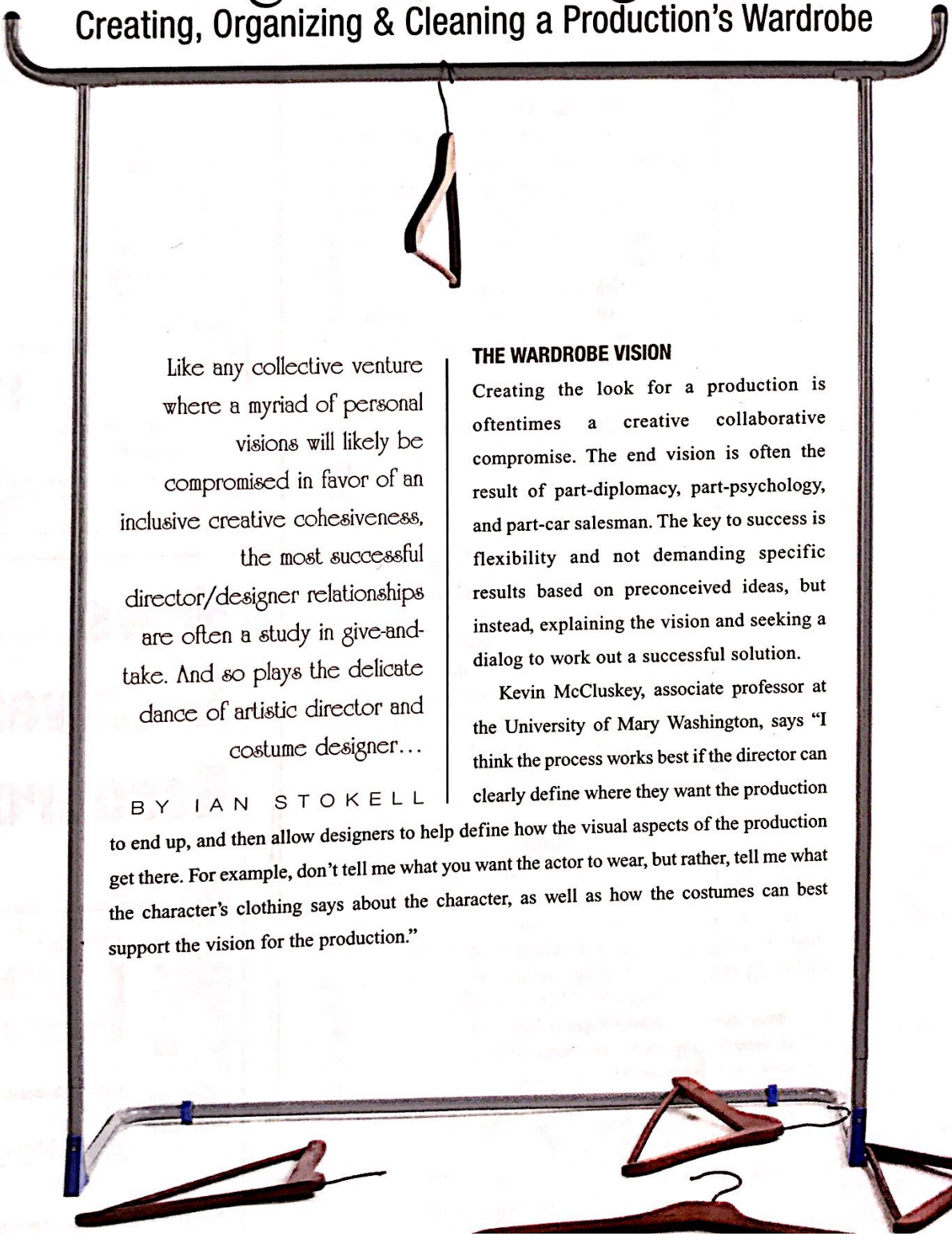


Ending Costuming Chaos

Creating, Organizing & Cleaning a Production's Wardrobe



Like any collective venture where a myriad of personal visions will likely be compromised in favor of an inclusive creative cohesiveness, the most successful director/designer relationships are often a study in give-and-take. And so plays the delicate dance of artistic director and costume designer...

