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Costume on Stage

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

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ALEJO VIETTI, Costume Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 44 of *Get into Costume* book)

‘As much as you may think that you’re the perfect person for a project, if you didn’t get it, you didn’t get it. You cannot hold a grudge, because it will only build resentment which is neither healthy nor helpful. Learn how to deal with situations and how to move on.’



Figure E2.1 One of the beautiful, 17th century costumes designed by Alejo Vietti for *The Three Musketeers* made by the Alley Theater costume shop in 2019. © Alejo Vietti

Do you do your own costume drawings?

I’ve done my own drawings digitally for a few years now, using an iPad and a program called Procreate on which I’ve self-trained using YouTube videos. Drawing digitally allows me to sketch anywhere: on a plane or a train, or in between fittings, so I don’t need to carry paper, markers and watercolours. It’s very practical and allows me to implement changes much faster than having to re-sketch. If you do everything in different layers, you can change colours,

lengths of skirts or whatever details you need to. Although I can fall into a rabbit hole of adding more realism, shading or an effect if it has sequins, luminescence or sparkles. So sometimes a lot of time goes into one single sketch!

Theatre or film – how do you choose?

I advise young designers to follow a career in film and TV if that interests them, simply because there are so many more platforms and therefore more

◀ opportunities. It's a mathematical equation: there's a set number of theatres and shows per season in the USA. More than ever theatres are looking to co-produce shows to fill the season, which reduces the number even further. On Broadway, some theatres are booked for years with shows that last forever, so they're out of the equation for a long time. As the pool of designers keeps growing, each year you have more designers for the same number of shows. It's much more competitive to get theatre jobs, especially in the USA.

Theatre is very time-consuming, emotionally draining but also emotionally fulfilling; it's a career of highs and lows, so you must have a burning love for the art and for the physical space itself. A freelance designer might have several offers for the same slot, and sometimes no offers for a season. Theatre, at least in the USA, pays less than the movies in general, unless you hit the jackpot with one of these mega shows and you get a royalty every week. The average designer gets pretty standard to low salaries.

Costume budgets are never enough no matter where you do it – you always need more. From my

experience working in the UK and Europe, the cost of making costumes is much higher in the USA. You need to be astute about how to allocate the budget you have for the show.

Your advice to young designers?

One of the most important things is to keep your eyes on the road. It's easy for young designers to get distracted and start looking at the shows they didn't get, but there's no point in crying over spilled milk, it happened already. I think it's also super important to learn how to listen. It's not as easy as it sounds. Often-times we get information, and we are reactive instead of proactive – what could you take from this and figure out a solution? It's easy to get carried away by your emotion and have raw reactions, especially in today's world, where everything is so immediate. Take time to pause and collect yourself and your thoughts. Pick your battles and make them as few as possible!

Find Alejo on Instagram.

RICHARD HUDSON, Theatre Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 48 of *Get into Costume* book)

How do you choose your projects?

I'm quite picky about which projects I'll do, but we all make mistakes. I do occasionally get halfway through a project and think I shouldn't have accepted this because there are too many compromises, or the director is too difficult, I don't need this anymore. That doesn't happen very often. I do still love it. I would love to do more dance, that's my favourite thing. I've done quite a few classical ballets and just loved it. A big three-act tutu ballet is my idea of heaven, or contemporary dance, I love that. I love dancers. They tend to be lovely people, with determination and discipline, who work incredibly hard. They're so focused on their

technique and doing what they are best at, they trust you to do your job. It's rare that I've had an argument or a tussle with a dancer. Normally, if they can lift their arms and roll over on the floor, that's fine. I remember a singer I worked with, we tried forty pairs of shoes on her. There was always something wrong. She had a long dress; you couldn't even see the shoes! That kind of thing drives me mad. In dance, you don't get that. I can just do my job and I love it.

When did you learn to draw?

