COSTUME DESIGN

THE BASICS

Costume Design: The Basics provides an overview of the fundamental principles of theatrical costume design, from pre-production through opening night.

Beginning with a discussion of what costume design is, why people wear clothes, and what the role of the costume designer is, this book makes accessible the art and practice of costume design. Peppered with interviews with working costume designers, it provides an understanding of what it means to be a costume designer and offers a strong foundation for additional study.

Readers will learn:

- How to use clues from the script to decipher a character's wardrobe
- Methods used to sketch ideas using traditional or digital media
- How to discuss a concept with a team of directors, producers, and designers
- Strategies to use when collaborating with a professional costume shop
- How to maintain a healthy work/life balance
- Courses of action when working under a limited money and labor budget.

Costume Design: The Basics is an ideal starting point for aspiring designers looking for ways to achieve the best costumes on stage and realize their vision into a visual story told through clothing.

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THE BASICS

The Basics is a highly successful series of accessible guidebooks which provide an overview of the fundamental principles of a subject area in a jargon-free and undaunting format.

Intended for students approaching a subject for the first time, the books both introduce the essentials of a subject and provide an ideal springboard for further study. With over 50 titles spanning subjects from artificial intelligence (AI) to women's studies, *The Basics* are an ideal starting point for students seeking to understand a subject area.

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THE BASICS

T. M. Delligatti

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For my parents, Gary and Carol Delligatti

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The first rule of costume design is *there are no rules*, but there are guidelines and conventions that can increase chances of success, helping the new costume designer develop an eye for what is effective. But what does it mean to be “effective”? How do designers know when their work is “good”?

Costumes are garments that bring a character to life. They tell a story of a person, of a creature in the night, of a monster, a whimsical spirit, and countless others. Using clothes as context clues, the audience can know a character’s personality before they say a single word. They help immerse an audience in a story and make them suspend their disbelief for a few short hours. Costume design creates **verisimilitude**—a show that is *verisimilitudinous* means its world feels plausible enough to be believable to an audience. It is the illusion of reality.

The best designer’s work looks effortless on stage, as if the characters in the play are real people and not actors. What a layperson does not see is the thousands of hours of research, drawing, planning, discussion, shopping, building, and improvising. The script offers words for the actor, but costume designers—in collaboration with scenic, light, and sound—put the character into the world.

A designer wields two main tools: an understanding of human behavior and the costume itself (which can include clothing, masks, makeup, and a variety of accessories). When designers read a script, they must figure out the core of each character’s personality. After a

thorough knowledge is gained, they dress characters in a way that makes that character believable within the world the team wants to create.

In order to understand a character enough to choose their wardrobe, first, a designer must understand why people wear clothes.

WHY PEOPLE WEAR CLOTHES

In 3300 BCE, a 45-year-old man died on the Ötztal Alps, his body soon frozen within the glacier. In 1991, two hikers discovered his perfectly preserved body, including his clothing. Scientists named him Ötzi.

Ötzi wore a grass cloak, a sheep-hide loincloth, and a coat sewn together with pieces of goat and sheep fur. The shoes had been carefully constructed with deer hide using dry grass as insulation. With this outfit, Ötzi could face the profound cold, the torrential winds, the heavy rains, and all the deep snow that came with living in the mountains.

Just like with Ötzi, clothes helped humans survive the earliest stages of civilization, but even our ancestors did not use clothing only for protection. Clothing evolved to represent a symbol of culture and expressions and humans imbued countless personal meanings to fabrics, shapes, colors, lines, and textures. Ötzi was only one of many discoveries that revealed the behaviors of early humans.

Humans developed ways to use our clothing to project our wants, needs, moods, and personalities to ourselves and the people around us. The section below addresses individual categories, but often the reasons for wearing clothes overlap with many categories. A garment can both serve as protection from the cold and be an artistic statement. It can protect against the cold and act as an expression of identity. Clothing is a nuanced art form, one that constantly evolves.

Time of Year, Time of Day

Big wool coats are for chilly weather, like a winter stroll through the woods, while flip flops are for braving the summer heat. Not only do people wear different clothes based on the seasonal weather, but fashionable colors and fabrics change with the time of year as well.

Spring might bring brighter colors and patterns that pop. Winter garments are heftier and often sport darker, earthier tones.

Dress also varies depending on the time of day. For nights, a person could curl up on the couch in comfy pajamas. For mornings, a college student might don the only clean hoodie to make an 8 AM class. In certain times in history, an aristocrat might have an entirely different outfit for afternoon tea or dinner.