BY IAN STOKELL

to end up, and then allow designers to help define how the visual aspects of the production get there. For example, don't tell me what you want the actor to wear, but rather, tell me what the character's clothing says about the character, as well as how the costumes can best support the vision for the production."

THE WARDROBE VISION

Creating the look for a production is oftentimes a creative collaborative compromise. The end vision is often the result of part-diplomacy, part-psychology, and part-car salesman. The key to success is flexibility and not demanding specific results based on preconceived ideas, but instead, explaining the vision and seeking a dialog to work out a successful solution.

Kevin McCluskey, associate professor at the University of Mary Washington, says "I think the process works best if the director can clearly define where they want the production

Adds Callie Floor of the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, "While it's always splendid to push for uncompromised artistic excellence, all parties involved need to remember that resources need consideration. It comes down to time, money and energy. Having an organized, well compensated, and well informed staff (stitchers, assistants, crafts people, drapers, tailors) will get you a long way towards your goal."

Says McCluskey, "Both designer and director must be careful of practicing artistic self-indulgence...and making choices that meet a personal ego need over a production need. When you are the only one that understands a visual choice, or when that choice needs to be explained in a production note in the program, what you deem so essential to the production may be just an ego need."

An interesting perspective comes from the other end of the costume supply chain. Ken Epperly is co-founder of Magic Makers, a retail costume company and supplies theatres with a turn-key solution to stumping their production.

After being hired for a production, the first thing Magic Makers does is send the director a measurement sheet for every actor—a three-part form which also includes what part they are playing, their name, and their measurements. All the pieces of the costume are written on the form. Then the costume is sent for alterations and finally bagged. The costume company keeps a copy, the director gets a copy, and one copy stays with the costume.

ORGANIZATION

Whether a costume rental company, or a professional theatre group, the way to keep track of costumes for any production, but especially for large productions, is to write everything down - make lists, use rolodexes, make copies, label everything.

"Lists! Lists! Lists!" That's how Floor organizes the costumes for a major show. Lists and organization are the order of any day. Floor organizes each production in a binder under the actor's name, with all characters' names and the number of changes. Any supporting information, such as measurements and sketches of costumes is also included in the binder.

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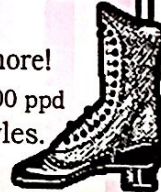
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"In my opinion, the look of a show this large ["Cyrano de Bergerac"] can benefit from not building the whole thing at the same time. It's like decorating a large home all at once—it loses a certain organic, integrated quality that is attractive in design."

—Callie Floor, American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco

Jeffrey Lieder, costume director of the Utah Shakespearean Festival, starts his lists at the onset from the designer's sketches and descriptions. "From these lists, we determine what will be built, bought, pulled from stock and altered or rented," explains Lieder. For a production like "Cyrano de Bergerac," the Utah Shakespearean Festival built one-third of the costumes, pulls one-third from existing inventory and borrows one-third from others. "We borrow costumes from a company and repay the loan when we can by loaning them costumes from our stock," says Lieder. "The informal, collegial and cooperative relationship that we have developed over years helps our budgets go further. Shipping costs, however, go up every year."

McCluskey, starts each costume prep work with a character breakdown, or character plot, as well as a preliminary costume plot. Why? In the first place, it reveals which characters are in which scenes, and secondly, it lets the costumer know how many costumes each character needs.

A character plot also reveals how much time there is during the performance for costume changes. Sometimes with a fast-moving play

where characters go on and off the stage quickly, it is necessary to make a character plot on a page-by-page basis and not scene-by-scene.

The most important thing to remember is that, at any given time, the costume person must know how many costumes have to be produced and when each one is being worn on stage.

McCluskey also assigns each costume a number, rather than referring to costumes by act and scene number. This allows him to keep track of how many costumes have to be produced, which is particularly helpful with a large production, especially when deciding the budget. McCluskey adds that this system is less cumbersome, especially if there is a large cast.

