

10

The Costume Family: Life Membership

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

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Unions: There to Look After Their Membership

In the UK, it's possible to work whether a member of the union or not. In the USA, other than in 'Right to Work' states, it's divided into union or non-union work, one or the other. Unions support people working in industry, establishing and maintaining fair pay and working conditions, offering help and intervention should a company fail to pay (unusual but possible), or other circumstances where an employer falls short of their obligations towards an employee.

Subscription fees put some people off, but I would urge joining the union, because costume as a department could do with more 'clout' and be a voice to be reckoned with, which union membership offers. Non-union rates are influenced by union rates which are 'rule of thumb'. There's nothing to stop non-union members receiving union rates or higher if they can be negotiated. Lower rates may also be agreed between crew and the producer.

UK: BECTU (BROADCASTING, ENTERTAINMENT, COMMUNICATIONS AND THEATRE UNION)

The Bectu union is for the stage and screen. It has a downloadable costume and wardrobe rate card for theatre, film and TV, updated with the cost of living. Other benefits include free legal aid, discounts on public liability and other insurance policies, deals on Apple Mac products, from time to time, as well as networking opportunities and excellent low-cost and free courses covering Photoshop, CAD, training in costume supervision, negotiation skills, building CVs and dealing with bullies. More courses are in development.

Joining the union when you start working is an insurance policy in itself.

www.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/rates/costume-and-wardrobe

www.bectucostume.com

www.instagram.com/bectuunion

www.facebook.com/BECTUOfficial

www.facebook.com/bectuyoungmembers

WORKING IN THE USA: UNION OR NON-UNION?

The motion picture and theatrical union IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists, and Allied Crafts) offers higher fees, medical insurance and pensions.

www.motionpicturecostumers.org

www.instagram.com/iatse/

www.facebook.com/groups/94921257450/

USA: NON-UNION PRODUCTION

Those working consistently on non-union productions often opt to stay that way when they have plentiful non-union work. 'Right to Work' states in the USA don't require union

membership. These are popular with film production because overheads are lower and crews more affordable.

How to Get into Costume

There are no proven routes or short-cuts to getting into the industry other than by starting with work placements (typically through college) or, as a legitimate volunteer, then as a trainee, intern or runner. The following are some things you can try, and try we must!

COSTUME DESIGN, OPENING DOORS

To become a costume designer, with or without training, will mean starting in any position you can get and working your way up. This is the most tried and tested way. It does work if you have the drive and conviction that this is the role for you, but it takes time. Offer to help costume designers, stylists and costumers with anything at all they might need. They may be inundated with requests so persevere. Seize opportunities and make contacts whenever they arise. Simply being an extra pair of hands could be just the opening you need. Don't expect results every time, but over time.

People are rarely taken on 'cold' without connections or experience unless it's to run errands, but this can be an opportunity in the making, so don't rule out this approach. When building a career and reputation, contacts, experience and exposure may be of equal value to money in certain circumstances, making it worthwhile doing a job you feel passionately about for little or nothing. If you monetize everything you do, you could be missing out. Investing time into working in any area 'on spec' (speculatively, without expectation of payment) is likely to pay off long term.



Figure E10.1 Meryl Streep and costume designer Patricia Field on set for *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). The costume designer may occasionally get to work with stars, although it's not guaranteed, but it's just as enjoyable working with all performers, from 'walk-ons' to principals. TM @ Copyright © 20th Century Fox Film

COSTUME MAKING: GETTING UP AND RUNNING

Working professionally as a costume maker commanding good rates of pay means working to consistently high standards. Stints of work experience, internships or working as a trainee could gain enough experience for an entry-level position. Pattern cutting and construction can be learned at college, then, once the fundamentals are learned to a proficient standard, they are best augmented through assisting a professional.

Self-instruction through online tutorials and books can be helpful, but it may only get you so far towards reaching professional standards because they can be a minefield of misinformation or non-professional standards and the potential for picking up bad habits along the way. This is why working alongside the professionals (in any way, even just being in the room) is of special value because it's interactive. Their skills are absorbed as well as taught. Established costume makers often take on graduates, having first met them through work experience at college, which makes the perfect entree into this world.