Ceremony and Tradition

Academic robes and mortarboards have become the modern symbol of graduation. For a wedding ceremony in western culture, white dresses and black tuxedos have become so ingrained since Britain's Queen Victoria married in white, it has become a cultural standard.

Religion

People wear clothes specific to their faith. Some wear their clothes for piety, some as a show of their morals, and some for ritual. Catholic priests wear an *Alb*, a stole, and a *chasuble* during mass. Jewish people wear *yarmulkes* as a sign of devoutness. Shinto and Buddhist priests wear *Jōe* to rituals.

Profession

Jobs in an office may have dress codes, called *business attire*, requiring their employees to wear garments that represent the company's mission. Often, this comes in the form of suits, ties, collared blouses, and knee length skirts. Painters or builders have messy jobs, needing clothing made of durable fabrics that can get dirty. A police officer's uniform signals their role in upholding the law. Hazmat suits protect workers from toxic environments. In the theater, a stage crew is required to wear all black so that they don't attract the audience's attention.

To Show Belonging to a Particular Group

Cliques, gangs, clubs, and groups of like-minded people dress similarly to be identified as a single unit. They use accessories, shirts, colors, or patterns to prove they represent a singular identity. Kids

at a summer camp can wear matching shirts. In medieval Europe, heraldry showed loyalty to a family heritage. March bands use their uniforms to appear as a singular unit.

Military

On the battlefield, uniforms help soldiers tell friend from foe. Outside of battle, a uniform's style, color, stripes, and medals can identify a soldier's rank, country, military branch, and length of service.

Sports and Recreation

Like the military, a uniform for a sports team helps fans and fellow players identify who is who on the field. Numbers on uniforms help the crowd pick out individual players. The chess club may have special hats they wear to competitions. Non-competitive sports also need specific styles of clothes to help athletes achieve their goals. Scaling Mount Everest, for example, would be even more of a challenge without crampons, a snowsuit, and an oxygen tank.

Gender Expression

Cultures throughout history have assigned masculine and feminine values onto specific garments. In some societies, pink, fluffy gowns represent the essence of femininity, while sharply tailored suits in dark colors illustrate an idea of manhood. Dresses, cowboy boots, crowns, and tiaras all bring to mind degrees of masculinity and femininity. These can be worn straight to express a "pure" form of gender (as defined by individual cultures) or they can be combined in numerous ways to create androgynous looks that bridge between masculine, feminine, and non-binary.

Culture

Textures, prints, patterns, and silhouettes have evolved in all corners of the world. Tartan is traditionally associated with Scotland. A kimono conjures the image of Japanese culture. Styles from around the world can migrate across the world and influence the fashions of nations.

Sometimes it happens peacefully through trade. Sometimes it's not so peaceful, forced through war and colonization.

Modesty

Social conventions dictate which parts of the human body should be covered in polite company. How much of the body is covered depends on the era, the country, the social class, along with the personal feelings of the wearer themselves.

When researching, it's good to know these broad reasons, but studying individuals can bring nuance to a design. People wear clothes for more reasons than can be accounted for in a single book. A designer can extrapolate much about a person's personality, identity, temperament, and disposition from interviews about a person's wardrobe choices. This is what costume design as a discipline seeks to capture on stage or on screen.

I asked a group of college students in a costume history class why they chose the outfit they were wearing. Answers ranged from, *it was comfy*, *it was the only thing clean*, and *I have an interview later*. These details give small clues into a person. I asked the same survey to a broader audience, with answers solicited from social media:

So, appropriate attire: oxblood Doc Martens, faded and torn black Moto jeans, oxblood t-shirt, light cabled black woolen hat I knit, because it's spring and cool in the shade. Boxer briefs, Diesel.

I bought these things because they're comfy and I like them? And I don't know where my Docs are from the 90s, so I bought these a few years ago. Style and foot support. I've had these all for a while except the hat, which I made lately. Wool from a local shop. Jeans and t-shirt from H&M. Boxers because comfort.

(Hugh Blackthorne)

Powder blue sleeveless shift dress. Pink and purple oriental flower pattern. Baby blue Mary Jane heels—think 50s wedding—with white tips, leather bows and gold heart clasps. Translucent pink crisscross choker, my signature pink flower hair clip. Fuchsia bikini bottoms with lace hips, purplish gray bra with a tiny bow

between the breasts. Hidden skin tone nylon socks. Fashion is my first passion, so I only wear dresses and ridiculously girly shoes.