I've drawn since I was a small child. One Christmas, my parents gave me a big box of coloured pencils from ▶



Figure E2.2 Costume design for the servant Castrone by Richard Hudson (*Volpone*, National Theatre, 1995).
© Richard Hudson

◀ Winsor & Newton. It opened like a book, and they were all lined up, all the shades. There must have been sixty or eighty different colours. I couldn't imagine getting anything more wonderful. It was just heaven. I've still got some little stubs from those coloured pencils. I can't throw them away.

One odd thing that has happened. When I was at college, my drawings were A2 – big, very loose, slightly cartoony – they were lovely. I used ink, charcoal and all sorts of things, but over the years they've gotten tighter and smaller, now only slightly bigger than A4. I sometimes think it's sad: they're quite nice drawings, but I've lost that spontaneity and energy, which I suppose is youth, isn't it? It comes from not really knowing what I'm doing, just making it up. Maybe it gets all a bit too

tight-arsed. I must try to let myself go occasionally, and make a mess!

What do you take away from designing *The Lion King*?

For me, one of the best things about *The Lion King* is the number of people all over the world who said that they've never forgotten it. I was asked to give some lectures in Japan to students, and one of them said to me, 'I was working in a department store, and I saw *The Lion King*, and I thought, I want to do that. I want to work in the theatre.' All these people's lives have changed, or their eyes have been opened. It's humbling.

Learn more about Richard.

AMANDA HALL, Costume Maker

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 55 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E2.3 Amanda Hall showing Georgia Nichols, costume-making apprentice, the ropes at the Royal Opera House costume department (2023). © Royal Opera House/Sim Canetty-Clarke

◀ **What are the ‘tutu rules’?**

The dancer’s arms, hands and legs must be visible. Costumes need to be ‘safe’, especially for partnering, with nowhere for fingers to get trapped. For this reason, decoration is generally kept away from the waist area, or well stitched down. Tutus can get in the way of partnering, which is why it’s vital they fit the body so the partner picks up the dancer and costume in one. Nets need to be stiff to aid longevity so the edges can be scratchy for the partner during lifts!

How are tutus maintained?

Most tutus are hand-washed after the end of a production and dried thoroughly before storage. A full refurbishment will happen every three to four revivals where the tutu plate will have the hoop and strings removed before resteamming, rehooping, and restringing, making it look as it did when it first appeared on stage.

How do tutu makers get ongoing work?

Tutu makers with a good reputation may get offers of work for large ballet companies worldwide. *The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* are mounted internationally every five years or so. Other avenues of work include replacing or refurbishing tutus in existing productions, gala appearances for professionals or making tutus for ballet competitions. Good tutu makers are *always* busy so there’s plenty of room for more makers to come into the industry! Achieving a well-paid, rewarding career requires dedication and productivity. The more efficient the maker,

the greater the hourly rate because commissions are often for a flat fee.

Making for the corps de ballet is repetitive, but principals can be more demanding and may need several fittings, so only the most experienced will make for them. Making a set of tutus can mean a better profit margin, but a single principal tutu may bring greater artistic reward. Tutu making is the same for principals and the corps so if a maker has capacity, they can make for both. All jobs can be repetitive, particularly tutus, but once all the decisions are made it’s time to get down to the making ... Turn up the music and don’t stop until tea break!

We once made a set of over sixty tutus for *Swan Lake*. It was challenging, but on the first day of rehearsal, a young dancer came up to me in her brand-new tutu and said, ‘I feel incredible,’ and that’s what it’s all about!

Your tips for prospective tutu makers?

Prospective tutu makers should work with at least one tutu maker to see what’s involved and if it’s the right career for you. All makers make slightly differently so be interested in how others tackle the construction and feed that into your own work. Find an internship with a professional ballet company. Not only for the opportunity to work with dancers but also to have a good look at the costumes. They may be reluctant to try a new maker on a new production, but there may be opportunities to make a one-off trial. If a new dancer joins the company, a single tutu may need adding into an existing set.

You can read more in Amanda’s book, *Making Tutus* (The Crowood Press, 2024).

Find Amanda on Instagram.

JOHN MACFARLANE, Theatre Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 57 of *Get into Costume* book)

What is the typical time span of a theatre production for you?

