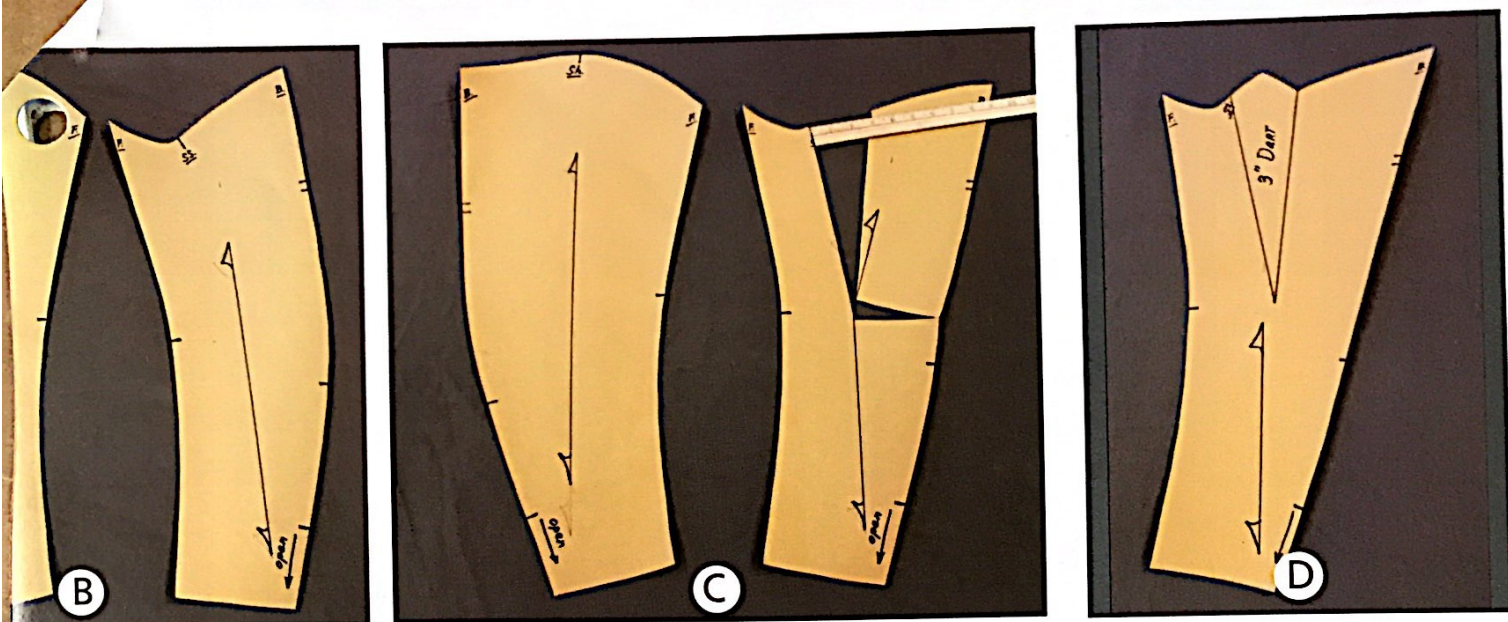
As you can see in photo A, this Elizabethan doublet has two-inch seam allowances at the side seam position on the body, or torso, which will allow it to be let out a total of six inches in circumference. The trick is to make sure that the sleeve and the waist peplum have the same amount of alterability at those very same side seam positions.

THE TWO-PIECE SLEEVE

When the sleeve is a historically accurate curved two-piece sleeve, much like a man’s jacket of today, there is no seam at the side seam position. In the patterns shown in photo B, the seams on a curved two-piece sleeve are at the front and back of the arm, not under the arm at the side seam position. When patterning the sleeve, you need to add alterability by adding a dart at the side seam position. I learned this method from British master tailor, R.I. Davis. Make the depth of this dart the same amount that the torso side seam can be let out—in this case, three inches.

Here are the three steps to creating the sleeve patterns:

1. To add the dart to the under-sleeve pattern, cut down the center of the pattern at the side seam position. As shown in photo C, cut from the armhole (the armhole) to the horizontal elbow line and then across the elbow line to the back of the under-sleeve pattern.



2. Pivot the back part of the sleeve open three inches at the armhole (see photo C). Trace off the new pattern, penciling in the newly created dart, and the grain line and notches. Remove the old pattern.

3. Close and cup the dart underlay, folding it towards the back seam, and blend the armhole seam line. Photo D shows how this pattern manipulation adds a dart at the side-seam position with a depth that is equal to the amount the doublet body can be let out.

Your sleeve can now be let out the same amount as your doublet body. This technique can be applied to any two-piece sleeve pattern.

THE DOUBLET PEPLUM

An Elizabethan doublet often has peplum tabs to finish the waist seam. If you have not planned for alterability at the side-seam position of the peplum tabs, when you let out the side seam of the doublet torso, you will end up with an unsightly gap in the peplum at the side seam. There is an easy way to prevent this gap.

When you pattern the peplum tabs, make the side front tab an extra three inches long. This matches the three inches the torso can be let out at the side seam. Sew the peplum tab onto the doublet waist, lapping this extra three inches under the next tab (see Photo E). When you let out the torso side seam, you can let out the peplum tab the same amount, thus eliminating any gap.

Once you get into the habit of incorporating these patterning techniques into your garment construction from the beginning of each project, you will start to build a stock of easily alterable costumes. Using these costume construction techniques will save you hours of labor on alterations in the future, as well as a considerable amount of money you can put towards other parts of your tight theatre department budget. And, unlike our ever-shrinking budgets, choosing how we build costumes is something we can alter.

