5   Costume Design

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Costume designers create the entire visual identity of a character. Hair, makeup, accessories, and even body shape, along with clothing, are all a part of this visual presentation, each carefully selected to give clues to the audience about a character and his or her world. By giving these clues, the costume designer is helping to tell the story in a nonverbal way.

Every story has a setting in which it takes place. Sometimes it is specifically defined by the playwright, such as "midafternoon on a cold December day in Maine, present day." Sometimes it is partially defined or not defined at all. No matter how much information is provided by the playwright about the setting of the story, the director and designers must make choices that define the world of the play. Those choices help to convey information to the audience such as geographic location, season and weather, time of day, a particular occasion or activity, and time period. Clothing has many functions, one of which is protection from the elements. For the setting just described, for example, a costume designer might chose to dress characters in snow boots and heavy parkas as opposed to flip-flops and shorts. The choice of clothing could help to indicate a geographic location that has a colder climate, a season that is cold, and weather that includes snow.

Clothing also functions as a statement about the wearer because it offers information about the amount of money the character spent on the clothes, his or her adherence or access to fashion trends, and the degree to which societal rules about appropriateness of clothing are important to this person. We attach meaning to those choices based upon our own

understanding, experience, and prejudices. If the characters wear jeans and plaid flannel shirts versus wool trousers and cashmere sweaters underneath the parkas and snow boots, a less urban and more rural location and/or activity can be conveyed. Because fashion is continually changing and there is a recorded history of these changes, the costume designer is able to use choices in clothing, hairstyles, and makeup to help indicate when the story is taking place. All of these choices are visual cues that help orient the audience to the setting of the play.

The costume designer also provides visual cues about the characters themselves, such as gender, age, occupation, and social status. Sometimes the costume can even provide insight into relationships between characters and their psychological or emotional states. We all attach meanings to the visual cues we are given based upon our personal experiences and the culture in which we live. Particular colors evoke emotion or have symbolism—red can mean anger or passion, purple is for royalty—some of which are culturally shared and some of which are unique to each individual. Society creates rules about what clothing is appropriate based upon activity, social standing, and gender (tuxedos are worn by men to formal occasions, pajamas are worn to sleep), which can be followed or broken. Fashion and the amount of money spent in its pursuit have different levels of priority for each of us, and we pass judgment on each other based upon our own level of priority. Exposure or accentuation of particular body parts sends unspoken messages that are based in personal and societal ideas of sexuality. Uniforms are worn by members of particular groups for reasons of identification and cohesion. By understanding and using the meanings attached to these visual cues, a costume designer can impart information about characters through the choices the designer makes in clothing them.

The audience makes some assumptions about the people they see onstage. For example, think about the image of a person wearing jeans, sneakers, and a tank top with long scruffy hair. Imagine that person and think about who they might be—their age, occupation, how much money they make, and so on. What if the jeans are tight and the sneakers are high heels instead? Does that change your ideas about this person? It is possible you are now imagining someone of a different gender and maybe even a different social status. Now imagine the jeans and sneakers are designer brand. Who is this person now? What if those designer clothes are dirty and torn? What if the person has smeared mascara and a

runny nose? Or is covered in tattoos? All of these specific choices provide different information to the audience about the character and how he or she fits into the story. The costume designer carefully selects from the many choices available to provide the visual image of the character that will best tell the story.

Sometimes the character is not a specific person, but rather a visual representation of an idea. In this case, the costume designer still makes choices based upon the personal and societal meanings we attach to visual cues. However, they are not made to define a particular person in a particular situation. The designer may choose to evoke a feeling, create an atmosphere, or visualize an idea of something that is relevant to the story, such as the inner turmoil of a character or the environment in which a character exists. These meanings, many times, are operating on a more emotional and instinctive level than meanings based upon rules or fashion that define a person's place within society—but that does not mean they are any less important or well defined. Sometimes these meanings create the visual image that best assists in telling the story.

The choices that a costume designer makes are developed through a multistep process that begins with the script. The costume designer, the director, and other designers first study the script and the information provided within the text; then they combine that information with their individual impressions of the story, the characters, and the world of the play and what they want the audience to understand or feel. The director and designers work together in a collaborative process to determine a particular approach or concept to the visual elements that is unique to that production. This collaborative process involves the sharing of ideas and visual elements, usually through a series of design meetings. Sometimes designers seek inspiration for the visual world or the characters. Photographs, paintings, even music can spark an idea or help express an element of the story that the designers and director want to share. Many times, research is required about specific time periods, events, or locations that will be part of the world that is created onstage. From that research, the designers and director can decide how closely to represent that reality or whether to represent it at all. This collaborative process results in a particular concept or design approach that is unique to the production.