Overall, I take about a year on a ballet. I'm also painting the big cloths. I've never really worked out another way of working. It's too late to do that! I've never managed the concept of having a squad of model builders. I do use them, but only for furniture. If I need Baroque couches or an old Pierre table with a marble top or standing candelabras in *Swan Lake*, everything is delivered to me white. If it's a marble-top table, I do the marble top. I do the gold leaf on it and the patina

so that it matches the rest of the model, which has been painted.

I work the model out through building it and changing and discarding. When I get to how it should look, I start at the beginning and build the perfect version. I'm constantly adjusting the backcloth, taking it out, adjusting the tone ... I can't begin to imagine how I'd instruct a model builder and leave them to it. I've never worked out how to do that. I'd feel terribly guilty, I think!

Visit John's website.



Figure E2.4 John Macfarlane's studies for the Tree Men costumes in *Hansel and Gretel* (Metropolitan Opera, New York, 2007). © John Macfarlane

AMANDA BARROW, Costume Maker, 'The Queen of Stretch'

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 64 of *Get into Costume* book)

Do you train people in stretch?

We take people on trial when they come recommended and then usually only when we have very repetitive work that doesn't require too much supervision. If they prove keen, self-motivated and able, we get them back in again. Above all, they need to be proficient on a machine. We can teach the stretch element then it's just practice.

I have become incredibly disappointed with the level of sewing competence. I used to teach stretch in various schools/colleges, but I became very disillusioned with the lack of interest in sewing and lack of skill/self-teaching around the edges of what was offered by the colleges. Beyond the basics of stretch

making, I try to emphasize the need for self-teaching: buy *Vogue* patterns, sew garments using the instructions, learn new techniques. Experiment, make lots of mistakes. You learn more from your mistakes than you ever will from getting it right!

Which designers have inspired you most?

Yolanda Sonnabend was my favourite designer, so random and yet ruthlessly specific. William Ivey Long (Chicago) pushed me the hardest technically, and I learnt so much from the process.

Visit Amanda's website.



Figure E2.5 Costumes designed by Kimie Nakano and made, with stretch, for dancers by Amanda Barrow for Akram Khan's *Dust*, part of the English National Ballet's *Lest We Forget* (Barbican Theatre, 2014). © Alamy/David Jensen

LEZ BROTHERSTON OBE, Theatre Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 69 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E2.6 Lez and Henry welcome dogs at work. They are valued members of the team! © Lez Brotherston OBE

How much input do actors have into their costumes?

An actor's input depends on the production. If it's modern, they often do, because they think they know what suits them, what they like to wear and what makes them look good. Very often, that's not helpful, because they're not playing themselves. I remember fitting someone who told me that they only looked good in jeans from Selfridges that were £180 a pair, and that's what she wanted to wear. She was playing a council-house woman – why would she be in £180 jeans? I took her to shops where her character would buy her clothes from.

I don't enjoy doing modern shows very much because you end up being a shopper for them, or an arbiter of taste. With period stuff, you have to commit because you must get it made. You can talk about character, and you've got the drawing in front of you. If you trust the actor, that's another thing.

If someone like Anne Reid, who I love and have worked with a lot, says to me, 'I can't be funny in that, I need this to do it,' I go, 'Give it to her. Don't challenge her on this, because she'll be brilliant. She'll make it work.'

Some actors come in with a notion that they're going to tell you what it's going to be like. I designed for an actress who said, 'I want to look like Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*.' I pointed out she was considerably shorter and a different shape, and we weren't going to get that long line on her, but we'd try. So, we agreed on fabrics and what we would make, but when she put it on in the fitting room and looked in the mirror, she said, 'You can't possibly think I look good in this?' That was when I was able to persuade her to trust me to know what would suit her.

How do young theatre designers get started?

What students need to understand is what the job is. If they want to be a costume designer, the clue is in the title: designer. You must be able to communicate your idea to the director, the producer, the actors and the makers. When a young designer gets a break, you may see a production manager tearing their hair out, holding half a sketch, a Pinterest board and a Cornflakes box. They'll say, 'These are my ideas for *Hamlet*.' That's lovely, but what's your idea for *Hamlet*? Young designers need to distil their ideas down and find a way of communicating them.