Costumes are expensive to produce, so everything must be done right. Competency in basic skills are needed even for elementary tasks like tacking or sewing on fastenings. Time is always of the essence. It's important to do each task well and to do it swiftly without cutting corners. Costume makers often need extra help when nearing a deadline, so working as an assistant, or 'outworker' (taking work away), is good too. But be careful not to take on too much because you can't change your mind and send the costumes back. You must deliver! Word gets round fast when there's a new kid on the block who turns in good work, even if it's doing basic tasks. These are always needed and could get you an 'in' and off to a flying start.

For those not taking college training, all is not lost, but you will need grit and determination to find the right level of independent costume and sewing courses and then plenty of practice. Many cosplayers and re-enactor groups are self-taught, some achieving professional standards, so it is possible!



Figure E10.2 Costume making should not be underestimated as a career. It can be every bit as creative as the designer, and with a little less stress! Georgia Nichols, costume-making apprentice learns the ropes at the Royal Opera House costume department, 2023. © Royal Opera House/Sim Canetty-Clarke

COSTUME DESIGN AND MAKING TRAINING FOR OPERA, BALLET AND DANCE

Because theatre costume designers are often the set designers too, the best start to this career path is through training in stage design at college. This will not only give a good grounding in the design practice and skills but also some valuable connections inside the profession that can lead to work placements. The aim after graduating is to assist established designers to gain the necessary experience to launch an independent career.

Ballet and dance costume-making training is more straightforward than design and is found on top-level courses. This paves the way to finding openings with professional costume makers, either freelance or in-house at one of the big theatre companies. Working alongside the dancers during fittings and rehearsals is invaluable to truly understand their needs. And as theory becomes practice, this becomes experience, and then careers will take off.

Ballet costume makers can make any other types of costume too. It's good to specialize, but it's also good to be versatile until you find your *métier* (specialism). For stretch costume, intrinsic to dance costume, specialist training and practice is a must. For all areas of professional costume making, aim for the top of the field. Working to the highest standards helps increase employment opportunities at a higher level and at the best rates.



Figure E10.3 Heather Cairns, costume-making apprentice, constructing a classical tutu at the Royal Opera House costume department. © Royal Opera House/Sim Canetty-Clarke, 2022

FASHION AND WARDROBE STYLING: WHERE TO START?

After fashion training, the first step made through college contacts is an internship, ideally at one of the glossies. Interns attend photo shoots, picking up clothes from designers and PR agencies who represent the fashion labels, and returning them after the shoot. You might wonder why you'd need any training to do this, but it's running these types of errands that gets you in the door. How you approach it from there (willingly, positively) will get you noticed and make you needed, giving you a 'toehold' to getting asked back. It's simple, but that's not to say it's easy, so persistence is key.

WORKING IN COSTUME RENTAL

Costume professionals are often freelance, but working for a costume house is full-time employment, with office hours, lunch breaks, holidays and even pensions. One step removed from the film industry itself, costume rental can be a stand-alone career or a springboard to working directly in the industry.



Figure E10.4 Costume designer Lori Ann Robinson pulling costumes at CBS wardrobe storage, Los Angeles, for *The Bold and Beautiful* (2006). If being surrounded by costumes all day every day sounds like your idea of the perfect career, costume rental could be a great place to start. © Wynne-Campion/ABC BAPRESS

Costumiers working in costume houses gain invaluable knowledge and experience of costume in the periods stocked. Working relationships are struck up with busy costume designers and supervisors who use their services, coming to depend on them like they would any assistant, to the extent they may get ‘headhunted’ and transition to becoming their design assistants, working in the heart of the industry. Working as a costumier is a great form of hands-on training which could be seen as a stepping stone to working in the film industry. Some top designers and supervisors started their careers this way in starter positions, whether they had training or not.

Taking the leap from the security of full-time employment to the more precarious freelance world might seem daunting, but it’s possible to be more than full-time employed as a freelancer. Most freelancers would run a mile from being tied down to one job with fixed hours – even when they are half the hours they are doing as a freelancer!

