

I Ain't Got No Body

Need a dead body for a show?

Get an intern and Saran Wrap.

Me: What happened to King Pentheus?

Assistant: We recycled his body parts for the feast scene in The Tempest last year.

Me: Okay, what about the dead bodies we dragged out in Measure for Measure?

Assistant: Water damage and mold; outdoor theater does that.

Me: I'd kill for a good dead body right now!

Assistant: Don't look at me like that.

Me: Grab the interns and some packing tape; I'll meet you in the shop.

Some things work on stage and some just don't so you have to know when to fight your fights and when to give in. The hardest part is knowing the middle way. Even if you know it may not be right and you have tried it hundreds of times before sometime you need to let the director see for themselves.

Babies are one of these problems. It's so hard to make a bundle of cloth look like a living baby. For *Gently Down the Stream* we pulled out all the stops because the audience would be right there on top of the actors. So, we went with a baby that cost us a lot, but that creepy thing looked just like a baby. We were able to carve the back out of the baby to install a small remote speaker. That helps out a lot, being able to move around stage and have the noise go with you makes a big difference. (The next test I want to do is creating some kind of remote kicking so there's some life to those little monsters.) I suggest if you see a baby in the script you ask your audio department at the first production meeting if they can get a small remote speaker for inside the baby. Remember to ask very early in the process so they can help budget it for you, they may even kindly incorporate the cost into their sound package.

Now back to the prop shop and that dead body we had to craft for *Cymbeline*. Ashton, one of our interns, was about the same size as our actor for whom we would need a dead body prop. First we asked Ashton if he had any claustrophobia issues and if he was comfortable with us wrapping him up like a mummy. That last part is no joke; some people really get upset and uncomfortable being confined. So, I always make sure that when we are wrapping or body casting, that the person we are working on is comfortable. They get to pick the music that we put on in the shop and that the door is locked with a Do Not Disturb sign on it. Also, all other work

in the shop stops. One person is picked as the lead and they are the one who talks. Everyone else remains quiet to help put the volunteer at ease. The volunteer is free to say anything at any time and can be clearly heard. It's the same reason why the lead is the only one who speaks, that way there is a clear and direct communication.

At a previous time when we were doing this a carpenter sat in to be the body. The room was cool at that time but I could see the guy starting to all of a sudden sweat a lot from his forehead. I also noticed he was grinding his teeth. I suggested that we stop and I asked him if it would be okay that we stopped. 'Yes, Please' was all he said. It is important to keep connected with your volunteer, they will keep you in the loop if you listen and watch them.

Have your volunteer stand in a neutral position. Then you cover the person's body with saran wrap. Once that is done loosely cover the saran wrap with clear packing tape. Make sure you cross hatch different sections of the body to keep the 'shell' strong. You will be cutting the person out of the shell from the back so make sure to layer the tape on fairly thick. Starting at the back of the ankles start cutting up the back of the legs. Go across the buttocks and meet the two cuts in the small of the back. Then continue the cut up the back to the back of the neck. A PVC skeleton inside the body helps keep its shape and fabric tubes glued then taped in place help articulate the body at the proper joints.

This is a great economical way to make a dead body. Unfortunately, we couldn't save his body for future shows this time either. The raccoons ate away the foam neck and hands we made! Oh well, ashes to ashes. **S**



The finished dead body prop for *Cymbeline* at The Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park.

