

Make it your own

Costuming an iconic show

BY E. SHURA POLLATSEK

SHOW ANY THEATRE lover a photo of a group of women in black-and-white, boldly patterned long dresses, sporting extravagant broad-brimmed hats, and they will immediately recognize *My Fair Lady*'s "Ascot Gavotte" number. Whether produced by a school, summer stock, or regional theatre, a well-known play can frequently be identified by the costumes alone. Often, the outfits are faithful imitations of the Broadway originals, albeit limited by budget and sewing skill. Mark in *Rent* is usually seen with a striped scarf, and the actors in *Cats* have pointed ears sculpted into fluffy wigs. For certain plays, some characters' costumes prove more iconic than others. Belle in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is rarely seen in styles other than a blue jumper and a yellow full-skirted ball gown, while the plate and napkin costumes are tackled in a variety of ways. These looks are so associated with these plays that it does not even occur to many directors that

producing a given work does not necessitate following its original visuals. Or while they realize the costume design is not part of the play, they feel the audience expects the show to look like previous versions.

Plagiarism and appropriate quoting

Quoting iconic designs is so common that people seldom question the propriety of doing so. When a theatre contracts with a publisher or leasing agent to perform a show, they are renting the right to use the work of the playwright (and lyricist and composer, for a musical), but permission to replicate the artistic choices made by the original design team is not generally part of the deal. Just as using a piece of music in a play, movie, or commercial calls for paying the songwriter, music publisher, and record company, a touring show that uses the designs that were created for Broadway must pay the costume designer. The show's producer owns the actual costumes, but the designer owns the artistic expression. These issues are not always clear cut. There is a moral dimension as well as a legal one, and there is a whole continuum between plagiarism and appropri-

ate quoting. A designer cannot own the right to dress Belle in yellow or Mark in a scarf. But if each actor in a production of *Cats* has their face painted copying the colors and brush strokes of the originals and wears wigs in the exact shape and style seen on Broadway, then that production is using the designs of Candace Carell and Paul Huntley.

All of this argues that costume designers should engage in their own creative process rather than copying the results of someone else's. They do, however, have the obligation to follow specific references in the script. Characters should wear clothing appropriate to the story and the setting. Any production of *The Sound of Music* will need to dress the Nazi soldiers according to the actual historical uniforms. The Pink Ladies in *Grease* would seem odd if they did not wear some pink. Any production of *Into the Woods* must contain the magic ingredients to reverse the witch's curse: "the cow as white as milk, the cape as red as blood, the hair as yellow as corn, the slipper as pure as gold." Some plays draw from source material that has a built-in visual. It would be hard for audiences to watch

Leaf Conebear in Western Kentucky University's production of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee wears a homemade, patchwork t-shirt.

MITCH WILSON

You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown without recognizing something of Charles Schulz's original creations, and in *Sunday in Park with George*, the performers need to become the colorful, nineteenth-century people in Georges Seurat's famous painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*.

Mining the script

Costume design is a balancing act. A play's clothing should reflect the characters and setting as well as the interpretation of the script developed by a particular group of actors, designers, and director. Costume designers begin their work by getting to know the characters. What kind of people are they? Where do they live? What do they desire? How do they change as the story unfolds? The costume designer combines creative visuals with the emotions and logic of the story—the goal should never be just to create an attractive picture. The costume designer chooses or creates clothing pieces that help tell the story and through colors, details, and textures elucidates the characters and their relationships to each other.

I just finished designing *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at Western Kentucky University, where I am associate professor of costume design. I had never seen the show before, and as usual when designing a production, I did not seek out images of prior productions. When discussing the character Leaf Coneybear, someone said, "Oh, is that the kid in the cape?" The show's dialogue does contain references to some of the clothing, such as the character Marcy Park being a Catholic school student, but the play's script does not mention a cape. That idea belongs to Jennifer Caprio, the costume designer for the Broadway version. I did put Marcy in a school uniform however, while a cape can be a wonderful choice for a dreamy kid who marches to his own drummer, I went back to the script and took

Leaf in another direction. One of the announcers in the show points out that "Mr. Coneybear makes his own clothing." The script also mentions that Mr. and Mrs. Coneybear have named their children Leaf, Pinecone, Landscape, and Marigold and that the children are home-schooled. I imagined that the parents were latter-day hippies with a large collection of funky vintage T-shirts that Leaf cut up and assembled (not too skillfully) into his own creation. I rounded out the outfit with baggy pajama-style shorts and colorful, mismatched socks worn with sandals.

The costume designer's dilemma is discovering when and how to reference prior productions, balancing the desire to satisfy the audience's expectations with the desire to create something unique. When I designed a production of the musical *Sweet Charity*, I broke my usual rules and watched the well-known movie starring Shirley MacLaine and researched the original Broadway show. I felt the audience would have these images in their minds, and while I didn't plan to quote anything, I felt that I should be aware of these expectations.

The movie's costume designer, Edith Head, and the original costume designer on Broadway, Irene Sharaff, both leave some very big shoes to fill. Head put MacLaine in a simple black dress and a red dress. To me, the black dress for Charity seemed to have more to do with the choreography than the character. Both the original production and the movie feature the choreography of Bob Fosse, who has a very distinctive movement style and favored accentuating it with black-clad dancers. While I mean no disrespect to the famous designers and choreographer, to me, black looks elegant and sophisticated—the opposite of Charity. She is a taxi dancer, but she is very sweet and optimistic, spending most of her time in a hopeful, but ill-fated, search for love. Red does seem appropriate for her character,

although perhaps too much of a cliché for a woman of questionable morals. Furthermore, the actress I was dressing had very pale skin and light blond hair, and I didn't think red would be a good color on her. I chose to put Charity in a bright pink dress, buoyant and flirty without being sleazy. Charity rarely leaves the stage, so to vary her look between scenes, I added a salmon-colored coat that she could easily put on by herself.