I always look for the most unique and feminine clothes to stand out and express myself. Yet I pride myself on finding phenomenal deals. My shoes were \$31 including shipping because they're from China and my dress was severely clearanced at Kohl's so only \$11.

(Paige Johnson)

Red, black, and white (mostly red) bikini bottoms and a black triangle bikini top. Light-wash denim cutoff shorts with a high waist. A cream cropped singlet with a few buttons at the front. Brown Havaianas. Brown and purple sunglasses and a black Roxy cap (just realised I'm wearing a whole lot of Roxy today)

I bought most of it online rather than in store. Reasons—first of all, it was on sale. The bikini I liked the cut and colour of the bottom (red is my favourite colour) and there was no top on sale that matched so I went with plain black, especially since they had a simple triangle top without all the frills. I'm long waisted so I try to buy high waisted shorts and shorter tops because they suit me better. I also tend towards lighter denim and colours like cream because they suit my skin tone. Havaianas, I have a lot, but brown goes with most of my clothes so they're my favourite. The cap was a gift and the sunglasses were one of the few pairs that don't look ridiculous on me. So, I guess you could say I've carefully crafted this 'I don't care too much' look, lol.

(Amy Ward-Smith)

A designer can imagine many combinations of personalities that fit the interviewee's clothing choices above, but they must always remember that people are nuanced. Producing an effective costume design means understanding the complexities of human nature.

Characters are a representation of real people. Designers use what they know about people to portray a character the audience will believe. Shakespeare's scripts are a great place to start practicing the creation of character through clothing because his scripts are dense and can be interpreted in numerous ways. Romeo from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a young man in love with the idea of being in love.

Hamlet, from Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, is a man who has grown suspicious and bitter after the death of his father. Just by the nature of their personalities, their outfits should be designed differently, even if both shows are set in the same time period.

Hamlet is a closed off and defensive character. His costumes are usually dark, precise, and constricted. Romeo waxes philosophically about love. His costumes tend to be more open, lighter, rebellious, and freer.

If a designer switched the looks, Romeo may come off more ironic and sneering than he is. Hamlet could come off as more fickle and more frivolous. Why? Because of the way people interpret color and line. Dark clothing may be equated with dourness, which feels different to an audience than the way romantic heroes are typically portrayed. Bright, light, and open costumes feel lively and carefree, which contrasts Hamlet's mourning of his father. Whatever choice is made must come from a deep understanding of the character, the clothing, and the overall vision of the team.

A designer could devise a character who is a bookish, introverted type with glasses (to show that constant reading strains the eyes) and ill-fitting clothes (to show the character is too absorbed in their studies to worry about appearance). Muted colors might say a person doesn't like to stand out. This interpretation plays into the classic nerdy type. It is a way for the audience to know the basics of the character before they do or say anything on stage.

A designer can make a different kind of statement by breaking the audience's expectation. This is called **subversion**. The same bookish, introverted character from the previous example could be dressed in bright, attention-grabbing colors in an eccentric style. This demonstrates a different personality even though the text didn't change. Every choice a costume designer makes says something different.

THE COSTUME DESIGNER'S PROCESS: WHAT TO EXPECT

The following gives a basic overview of the costume designer's process from hiring to the end of their contract. Once the general order of events is established, the subsequent chapters will break down each section in detail.

Reading the Script

The first task for a designer is to study the script and form basic ideas about the characters and the setting. Who are the characters and what are their personalities? What are the characters' social and economic class? What is the time period of the play? Where is the play set geographically? What are the play's unifying ideas? What is the playwright trying to say to the audience? Are specific events mentioned in the script like proms, weddings, masquerades, or other ceremonies? The answers to these questions will create a foundation that a costume design can be built upon.

Along with a character analysis, the designer will then notate information such as the number of costume changes for each character and document the scenes they appear in. Once a script is thoroughly scoured for wardrobe clues and hints, the next step is research.

To illustrate how a designer might break down a text, this book will use examples from Shakespeare, specifically *Much Ado About Nothing*, to talk about the script analysis process. The reader does not need to know the play to understand the example, but a familiarity will give the reader some context to the analysis section of Chapter 1.

Researching the Play's Context and Exploring Themes

The context around a play's settings gives insight into its **themes**, which is a topic that is repeatedly explored within a story. Love, redemption, and justice are themes commonly encountered in literature. Knowing a playwright's intent is not always possible nor is it necessarily needed, but a designer can infer through research the original meaning, or they can use alternative interpretations of the text and create their own meaning.

For example, stage or film adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, originally published in 1870, could use the author's themes as stated in the text. This story about an alien invasion is an exploration into Britain's fears about being colonized just as they had done to other cultures.