MUSIC PROMOS AND TOURS: GETTING IN ON THE ACT

To become a costume designer, fashion or wardrobe stylist in this sector, start with emerging bands on low-budget videos, gigs or tours. Approach them and offer to create them some looks. Present your ideas: sketches, mood boards or sample outfits, and they might just try you out if they’re looking for something new. Dressing jobs at concert venues gets you on the inside, with an opportunity to connect with people in the know. Directors and designers often ‘cut their teeth’ on music promos, progressing to TV commercials with better budgets, and some graduating to film once they’ve built a name and reputation. So it’s a great way to meet emerging directors on their way up.

Performing arts schools like London’s Brit School are a spawning ground for some huge music industry names: Adele, Amy Winehouse, Imogen Heap and Katie Melua. Costume design is part of their visual art and design course, training alongside those following in the footsteps of the icons above, putting you on the right circuit from the off, working your way up from college shows to tomorrow’s star names of rock.

BECOMING A TEXTILE ARTIST

If you’d love to become a textile artist, consider a textile or costume course that offers textile arts to learn the basics of dyeing, printing, fabric design and colour theory, as well as drawing and painting, working by hand as well as digitally. With the fundamentals learned, private courses are also run by textile artists which are of great value for learning their tricks of the trade and making contacts within the industry. These courses are how the professionals often find new talent and may even be an entrée to becoming a professional textile artist.

WORKING AS A COSTUME ILLUSTRATOR

Costume illustration is increasing in popularity, but it may not always provide plentiful work straight away so it could be approached as part of a portfolio of talents when starting out then seeing how things develop from there. Fledgeling costume designers will always do well to work on their illustration skills. Expressing ideas on paper is

hugely valuable and liberating to the costume designer and illustrator. Training for this niche role will focus on drawing and painting, both physical and digital. Knowledge and a passion for costume and fashion history comes a close second.

HOW NOT TO BE OUT OF WORK

Being freelance risks work not coming in from time to time; it's something that freelancers get used to. There are lean times and times when you're crazy busy working round the clock, but this is normal too. Build a 'portfolio' career in case you need to work outside the industry doing any part-time or self-employed jobs to pay the rent during leaner times (it happens to everyone). It won't be the end of the road, just a bend to navigate along the way.

The way to minimize being out of work is by working to consistently high standards, reliably and without drama or fuss, and you'll soon become known for all the right reasons.

Presenting Yourself Online

'People get hired through their social media feeds if they're putting up incredible artwork – that's becoming the new portfolio.'

Matt Winston, Stan Winston Academy of Character Arts



Figure E10.5 Dante Baylor, costumer at the Royal Opera House. Working full-time in a costume department can mean more job security than working freelance, but both can keep you busy! Costume departments, such as this one at the Royal Opera House, make and maintain large numbers of costumes for their heavily costumed productions. © 2016 Royal Opera House/Sim Canetty-Clarke

Your online presence is your shop window to the world and a way for people to get to know you and your work. Aim to be an active member and follower of relevant social media groups when you are looking to get established. Work can originate through social media, and it's a great way of making connections or for seeking advice and it's great networking, whatever stage you are at.

WEBSITES

You don't need a website when there's Instagram and Tik Tok, but when you decide it's time, providers like Wix, Squarespace (and others) make it easy to set up. Choose a platform that lets you keep technical control of your website so you're not reliant on someone to update it for a fee. You'll want to showcase your own design style, with quality images, and to come across as professional, so keep the content clear, concise and up to date. Do refresh it regularly with new images and updates on latest projects or work. Include some basic information about yourself that shows your personality – remember professional, no party selfies! Make it quick and easy for busy people to check you out.

IMAGES, SHOWREELS AND VIDEO

Phase out college work once you progress into the professional world. Getting hold of production images takes perseverance. You'll be asking a favour, and it may need gentle but persistent prodding once the film or show is live (i.e. in the public domain). While stills images show off our work, it's great to include moving images too (if only for the algorithms) – our work is seen in action after all. Video shows your work in motion and in context and engages the viewer more than stills alone. Include short, snappy clips, compilation showreels or online links (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo) to give yourself a professional edge. Getting hold of material in the right format and quality for editing is a job in itself, but it should be possible. Edit your own reels if you can as they are costly to edit professionally. For example, here is mine: <https://vinburnham.com/costume-design/showreel-new/>

COPYRIGHT AND IMAGE USE

Copyright is part of the 'intellectual property' (IP) of the film or theatre company, author, photographer and the designer in theatre (not currently in film). IP applies to their work, and the people in any images also have rights under data protection. IP and the law is a bit of a minefield, so don't be caught out. Restrictions on use of production images may be included in a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) or contract, and permission may be needed. For example, behind-the-scenes shots (on set, on stage, fittings or continuity images) are deemed confidential. If in doubt, check with production or your HoD.