The overall design approach artistically affects all the choices of all the designers. The costume designer must always base his or her designs

Examples of costume research from two historical eras, the turn of the century (19th to 20th) and the 1950s.

on what best supports the design approach and creates the world of the play. These choices are also affected by practical elements that must be determined and accommodated. The most basic practical element is the number of characters and the number of different costumes they require within the production. This information is usually compiled into a **costume plot** or list. Costume designers structure this information in different ways according to their own process, but the objective is to determine the specific costume needs of the production. The compiling of this information can bring clarity to another reality of creating a world on stage: whether the performers must change costumes and how much time they have to do so. Also, the physicality of the performance can impact the particular choices that the costume designer makes. Running, dancing, fighting, even gesturing all impact the particular choices of the design.

Once practical needs are determined and the overall artistic foundation for a production is laid, the costume designer must begin to visualize the specific choices for the costumes. Different designers approach this step of the process in different ways, but the goal is always the same—to

CITY OF ANGELS COSTUME PLOT

ACT 1	PROLOGUE	SC 1 - L.A. HOSPITAL	SC 2 - STONE'S OFFICE/STINE'S OFFICE	SC 3 - BUDDY FIDLER'S OFFICE	SC 4 - STONE'S OFFICE	SC 5 - STINE'S BEDROOM	SC 6 - STONE'S OFFICE/STINE'S BEDROOM	SC 7 - STONE'S BUNGALOW	SC 8 - BUDDY'S OFFICE
STINE			LOOK #1	SAME		LOOK #2			SAME
STONE		LOOK #1 UNDER SHEET?	LOOK #1 W/ COAT & HAT		SAME			SAME PANTS & SHIRT	
GABBY / BOBBI						GABBY LOOK #1 (TRAVEL SUIT)	SAME		
DONNA / OOLIE			OOLIE LOOK # 1		SAME		SAME		DONNA LOOK #1
BUDDY FIDLER/ IRWIN IRVING				BUDDY LOOK #1					BUDDY LOOK #2
CARLA HAYWOOD/ ALAURA KINGSLEY			ALAURA LOOK #1						
WERNER KRIEGLER/ LUTHER KINGSLEY									
GERALD PIERCE/ PETER KINGSLEY									
AVRIL RAINES/ MALLORY KINGSLEY									
PANCHO VARGAS/ LIEUTENANT MUNOZ									
GENE / OFFICER PASCO		ORDERLY							
STAND-IN / MARGARET									
GILBERT / DR. MANDRIL									GILBERT (BARBER)
JIMMY POWERS								LOOK #1 (CROONER)	
STUDIO COP / BIG SIX								BIG SIX	
STUDIO COP / SONNY								SONNY	
DEL DACOSTA/ MAHONEY		ORDERLY							
CINEMATOGRAPHER (JACK)/									
SHOESHINE / COMMISSIONER				SHOESHINE					