And before we judge them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but

upon its inferior races ... Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

(From chapter 1, "The Eve of the War")

The designer can design with the author's intent in mind, or they can make note of other meanings. Some artists like to take old texts and tie them into topical events. Both are good to note as reference for conversation and research. With all these ideas compiled together, the designer will next discuss them with the director.

Meeting the Director and the Design Team

During the first meeting, the costume designer, the director, and other designers discuss the show's **concept**, which is a show's mood, tone, setting, and aesthetic. Plays that emulate real life and are about real-life situations often require a realistic concept. For example, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* features a story loosely based on true events, set just after the end of World War II. Generally, the show's concept is portrayed with a naturalistic aesthetic, making the stage feel as lifelike as possible. Exaggerated concepts that go beyond the real can work, but going too far may distract from the play's themes. For plays with more ambiguous settings, there is more room to play with the concept. Unlike *All My Sons*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* could easily be set on the moon, on a mountain, or in a fantasy world, for it is not the specific setting that is necessary to the story, but the idea of being stranded in a magical place far from home.

These ideas will be discussed between the designers and the director until they determine the concept that will satisfy their artistic needs and resonate with the audience they intend to present it to. Once all these ideas are debated and weighed, the director will make a final decision. The next step is research and rendering.

Another Round of Research

Once a concept is chosen, research can become more specific. For a show dependent on realism and naturalism, a designer should aim for accuracy. Audience members will know if military uniforms are wrong for the period, or if the **silhouette** of a dress is inauthentic.

They may not be able to express exactly what is wrong, but an audience is good at vocalizing when something *feels* wrong.

If the show is not set in a historical period, precise research still provides the resources needed to design. A designer can visit a museum to study **extant garments**, which are real garments from history that have survived the test of time. (All clothes before the twentieth century were made from natural fibers, which succumbs easily to rotting. The further back in time one goes, the fewer extant garments).

Photographs of everyday people are a reliable source for convincing characters, supplemented with magazine spreads and fashion photos for a little designer flair. Film or fine art styles can also be introduced in addition to period. A director might want to replicate genres such as Italian cinema, cyberpunk, or German expressionism.

Sketches and Rendering

The drawing phase is where all the ideas, research, concepts, and genres come together. The designer takes everything learned from research and discussions and begins to quickly sketch plans of what each character looks like. These sketches can be black and white with color swatches added to communicate an intended palette. The team discusses these ideas and shares critiques. Depending on the project, there could be hundreds of revisions before a consensus is reached. Once the director is happy with the sketches, the designer creates **costume renderings**. A **costume rendering** is a fully-colored illustration of each character accompanied by fabric swatches and detail drawings. The designer will render their ideas using a medium of their choosing—watercolor, digital painting, 3D modeling, and many other methods—to present the final designs to the team.

Production

With the drawing phase complete, the production phase begins with the designer presenting their drawings to the costume shop. This team will use the designer's rendering to build the garments. Drapers, stitchers, craftsman, shoppers, and managers come together to pattern, cut, build, and fit every single costume on every single actor.

The actors discover their own interpretation of the characters during rehearsal. They may have new insights into their characters

that the designer never considered. The actor portraying Romeo may find a unique angle to his character that could enhance the aesthetic. A designer doesn't have to take every actor's suggestion, but it helps to listen and keep the collaborative channels open. An actor's ideas can be brilliant, giving a costume more dimensions. To dismiss them without consideration can be missing a vital opportunity.

Flexibility is important during this stage. Sometimes the design as originally rendered doesn't allow for everything an actor needs to do. The director and the designer must work together on solutions, altering as needed to maintain the intended vision.

Dress and Tech Rehearsal

Costumes are nothing without context. In tech rehearsals, everything finally comes together—scenic, lighting, sound, projections, actors, dancers, and orchestra. Designers can add their detailed adjustments one final time.

Opening Night

This is the night everyone waits for, the culmination of everyone's hard work. Even in small theaters, hundreds of people have come together to make a show happen. They celebrate as the mind turns to new projects and new adventures.

These are the fundamental elements of costume design—what it is and how it all works together.

SUMMARY

- Costume design is the art of creating character through wardrobe.
- Creating character requires an understanding of human nature and the countless reasons they wear clothing.
- A costume designer achieves their vision through a process of research, collaboration, and production.

NOTE

- 1 The excerpt from the introduction to *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill is copyright ©1983 Caryl Churchill Limited, reprinted with permission of Nick Hern Books. www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

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