# **Costume Quick Notes**

**Costume design** is the most personal aspect of design. The costume designer must create clothes for characters that, on the one hand, reflect the ideas and goals of the play, but, on the other hand should look like the character chose the clothing in the same way you choose yours every day.

These **goals** of a costume designer can be broken into five categories:

1. costumes should help establish tone and style
2. establish time and place
3. add character information
4. costumes should aid the performer
5. coordinate with the director's and other designers' concepts

**Practical/Period costuming:** They may look just like what we wear today, or they may look like what people really wore at the time in which the play is set.

**Stylized Costuming:** Working more in symbolism or abstract concepts that come together to mean something.

**The elements of visual design: line, mass, composition, space, color, and texture.**

**Silhouette:** The first important element of a costume is its silhouette, which combines its line and mass. Silhouette is the fastest way to identify the time and place of a period costume. Silhouette also tells what parts of the body are emphasized, hidden, or displayed by the clothing.

**Composition:** A costume designer considers composition on several different levels. She composes a single costume, she creates a composition of a single character over the duration of the play, and she composes how the entire cast should look when on stage together at any moment of the play. Usually a central character will change radically through the play's action (Oedipus blinds himself, Nora in A Doll House decides to leave her husband) and the character's successive costumes should show the character's evolution. Factors that a costume designer considers when composing the costuming of the entire cast might include putting the leading characters in more noticable clothing, working within a restricted color pallette, or demonstrating relationships among characters through silhouette or color so that some look good and some silly together.

**Space:** is less a factor for costume designers than set designers, because their canvas is always the human body. Color in costumes functions similarly to color in set design; it has its four properties, we associate certain colors with comedy versus tragedy or with other kinds of moods, and color must be used with less subtlety than in life to compensate for the distance between audience and actors.

**Texture:** The first element of texture is in the fabric itself: satins are smooth and shiny while lace is light and highly textured and tweed is heavy and highly textured. On the stage, plastics, leathers, furs, feathers, and other materials may also be combined with fabric. Two dimensional texture is provided by the fabrics' patterns: paisley, plaid, and polka dots have a busy visual texture, for example. Many costumes are composed of multiple fabrics making up multiple articles of clothing plus accessories, making an elaborate visual texture.

# **Costume Designer's Process**

1. Text analysis: the costume designer looks specifically at the characters, the characters' actions, how the characters change through the play, the times and locations of the play, and the style of the play.

2. Production meetings: the costume designer must also work within a director's concept for the play, which may shift the time, place, or style from that indicated by the playwright, and coordinate with other designers' ideas.

3. The costume designer may present initial ideas in the form of thumbnail sketches, color palettes, fabric swatches, or pictures drawn from outside sources.

4. Once final designs have been approved, the costume designer creates renderings. Costume designers' renderings include swatches, or small samples, of each fabric to be used in the costume.

5. The costume designer gives the renderings to the costume shop for use in constructing the costumes. Thus, renderings may also contain verbal instructions. The designer may also sketch other views of the costume to aid the shop in building the garments.

6. The costume designer does not usually build or buy the costumes; this is the job of the costume shop. A designer will attend fittings when actors try on the work of the costume shop. The designer may make adjustments at that time, depending on how the garments suit the actor and character and the actions that character engages in onstage.

7. Designers join the entire group of artists, in the theatre where the play will open, during technical and dress rehearsals. Normally, sets, lights, and sound are handled in tech rehearsals, and the costume designer comes in for the first dress rehearsal, which is when costumes and makeup are added. Sometimes, when the costumes are elaborate, the designer, costume shop foreman, and director watch a costume parade.

**costume parade** is when actors come out singly or in groups in their costumes outside the context of the play, simply to examine the look of each costume, its appropriateness to a scene, and how groups of actors will look together.

# **Historical Conventions of Costume Design**

Of course actors have always worn costumes, but the job of costume designer evolved only in the 19th century with the general theatrical trend toward historical accuracy.

Costume design in most cases costumes were left up to the actors. In Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, each actor in the company provided his own costumes. Except for certain conventional costumes for characters like Ancient Romans, Shakespeare's company wore contemporary clothing of as fine a quality as they could afford. The company was given the cast-off clothing of the aristocracy and thus had a small stock of costumes belonging to the company. Hirelings and apprentices, who were not sharing members of the company, were probably costumed from this stock wardrobe. Audiences did not expect historical accuracy in costuming, but they did want visual splendor.

The practices described for Shakespeare's company lasted for hundreds of years. It often led to strange character inconsistencies; for example, a famous actress who commanded a high salary could appear in the best gown in the whole play, even if she were playing the maid within the story of the play.

A few companies in the 18th century experimented with historically accurate costuming of period plays. This was mostly done to draw an audience, as an extra piece of publicity about the play. In these cases, it was usually the set designer or an actor-manager who selected the costumes. Often, only the lead characters were costumed in period clothing.