An Introduction to TECHNICAL THEATRE

by Tal Sanders
An Introduction to Technical Theatre
From the time an actor first enters the stage the audience should be able to tell quite a lot about their character, even before they speak. The actor themselves, through posture, stance, gait, and general demeanor can communicate much, but their costume, much like our own clothes, establishes a lot of what the audience infers about that person at first glance. Humans make quick judgments about new stimulus from the world around us. Interpreting situations and reacting to things quickly helps to keep us safe, and, therefore, we are creatures who depend on generalizations that shortcut our perception to reaction time. We see a character hunched over and walking with the aid of a cane, and we assume them to be aged. If we are presented with someone in a white lab coat, we assume they are a scientist or doctor. Likewise, someone dressed in bright colors may seem outgoing, while someone dressed drably may seem more introverted. In our daily lives we develop our own characters as we choose how we present ourselves to the world, and our wardrobe is a key component of that presentation. Costume design is the artful creation of wardrobe that tells the stories of the play’s characters. Good costume design accomplishes the looks required by the production while preserving the comfort and flexibility of the performers and addresses wardrobe maintenance concerns for the run of the production. It is an art that relies on knowledge of period detail, fabric construction, tailoring, and costume craft.

Theatrical costume designers are often responsible for the entire look of the character, including wardrobe, accessories, hairstyles (or wigs), and makeup. In some productions, a wig designer or makeup designer is involved. Initial costume designs are typically established prior to a full cast being selected for the show and may be revised to fit the body types of actors eventually cast for the production. Designs are usually rendered in a full-body sketch, which is either painted or otherwise colored to show the eventual desired look. Costume designers carefully consider the use of color and texture and coordinate them with the other stage designs. The costume renderings are often accompanied by a series of small pieces of the fabrics to be used in the construction of the costumes. These samples, called swatches, are also good for communicating the textures of the fabrics. Fabric textures give the other designers a sense of weight and how the costumes will be affected by light. The feel
of fabrics is important to a design. The way a fabric drapes over a form is affected by this feel, which is referred to as the hand of the fabric.

There’s More to Know

Fabrics can be classified in two basic categories: natural fabrics and synthetics. The “hand,” or feel, of these two classifications of fabric as well as their performance qualities can be quite different and partially depends on how the threads or filaments are woven.

“Warp” and “weft” refer to the two directions fabric is woven in; the warp is the longitudinal threads, and the weft or filler runs perpendicular to it. Fabrics are woven on looms and fall into several main patterns: plain weave, satin weave, and twill. Woven fabrics tend to stretch only along their bias, or diagonally across the weave, unless woven of an elastic thread.

Fabrics can also be knit. Knit fabrics are constructed from a single length of thread, much like hand knitting. These fabrics allow stretch, or “give,” in all directions.

Like other designers, costumers find their inspiration through a combination of careful close reading of the play script and research into the period style and customs for the wardrobe. A costumer may choose a high collared dress for an uptight matronly character, while a childlike bride-to-be may be in a flowing and unstructured gown. Whatever is chosen, it is designed to both allow the performer to move effectively and to inform the audience members about the kind of person they are watching. Costumes regularly establish a sense of class, age, sex, profession, country of origin, health, marital status, season, and sometimes morality.

A costume shop
Once a designer has created the renderings that the costume shop, or costume production facility, will build the wardrobe, a meeting with the costume shop staff will help to determine how production and maintenance of the wardrobe will be accomplished. A costume shop manager runs the costume shop. Assisted by the first hand, the costume shop manager shepherds the process of creating the wardrobe, ordering materials, and assigning work within the shop. Many costume shop managers are active workers in the shop and may specialize in one of several wardrobe construction methods. The two most common methods for creating wardrobe are flat-patterning and draping. Both require skill sets that are so different in approach that it can be rare to find someone who is highly accomplished at both. A pattern maker may create patterns for a show’s wardrobe from scratch or may alter commercial patterns for fit or period details. Sometimes a piece of historic wardrobe is deconstructed to create a pattern from the pieces. A cutter is the term for someone who works with flat patterns and cuts the needed pieces of cloth from the bolt. If an existing pattern is being used for the garment, the cutter’s job is to carefully follow that pattern to construct the piece. Cutters are skilled three-dimensional thinkers who understand fabric construction methods.

Alternatively, sometimes the style of costumes cannot be created using a pattern, like a toga or other diaphanous and flowing dress style. A draper creates these costumes by wrapping fabric over a dress form and then pinning the fabric so it can be sewn to hold the desired shape.

Draped costumes on dress forms
At the initial shop meeting with the costume designer, the shop can begin to devise a schedule for creating the costumes based on decisions about what items will be built from scratch, what may be pulled from stock and altered, and what may be rented or purchased. As the look of each character’s costume is usually communicated via a single rendering, close communication and regular check-ins between the shop and designer are required to achieve the desired looks.