There's nothing for trainees on the costumes at first, it's more of an observational role, an extension of their training. Ideally, they will have had a placement at college and have come out for a couple of weeks to see what the real world is like and will have taken that on board. Trainees come to production meetings, workshops, and see how we make things happen. At rehearsals they'll see the relationship between the choreographer, the performers and the designer.

◀ Once I've done the drawings, and I've got my supervisor, we'll look for fabrics, makers, etc. The supervisor needs someone to run and buy spectacles, that kind of thing. It's not costume design, it's being a runner or sampler – but that's not a bad thing. Going around the shops, sampling fabrics, looking at and feeling them, finding the language to talk about them is how you learn. I might say, 'I need something like a georgette. I want it a bit dense, not too see-through, in this range of colours. It can't be too pingy, it's got to be something that wants to collapse and bleed into a scene.' How you

decide later that a fabric isn't going to work, maybe it doesn't 'feel' right or it's fighting you, is just experience.

Your thoughts on dogs at work?

I love dogs. I take mine to work. It changes the dynamic because it gives a lot of focus. If a dancer's feeling a bit dodgy, they sit and stroke the dog. Actors come and cuddle him, and it just gives us another dimension.

Learn more about Lez.

IAN FRAZER WALLACE, Costume Cutter

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 78 of *Get into Costume* book)

In your world, where do design and craftsmanship meet?

Personally, I feel like they are two sides of the same coin. If you're designing without understanding how to build something, then it will forever remain a 2D vision. Likewise, when you start to build, materiality begins to inform silhouette. The two cannot exist exclusively, and it's that marriage that will deliver. The greatest designers I have worked with are those who understand the make process extensively.

Each project requires a different skill set, but there are some universal skills that carry through all projects. I like to have strong all-rounders on my team. Obviously, each individual has their own field of expertise, but I always look for people who enjoy learning, experimenting and expanding their knowledge.

How much collaboration is there between you and the burlesque performer?

There is an incredible amount of collaboration – it wouldn't work if there wasn't. All of the performers I've worked with are the creatives in our relationship. They come to me with a whole concept for an act with visuals, sketches, choreography ideas, music, the whole package. It's my job to break that down into what the costume needs to deliver visually and how it needs to perform through the routine. That then begins all the toing and froing of fabric selection, toiling, fittings, more toiling, more fittings before the final build commences. It requires a lot of input from both sides to create a costume this way, but it is always an exciting journey.

Visit Ian's IMDb page.

TAHRA ZAFAR, Costume and Creature FX Designer-Supervisor

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 83 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E2.7 Tahra Zafar. Photo © Timothy Mann

Describe your Olympics team.

There were around twenty-five of us on the core team, with about sixty specialists joining us at different times. Not that many to manufacture 23,000 costumes! Statistical fact: that's a different outfit, every day, for sixty-five years of your life. We made a lifetime's worth of garments! They were on 800 six-foot costume rails – a mile's worth of costume rails. We had 500 volunteers working in our department helping to dress the cast of 17,000 volunteer performers and a professional cast of 800–1,000 people.

We gave some cast groups their costumes to take home and look after, hoping they would turn up on the night wearing them – which they did! Others we'd dress on site in vast dressing-room villages. We also had animals in the opening ceremony, and my budget included livery, so we were looking after the horses and sheep too! We were working with very creative people, who wanted to deliver their best, but that best might change, so we had to be flexible with the budget, crew and the time needed to deliver.

How did you approach so many costume multiples?

When I got the Olympics job, I decided that I was only going to use British manufacturers to make the costumes as UK manufacturing was going through tough times. Finding the right UK factories was so rewarding. During my first three months, I visited factories who could not only deliver our costumes but where workers were getting paid properly and the machinery they were using was safe.

Up to 300 pieces is seen as a sample range, which worked well for us as many costumes fitted into that bracket. Sets of 1,200 costumes were our largest commissions.