Much can be downloaded from the internet, but it could infringe someone's copyright unless permission has been granted. There is copyright trawling software aimed to catch misuse, so be aware and check the current regulations at the time of use. If

you've genuinely tried to find copyright owners and photographers without success, then add a proviso note – and honour it – should anyone object to your photo use: 'Thank you to photographers and copyright holders whose names are unknown. Please make contact if you would like me to remove any image.'

INTERVIEWS: BE YOUR BEST SELF

'Always trust your instincts and have confidence in your own ideas. Even if you are not feeling confident, it helps to pretend!'

Sandy Powell OBE, Costume Designer

Whether live or remote, do your homework on the person you're meeting and have your questions ready. They will want to see the real you, but consider how to present yourself: you'll want to feel confident and as relaxed as possible.

After the interview, then what? They may have other people to see so won't give you the outcome directly. It's frustrating being left in limbo, but give them a few days, and if you still haven't heard from them, follow up with a short message and ask when you might hear. If it's ultimately a no, ask for feedback which you could learn from. Remember that being rejected for one job doesn't mean you won't be asked on another – or asked by the same person another time. There could be many reasons why someone else may be chosen over you. Rest assured it won't be personal and try to see it as a connection made, as a potential beginning not necessarily the end.

Resources

FASHION & CINEMA

Launched in 2012, Fashion & Cinema is a series of events created and produced by Tristana Media including film screenings, on-stage conversations and talks exploring the relationship between fashion and cinema. Writer and curator Keith Lodwick interviews costume designers at live events which are recorded and can be accessed on YouTube and Spotify.

Visit the Fashion & Cinema website.

Watch live events, on-stage conversation, and screenings on the Fashion & Cinema YouTube channel.

Listen to the Fashion & Cinema podcast.

CREW CHATS PODCAST

Highly recommended! Poonam Thanki, a costume props and jewellery maker herself, hosts the **Crew Chats podcast** where you can hear at first hand from industry professionals across film, TV and theatre including the many different roles within the costume department. Find Crew Chats on Spotify, Soundcloud, Apple and wherever you get your podcasts.

THE BLACK COSTUME NETWORK

'We work in a rare field of developing creative collaboration leading to a costly intangible product that's dictated by extreme time constraints: this involves management of change on a level rarely experienced in other industries. I salute all fellow costume supervisors and their coordinators, and I encourage increased support for equality and diversity of crews through the Black Costume Network.'

Annie Crawford, Costume Supervisor

The Black Costume Network is a cohort creating an open and safer space for Black and Mixed-Race creatives in the costume industry in the UK and beyond ...

Find the Black Costume Network on Instagram.

THE COSTUME SYMPOSIUM

In 2017, award-winning costume designer Susannah Buxton was invited to speak at a costume symposium for young technicians and designers held at the Opera House in Oslo, Norway. The experience inspired her to set up a similar event in the UK. This was held in London in June 2018, followed by further events in other parts of the country.

Visit the Costume Symposium website.

HOW TO FIND ME, WHERE I HANG OUT

Visit my website.

Find me on Instagram.

Join the Vinilla Burnham Costume Group Facebook: A costume and creature FX community to interact with others and ask questions.

Best of luck to you all!

Figure E10.6 The end of one project means that the beginning of a new adventure is just around the corner. Katarina Johnson-Thompson MBE in Müllerlight commercial (Merman, 2021). Director: Martin Krejčí. Producer: Nick Goldsmith. Costume designer: Vin Burnham. Costume makers: Lal d'Abo and Jackie Hallatt. © Sean Collymore