A costume sketch
Around the time of the first rehearsal, the performers will be scheduled for the first of several sessions with the costume shop. During the first meeting, their tailoring measurements are taken and recorded for use by the shop. At this point performers may also be asked not to cut their hair or to begin to grow facial hair for the style of the show. The performers are asked back a few times during the rehearsal period for fittings when their wardrobe is test fit on them for both look and movement considerations. Fittings also give the actor insight to the clothing of their character. This can help them incorporate that visual sensibility into their characters. During the rehearsal process, actors wear rehearsal clothes to help them adjust to the wardrobe style of the eventual costume. Actors may be asked to supply some basic rehearsal clothes options like a long skirt or flat shoes for women, or trousers or hard-soled shoes for men. If a period requires something unusual such as hoop skirts or dress swords, the costume shop will supply rehearsal-friendly approximations of those styles. Period wardrobe can seem uncomfortable or ill-fitting at first. In rehearsal, actors need to get used to how high a waistband sits or how tight a bodice is laced to be able to move naturally in character. Along with rehearsal clothes, common personal accessories can be requested from the costume shop for rehearsals. Items such as fans, wallets, purses, compacts, jewelry, and pocket or wristwatches are commonly requested.

Show wardrobe must often allow performers to change quickly between scenes. Clothing is often rigged to go on and off quickly. Ample use of Velcro, snaps, and magnets along with replacing shoelaces with elastic, underdressing (wearing something underneath for a quick reveal), and having a helpful dressing crew backstage can make a quick change easier. Often wardrobe purchased off the rack has to be altered or rigged for production use.

Costume shops need a variety of skills to operate. Some shows require bringing in a specialist to handle particular elements of a design. Costume specialties include dyers, wig stylists, leather workers, and costume craft specialists. Costume crafts include jewelry-making, lace tatting, cobbling, millenary, and armor. Millenary arts include all hat making and haberdashery. Armor is common to the theatre, and costume crafts strive to make believable armor from lightweight materials while allowing actors to move comfortably. Painted rubber sheeting and moldable thermoplastics are often used to replicate the look of metallic armor.

The standard tools of a costume shop should seem familiar to most of us, though some of the tools may be industrial or professional versions of the home variety we are familiar with. Sewing machines, large worktables for laying out cloth, and patterns are standard as are irons and ironing boards, steamers, and a laundry area. Spools of thread and cloth bolts in many colors along with drawers of notions including buttons and snaps, zippers and trims are found in costume shops, but you will also find less familiar tools such as a large dye vat or an over-lock serger machine. All the standard equipment in a costume shop is employed to created fabric based elements.
Consider This

Equipment functions best when used only on the materials for which it is intended. Please do not borrow fabric shears from the costume area for cutting non-fabric items.

Earlier it was mentioned that the use of a backstage dressing crew can be very helpful in managing quick changes. A dresser might also be assigned to a particular performer to assist in their costume and makeup application preparations. In the professional theatre union, actors are only required to report to the theatre at “half-hour,” that is 30 minutes prior to the scheduled start time of the performance. Though many come earlier to prepare, in this relatively short period of time, a performer may require wardrobe assistance. The relationship between dressers and actors is an important one and is worthy of the time invested in making it work. The performers are literally exposed during these exchanges and are trying to maintain focus for their performances. Meanwhile, the dressers are under the pressure of time and care for details. Both the actor’s and dresser’s perspectives need to be respected and preserved. Rehearsal and repetition can be key to an organized, efficient, and fast change.

The costume shop maintains all costumes during the performance run. Some items may be laundered, some may be dry cleaned, and some may only be able to be spot cleaned due to their materials or construction. Actors are typically asked to provide their own undergarments and are usually responsible for cleaning them. This leaves the costume staff to focus on any needed repairs and maintaining the look of the show. Laundry may be done daily or less frequently depending on the staffing. Performers take some responsibility for maintaining their costumes by ensuring they are cared for and properly hung and organized, and reporting any maintenance problems. An actor who has left their costumes rumpled up on the stage floor after the last performance should not be too surprised when they find them wrinkled or unwashed for the next show. There is usually quite a bit of wardrobe to coordinate and track, so all parties need to do their best to keep things in order.

Sometimes a play calls for clothing to take some unusual punishments. Blood effects are pretty common. A spill of wine or other food also occurs in a number of plays. The costume shop works with the props designer to come up with solutions that are believable approximations for the audience, but that can also be washed out of the affected wardrobe. Fortunately these effects are often looking for high contrast color impact, and though it might seem like white would be the easiest color to be permanently stained, bleach and other laundry agents can help us get back to white with relative ease. The costume shop should also test other liquids the actors may handle, such as colored waters for drinks. In general natural colorings and liquids without sugars tend to be easier to wash out.
For Further Exploration