By using British manufacturers, we could work closely and move fast. Getting costumes shipped from factories across the world we couldn't visit wasn't an option, either ethically or sustainably. Everything we worked on needed to be transparent and reportable. Shoe manufacturing, however, was harder to find in the UK so we had to expand our search to within the EU. But still we followed our set working practices.

Did you get to meet the Queen?

Yes! We worked with Angela Kelly, royal dresser to the late Queen Elizabeth. She was pivotal in making that sequence work so well. There was also a stunt man

◀ and body double to make for. Replicas of her jewellery and handbag were made. I went to the palace a lot to make sure everything was right and had an audience with the Queen. She was so lovely! She had the best skin I've ever seen. It was an amazing experience of top-secret stuff. The reward was to see the surprise on everyone's face when the Queen arrived parachuting out of a helicopter into the stadium. Danny Boyle gold!

What did you take away from the experience?

What I love about doing ceremonies is that you're doing a live televised broadcast to billions of people with TV detail and close-ups. It's also a live show in front of a stadium audience of 80,000 people. Take Kenneth Branagh giving a speech about the Industrial Revolution: the detail on his costume had to be

absolutely right for TV standards. People think big events can be a bit sketchy with broad visual strokes, but it can't. It takes a huge creative team: the construction team to build the stage, the costume people, the logistics people, the camera team – all these people creating layers of detail to enable one person to stand in front of the world and perform.

People are very proud to have been involved. Lots of volunteers still have their costumes. There were times, of course, when everyone felt tired and had had enough. That's when you had to give a pep talk and say, 'We know it's going to be amazing.' Sometimes you need someone to give you a push, and when you look back, you'll go, 'That was tough, but I'm so proud of it.' It makes it all worthwhile.

Visit Tahra's website.

Contemporary Dance Company Examples

Ballet Rambert
CDK Dance Company
Malpaso Dance Company
Martha Graham
Pina Bausch
Wang Ramirez

The Costume Bible

Costume remakes would be impossible without a costume bible. This is a physical record contained in a series of box files of collated photos and samples of every fabric and material type used on that production, whether plastics, metals or foams, trimmings, haberdashery, dye samples, noting sources for shoes, boots, jewellery and accessories used for each costume; where it came from or where it was made. Everything is listed down to the last button, along with copies of the original designs and production photos. Bibles can run into many volumes on opera, ballet and musicals, when there are large cast numbers with chorus lines and multiple costume changes. Costume bibles must be understood by costume supervisors and wardrobe managers not previously involved, who may be new to that production perhaps years after it was originally mounted. An accurate costume bible should be updated regularly, not in retrospect.

Dance Costumes on Ice

Ice shows are typically exuberant spectacles with costumes built on similar principles to dance and ballroom costumes, where stretch is all important too. Costumes are either built in a company workshop or subcontracted to independent costume shops and free-lancers. Work on ice shows might be infrequent, but when they happen, large numbers of costumes need to be produced, keeping a costume team busy for months at a time. A costume team is also needed on tour to maintain the costumes and dress the shows. It's hard work but fun being part of a touring company, whether it's an ice show, a music tour, a musical or a ballet. It's a different aspect of the costume profession, and quite a different experience.

Ice Age Live! (Now extinct) was impressive for its full cast of animal characters, which included a life-size woolly mammoth performed by puppeteers and ice dancers. Animal characters for ice shows are fabricated using similar methods for costume characters and mascots, with heads allowing performers to see and breathe as they skate across the ice at speed.

Stage Musical Examples

Beauty and the Beast (1994); Costume Designer: Ann Hould-Ward

Hamilton (2015); Costume Designer: Paul Tazewell

Les Misérables (1987); Costume Designer: Andreane Neofitou

The Lion King (1997); Costume Designer: Julie Taymor/Richard Hudson

Mamma Mia! (1999); Costume Designer: Mark Thompson

Moulin Rouge (2022); Costume Designer: Catherine Zuber

Phantom of the Opera (1986); Costume Designer: Maria Bjornson

Wicked (2003); Costume Designer: Susan Hilferty