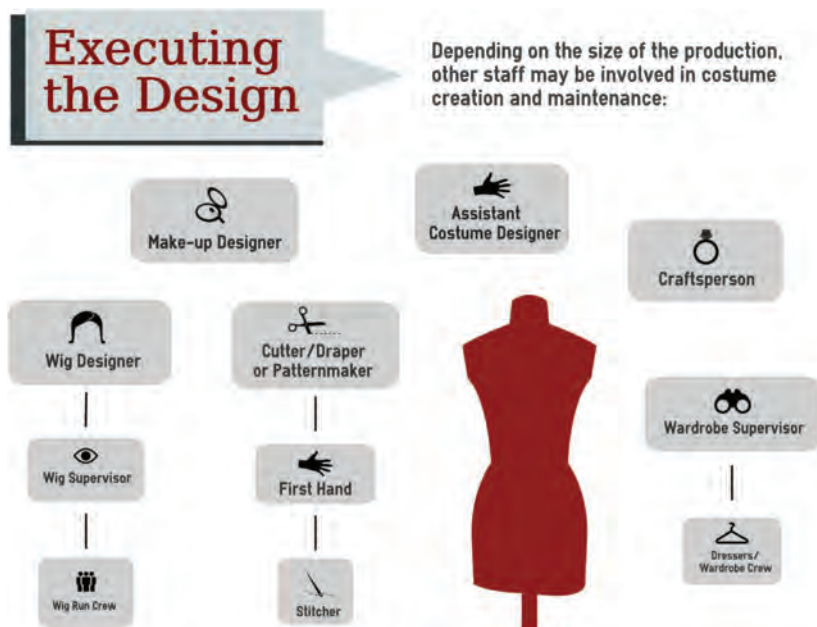Act 1 costume plot of the musical *City of Angels*.
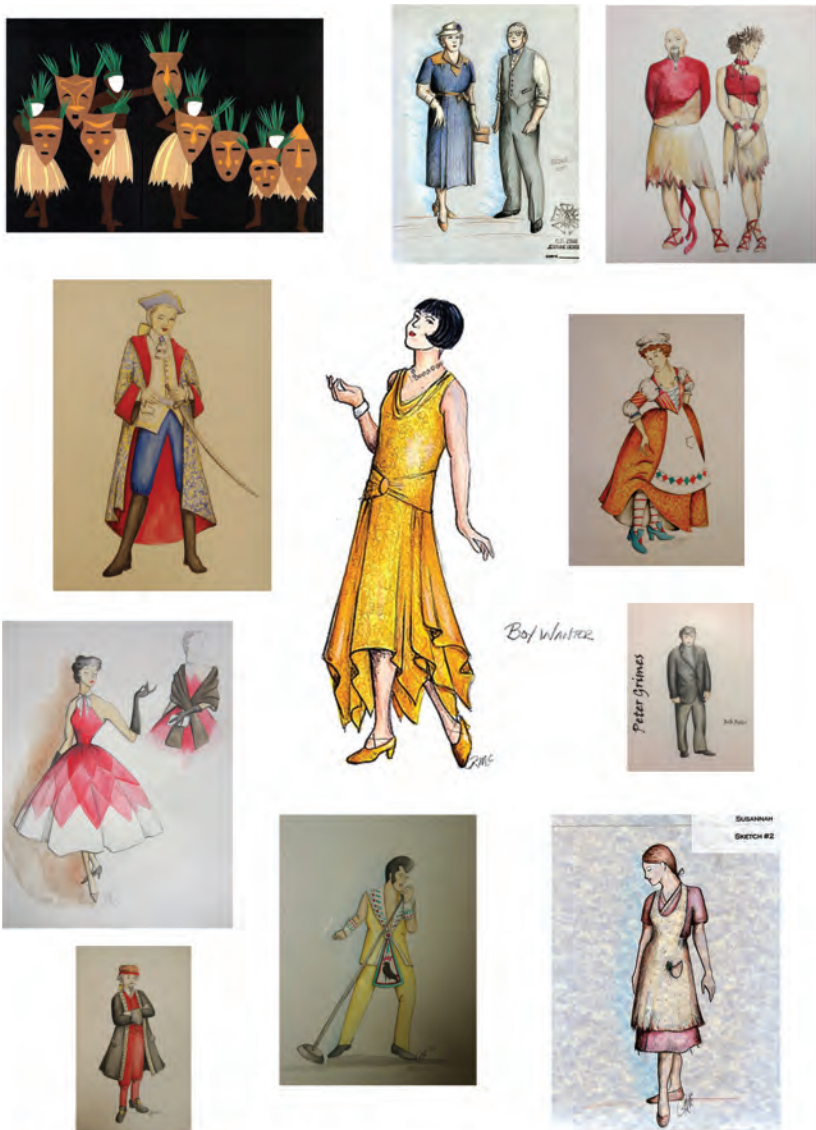
Costume renderings by Robin L. McGee.

visually represent the physical appearance of the play's characters. Many designers create artwork to visually communicate their intentions, generally called **costume renderings**, a series of sketches, paintings, or collages.

Many designers also compile research to accompany this artwork to act as the visual representation of their designs. Magazines, photographs,

illustrations, portraits, and even written information can all help to specify how the characters and their world will appear to the audience. Some designers assemble swatches, examples of the colors and textures of fabrics they wish to use. All of this information and visual representation is used to communicate with the director, designers, and performers how the characters will ultimately appear onstage.