The original look

Even Broadway designers who create the "original look" often have to work around prior visuals associated with a show. A revival or an adaptation from a well-known film may be asked to give a nod to its predecessors. Gregg Barnes's designs for *Aladdin* on Broadway needed to follow the lead of the movie, and as Disney produced the musical, he certainly had permission to do so. Barnes translated flat, cartoon images into a lush, dimensional set of costumes worn by actual humans. *Aladdin* is recognizable by his short, open vest and white pants, and Jasmine by her turquoise, midriff-baring ensemble. But the intricate details and textures make Barnes's version distinct from the animated film.

I worked as an assistant costume designer on the Broadway show *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. The musical is based on the 1967 film starring Julie Andrews, but other than preserving the 1920s setting, the show's creators chose not to refer to the film visually. Martin Pakledinaz's Tony-winning costume design has since become associated with the show, and many subsequent productions have quoted the ensemble's chic pale costumes, Millie's bold yellow and gray "modern" flapper look, and the glittering, red halter dress for Millie's eleven-o'clock number, which features a bodice of overlapping circles and a skirt of pointed handkerchief ruffles. A keen observer will notice that while the show's



JIM BROWN

At right: The author's rendering of Charity's clothing. Above: The fully realized pink dress on stage in WKU's production of Sweet Charity.

logo is also a woman in a red dress, it is a typical flapper's slip-dress covered with fringe. Other than the color, the logo image—which was created prior to the development of the final Broadway costume design—bears no resemblance to Pakledinaz's stylized work. Pakledinaz and his fellow designers developed a look for the show that was inspired by the geometric forms of the Art Deco movement popular in the 1920s. Some of Millie's costumes are printed with graphics, like the zigzag gray stripes on her yellow dress, and some use bold dimensional shapes

RENDERING BY THE AUTHOR



like the overlapping, scale-like V's of the green dress for the speak-easy scene. Pakledinaz's red gown is part of this overall visual idea for the show, and the coherence of the show's design was much more important than matching the costumes to the poster.

Approaching the design

Designers approach a project by mining the script for facts and details to support the visuals and by following the director's lead to come up with a concept for the show. A designer should not copy the original, but a designer also should not create something divergent merely for the sake of being different. Ideas should evolve naturally. If you are drawn to a design choice made by another artist, analyze what it is about the choice that feels so right, and consider how another costume visual might achieve the same goal.

For instance, the adult Eponine's costume in *Les Misérables* is very widely quoted. The brimmed cap and wide leather belt are boyish touches that work well for her character. But the best approach is to back up and go into the story itself. *Les Misérables* is about an actual historical event that took place in the 1830s. Eponine and Cosette live very different lives, and their clothes should contrast greatly. The adult Cosette is innocent and protected, whereas Eponine has a hard life and looks out for herself. Since Cosette lives comfortably, she is likely to wear the wide-sleeved, highly structured dresses and the demure, girlish bonnets that were fashionable in the 1830s. As these styles are typical of the era itself, most costume designers will follow the same general idea, varying fabrics, colors, and decorations. Eponine's cap and wide belt, however, are not

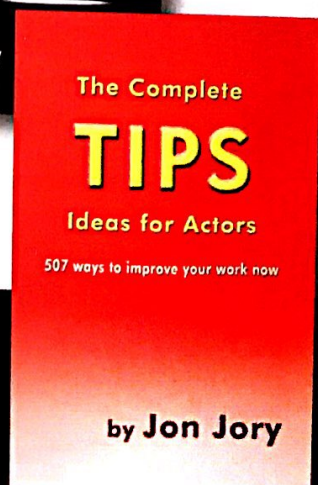
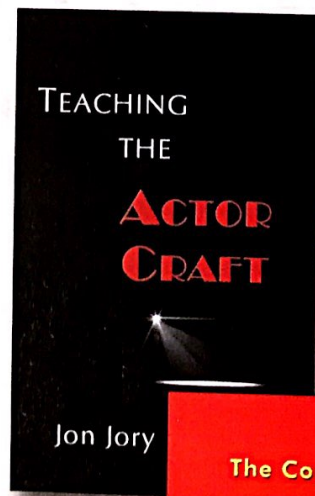
typically worn by women in the era and are therefore an eclectic look created by Broadway costume designer Andreane Neofitou. Another designer could evoke Eponine's individual spirit and toughness using different costume pieces. Eponine has presumably collected her wardrobe by scavenging, so it certainly makes sense to mix and match. If she has masculine touches, perhaps she could wear men's breeches or sturdy boots or a different type of hat.

Another often-quoted musical is *Cats*. Making humans look like animals is challenging. The original costume designer, John Napier, had the clever solution to combine more cat-like features like tails, fur, and whiskers with human clothing elements evocative of cats' bodies, like wigs and leg-warmers. Although another designer is welcome to come up with any cat costume he or she might choose, for most productions the outfits need to accommodate lots of movement and choreography. Napier's design idea of working human clothing into the cat bodies could be used as inspiration, but altered. *Cats* on Broadway opened in the early 1980s, when leg-warmers and fluffy hairstyles reigned. Why not update the clothing touches to be contemporary? Or evoke a different era, such as the 1930s of T.S. Eliot's original poems?

What should a character look like? How do they move and speak? What should they wear?

When exploring these questions, there is nothing wrong with following the lead of what went before, but as an inspiration and not an obligation. An actor would not re-create another's performance by copying every intonation and gesture, and a production should not directly reproduce a design either. Both performers and designers should value their own artistic creativity. Trust that audiences go to the theatre to see something fresh, created just for them. Trust that audiences want to see *your* production. ▼

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