

COSTUME DESIGNER

A Costume Designer creates the clothes and costumes for theatre, film, dance, concerts, television and other types of stage productions.

The role of the Costume Designer in the professional theatre industry is to design garments and accessories for actors to wear in a production. In this industry the majority of designers, specialise in both set and costume design, although they often have a particular strength in one or the other.

READING THE SCRIPT

The first step is to read this script, which can give direction as to what the characters are wearing. The script also gives an indication through the character's personality and behaviour. The designer should consider the time period, the location, as well as the social status of each character.

The designer would then liaise with the director to determine the time period and location (as they may change this from the script) and if there is any other style or element they want to achieve. It is imperative that the costume and set design have a cohesive look.

BUDGET

As a designer you will need to know your budget as this has a big impact upon the design of a production. It is cheaper to produce a contemporary show, so you can shop costumes or buy them from a retail outlet. Often actors will provide bits and pieces from their own wardrobe on smaller budget shows.

Period shows are expensive as most costumes will need to be made. These costs include fabric and trims and employing people to draft patterns, cut and sew them, all of which are labour and time intensive.

If you go over budget you may need to compromise on your work and have fewer pieces.

WHITE CARD

A designer usually delivers what is called a 'white card' presentation to the Production Manager and workshop staff up to six months prior to a production opening. This 'white card' is a mock-up of what the set will look like and may also include preliminary costume designs.

DESIGN PRESENTATION

About 3 months out from opening, the designer will do a formal presentation to the whole company with a completed set model and fully rendered costume designs. This is again presented at the first rehearsal when the actors arrive.

'BUILD OF A SHOW'

During the rehearsal process the designer will float between departments to ensure that the design brief is being fulfilled. This includes Wardrobe for the costumes and accessories, Workshop for the set construction and Props, who source or build the props.

PRODUCTION MEETING

There is usually a weekly production meeting where representatives from each of these departments, along with the Director and other Production staff discuss the progress of each process. This is the time to problem-solve any issues that have arisen during the build.

TIMEFRAME

The rehearsal period for a show is generally 4-5 weeks depending upon the size of the 'build' and then there is a technical production week where everyone moves into the theatre for tech rehearsals and dress runs prior to opening. Everything needs to be ready and in place for the technical production week.

Once the costumes move into the theatre, it is usually the responsibility of stage management or the wardrobe department to ensure the ongoing maintenance of costumes i.e. washing, pressing and repair of costumes between shows and dry cleaning as necessary.

WARDROBE PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR

The main contact a designer will have throughout the construction process will be the Wardrobe Production Supervisor. The role of the supervisor is to assist the designer to achieve their vision by:

- Purchasing / hiring / sourcing articles of costumes with the designer
- Coordinating the wardrobe team of patternmakers and sewers to create the costumes
- Being present at wardrobe fittings with the actors and the designer. Note: the fittings are used to 'trial' the costumes. Once they go into the theatre they are generally 99% finished (only final hems are left to do).
- 'Breaking down' costumes i.e. making them look older depending upon what is required

Unless you are very big company e.g. Opera Australia, you don't have a makeup department, but bring in a freelance hair / wig / makeup stylists that are employed on a show by show basis, and liaise between the designer and Wardrobe department.

DESIGN INSPIRATION

Inspiration can come from any number of places, such as; the script, characters, films, artworks, literature, historical periods etc. Often a designer will build up a number of pictorial references of people, places, colours and textures that inspire them, and combine these in a folder.

They may reference the overall design of a production or a particular character, or both. This reference folder, combined with trade sketches (detailed pencil sketches of each of the characters costumes) is a great help when you are working with patternmakers and sewers on a show, as they can easily grasp the look or concept you are trying to achieve.

CHOOSING FABRICS

The maintenance of a costume is an important consideration when picking fabrics and designing a show. ie:

- How easy is each garment going to be to launder?
- How much wear and tear is each garment going to be put through each show?
- Are any actors prone to excessive perspiration?
- Do you need doubles of a particular garment e.g. one for a matinee and a fresh garment for the evening?
- Is the show going on tour? Are the costumes sturdy enough to survive a tour?

COSTUMES FOR MUSICALS

Musicals are approached in a different way from a straight play, as the physical requirements are very different. There is usually more physical movement or dance, so the costumes need to be easy to move in and the fabric needs to breathe, so that the actor doesn't overheat or sweat too much.

Cotton fabrics that are woven with elastane or lycra are great for musicals because they stretch and breathability of the fabric is good. Costumes for a musical will generally need to be laundered after each show to keep them fresh and to stop the fabric from breaking down from perspiration. They need to be very well made so that all seams are finished correctly and there are no invisible zips (lapped zips only).

ADAPTING DESIGNS

Occasionally adapting designs or costumes needs to take place, eg for a quick change or if a lot of movement or action is required. Also some actors have very clear ideas about what their character would or would not wear. This is usually in consultation with the designer, actor and director.

The number of costumes you design for each character is dependent upon the script and the overall look or concept for the production e.g. the director may go for something very

minimalist with each actor in jeans and a t-shirt and only adding accessories such as hats or coats. This is often the case for shows with very small budgets.

IMPORTANCE OF COSTUMES

Cannot be underestimated. Costume design helps set-the-scene for the audience and gives them an immediate snapshot of what the character is about. Ultimately, a costume should support the actor in conveying the character and its personality to the audience.

ADVICE FOR YOUNG DESIGNERS

1. Be clear in your vision in terms of the costume design and why each character is wearing what they are wearing;
2. Take into account the budget for each production and design to this budget, or you may not get what you want;
3. Do not let the production get 'bigger than Ben Hur'. Sometimes actors and directors often want to change or add things to a production. It is a designer's role to accommodate these as much as possible *without* comprising the budget, the overall design and look of a show, and their own sanity!

WARDROBE TERMINOLOGY

- *Toile* (pronounced twarl) – the calico 'mock-up' of a costume which we put on the actor in the first fitting;
- *Cutter* – the person responsible for making the patterns for costumes and cutting the fabric. The cutter will often make the costume as well, or supervise a sewer to do it;
- *Dress run* – a dress rehearsal with full costume;
- *Tech run* – similar to dress run, but it is a stop/start rehearsal used to plot light (lx) and sound and to trouble shoot any costume issues e.g. quick changes;
- *Bump in* – setting up the set and costumes in the theatre / dressing rooms;
- *Bump in* – removing the set and costumes from the theatre / dressing rooms;
- *Maintenance* – the laundering and pressing of costumes between shows.