The conceptualization and visual representation of ideas is only half the process of costume design. These ideas must be turned into reality. This realization is a multistep process that involves many elements and, usually, many people. Before beginning the realization of a costume design, the parameters of the process must be determined. For every production, a particular amount of time, money, and labor is available and required. Because this is different for each production, the approach to the realization of the costume design is always different. Sometimes costumes are created, sometimes existing garments are used, and sometimes it is a combination of these two approaches. Whichever approach is used, the costume renderings and/or research serve as the plan for what the characters will look like.

Executing the Design

Depending on the size of the production, other staff may be involved in costume creation and maintenance:

Make-up Designer

Assistant Costume Designer

Craftsperson

Wig Designer

Cutter/Draper or Patternmaker

Wardrobe Supervisor

Wig Supervisor

First Hand

Wig Run Crew

Stitcher

Dressers/ Wardrobe Crew

If the costumes are being created, then the rendering becomes a blueprint. The people responsible for the realization of the costume analyze the rendering to determine its elements and how to make them. For the person or persons creating the clothing, they must combine what they see in the rendering with their own training and knowledge of fabrics, construction methods, and historical clothing (when appropriate) to turn a two-dimensional illustration into three-dimensional clothing. Many times this process involves creating a **mockup**—a version of the garment made out of inexpensive fabric. This allows the designer to see the idea in three dimensions and also see how it fits the actor's body, allowing adjustments to be made before the garment is constructed. The costume designer is generally involved in or in charge of selecting the fabrics from which the garments will be made. Many choices are available for different colors, textures, and types of fabric. The costume designer must select fabrics that are appropriate for the construction of the garment and fulfill the plan for the visual representation of the character.

If the costumes are not being created, and existing garments are being used, there are several means of acquiring them: pulling, borrowing, renting, and buying. Many theatres maintain a stock of costumes used in previous productions from which they "pull" items they need. If a particular theatre does not have an item that they need within their own stock, they may be able to borrow or rent it from another theatre that does. There are also businesses that rent items or whole sets of costumes for use on stage. Another option is to purchase needed items from stores, online businesses, or other merchants. It is very common to use a combination of all of these methods to assemble the needed items for a show. The costume designer must be able to coordinate all costume items, whether created, bought, rented, borrowed, or pulled, into a cohesive combination that fulfills the plan for the costume designs.

Whatever the origin of the costumes, the ultimate goal is for them to be worn by the actors onstage. This means that they must go through a process of fitting—each costume is tried on the actor and adjustments are made so that the garment fits that particular actor correctly and creates the appropriate image of the character. During this fitting, many of the specific choices for the costume are made—how the garment fits, the extent to which the actor can move in the clothing, which undergarments create the correct look and body shape for the actor, what acces-

sories complete the outfit, and what makeup and hairstyle complete the look of the character. This is the stage of the design process where the character's whole look begins to come together and the costume renderings come to life.

As we have discussed, the visual representations of the characters are made up of a complex set of choices made by the costume designer and many others. These choices must be able to be replicated exactly each night onstage: each actor wearing particular clothes, hair, and makeup in specific ways and at specific times. All of this must be documented, so that it can be implemented each time the actors perform. This documen-tation varies based upon the organization and the people involved. Some of the common paperwork includes a costume plot and a **pieces list** of every item used in the show. This list can also be used as part of the infor-mation given to the wardrobe crew or department. The wardrobe crew is responsible for dressing the actors, making sure they match the design, helping the actors change costumes when necessary, and maintaining the costumes and look of the show for each performance. Their paperwork includes information on costume changes, laundry/ maintenance procedures, and check-in lists for costume items that have been created from the pieces lists. All of this documentation is crucial for the consis-tent creation of the visual world represented on stage each night.

The last step for the costume designer is to see everything together onstage during dress rehearsals. All the exploration, research, collaboration, planning, construction, fittings, and finishing are done so that the visual elements created and decided upon by the director and designers come together to create the world of the play. Dress rehearsals allow them to see this world for the first time. During these rehearsals, refinements can be made or whole ideas can be reenvisioned. These final necessary modifications ensure that the visual world created for the audience is the best one to tell the story.

A costume fitting.

Grand Canal 1, 2, 3, and 4 Costume

GRAND CANAL FINALE

GRAND CANAL FINALE