Labeling is a key part of staying organized. The Utah Shakespearean Festival uses a variety of colored cloth tags to represent the different locations from which a piece was sourced with white tags representing their own costumes.

For items where a label cannot be sewn in, such as socks or nylons, each actor should be assigned a different color of thread. Those costume pieces are then marked with the corresponding color of thread.

Callie Floor and ACT developed their own inventory system using Filemaker Pro and based it on the Dewey decimal system. They preferred to develop their own system because it helps them keep track of pieces of a garment, which is useful for keeping ensembles together.

RENT VS. BUILD YOUR OWN

For a large production like "Cyrano de Bergerac," is it best to rent costumes or build your own?

The response goes beyond the obvious answer of financial constraints. At the heart of the "rent vs. build-your-own" battle is the issue of artistic control and limits on creative vision.

In the world of theatre-nirvana, it would seem best to build all costumes yourself. That way, both the director and the designer will likely be pleased, and it guarantees a perfect fit for each actor.

However, there is also an aesthetic argument for NOT creating all the costumes at once. Says Floor, "In my opinion, the look of a show this large can benefit from not building the whole thing at the same time. It's like decorating a large home all at once—it loses a certain organic, integrated quality that is attractive in design."

A show like "Cyrano de Bergerac" would be a massive undertaking for any theatre considering building the entire wardrobe—upwards of 200 period costumes with everything from boots to hats, military uniforms to full dresses, and even greatcoats.

Says Floor, "Very few companies would successfully be able to build that entire show. Usually, a show of that size will be either mostly rented with the lead costumes built, or mostly built with the smaller roles rented and pulled from existing stock."

At the outset of any production, most theatres should be able to ascertain which standard costumes are likely to be rented—suits of armor, and police, military or medical personnel uniforms, for example. Renting these sorts of costumes is least likely to cause a creative meltdown!

Nevertheless, renting or building is also a question of creative control. It can demand some hard choices that members of the creative team will have to make.



PHOTO BY KARL HUGH, IUTAH SHAKESPEAREAN FESTIVAL, 2008

Says McCluskey, "The problem with renting costumes is that you lose some control over what they look like, and you may have to settle for something that is not perfect for your production. In other words, you will never rent exactly what you designed and will have to make concessions in color, or fit, or line, or pattern."

And alterations can be problematic.

The rental policy should be checked closely with regards to alterations. Not all rental companies allow costumes to be altered. If they do, they will most likely require the alterations to be removed

before the costume is returned. Or they may handle the alterations themselves in-house. Rental houses will often charge an additional fee for alterations.

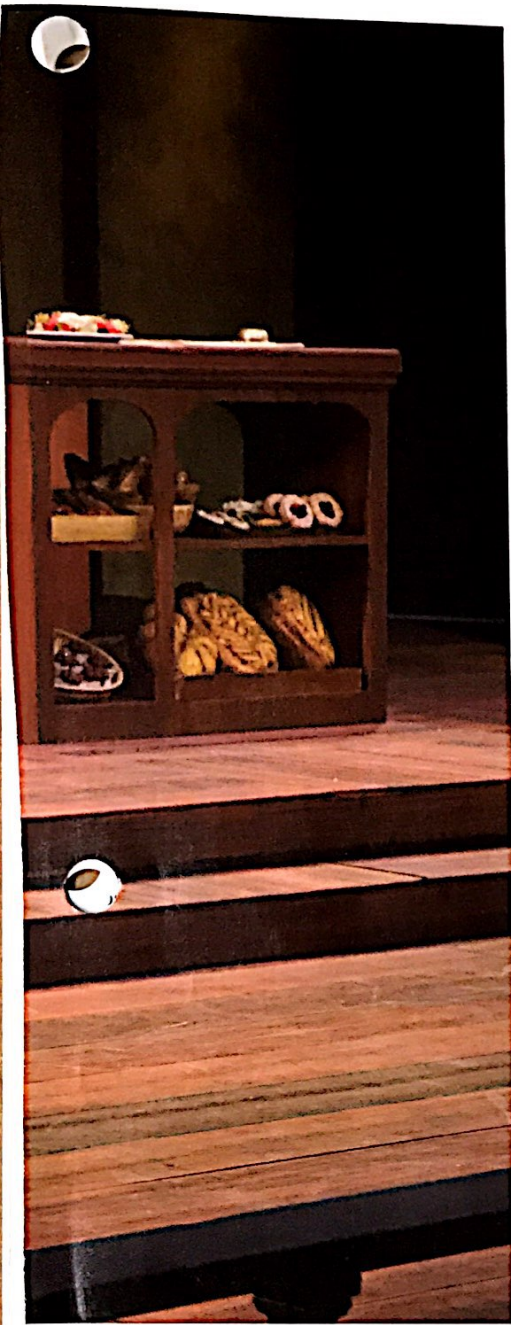
But there are some costuming tips ubiquitous to all theatres, wherever they are, that are often only learned over many productions and many problems.

For example, if renting, make sure the clothes are well-made and sturdy, not flimsily put together using cheap materials. You may think you are getting a bargain paying less, but more often than not, there is a reason the costumes are lower priced.

Moreover, rent from a place you know, or a place that comes recommended from someone you know who has high theatrical standards. A personal recommendation is only as good as the standards of the person giving the recommendation!

Also, be aware of the rental prices and any hidden fees. Reading the rental contract closely BEFORE it is signed should be a no-brainer.

Says McCluskey, "Be sure you understand rental price structures; they are not all the same. Most rental houses use a



Brian Vaughn (left) as Cyrano de Bergerac and Melinda Pfundstein as Roxane in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 production of "Cyrano de Bergerac"

require that all costumes be cleaned once a week (for an eight-show week). In addition, all clothing items worn next to the body – such as shirts, socks, and underwear – have to be laundered after EVERY show. That doesn't seem much, but for just a four-week run, for example, a single shirt will need to be laundered around 30 times. That makes buying, renting or making sturdy, well-made costumes even more vital.

McCluskey has two good rules of thumb whether it is a union house or not. "First, each audience deserves to see the production looking as crisp and clean as did the audience opening night. Second, each performer deserves to wear a clean and well-maintained costume for each performance."


For non-union houses, the underwear-washed-after-every-performance rule is still understandably a good one. But for small theatres, sometimes accomplishing it is a challenge. If it is to be done, it can demand significant time and effort by the individuals involved.

Leider, along with his 10-person wardrobe crew, launders the washable parts of every costume between each

show, presses and steams each piece before the actors arrive and assists with dressing and fast changes during the performance. Leider is also proactive stating, "The women's dresses have removable dress shields which are removed and laundered each night. The men wear tee-shirts under their doublets to protect the garment from perspiration and body oils."

Nevertheless, an accumulated bad smell on a costume can have a detrimental impact on any dressing room and, in some cases, the front rows of the audience!

So how do you remove bad odor from a costume? McCluskey has a great tip—vodka! Apparently, the alcohol in the vodka kills the bacteria that cause the odor and dries spotless. The area of the costume absorbing the sweat needs to be saturated with vodka sprayed from a hand-squeezed spray bottle as soon as the performer removes the clothing.

Designing and organizing the costumes for a large show can be a daunting task. However, it can be made easier by meticulous lists, labeling, and record keeping from the start. 

To continue the conversation on costuming, visit the Dramabiz Magazine discussion forums at www.dramabiz.com/forum.

sliding rental scale and rent by the week. Usually, you pay an initial fee for the first week of rental and then a percentage of that fee for the remaining weeks of the rental."

CLEANING

Initial costume choice and production decisions are often linked with cleanliness. And Equity and actors' unions can play a key role in those costume choices, however indirectly.

Different cleanliness rules apply to different levels of theatre. But basically, if it's a union house, the rules will likely

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Photo by Tracy Kinatus