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The Business of Costume: Budgets, Schedules, Contracts and Continuity

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

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CLAUDIA SARBU, Costume Supervisor

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 286 of *Get into Costume* book)

'His Dark Materials was a beloved series for me, and I was very proud to be working on its final instalment. It was a richly varied experience – as you would expect with a fantasy series. Our costume department worked closely with other departments: creature effects, puppeteers, VFX and stunts – it was a joy working with such a talented group of people who all loved the material and brought their best game to the table to do it justice.'



Figure E8.1 *His Dark Materials* (series 3). When she relocated to London from Los Angeles, Claudia teamed up with costume designer Caroline McCall in supervising this fantasy production. Lin Manuel Miranda as Lee Scoresby and Dafne Keen as Lyra. Costume designer: Caroline McCall. Costume supervisor: Claudia Sarbu. © Bad Wolf, BBC, HBO

What were your biggest challenges when working abroad?

Working in Romania with so many lovely foreign professionals opened up a taste for travelling in me, and I realized I could do that through work. Before moving to Los Angeles and then London, I worked in Morocco, Germany and Malta.

It's always challenging moving somewhere new, but the kind of work I'd been doing prepared me for it. I'd

worked almost entirely on international productions, mostly from the UK, USA, Canada, and Germany. We'd always communicate in English, which wasn't a barrier for me because I was fluent quite early on, which I attribute not only to school but to the fact that we watched TV with subtitles, hearing the original language which was mainly English.



◀ I was encouraged and supported by the Americans I'd worked with in Romania when I moved to Los Angeles. The city is the heart of the film industry so it could only mean growth for me. So I decided to take a chance, apply for a work visa and I got it! The five years I spent there were very productive. I worked almost constantly, from feature films to TV and commercials. I learned so much about supervising through my experience there, and it absolutely made me better at it and gave me the knowledge and confidence that I could work anywhere. Now I'm in the UK, and it seems I landed at a time when the industry was booming, so it wasn't hard finding work here either. I'd say the USA and UK have similar work practices. Much of what I learned in the USA I've been able to apply in the UK.

My goal is to be the best I can be in my job. I was always determined to learn everything I could to get me to where I am now.

How was it adjusting to different cultures and ways of working?

The hardest part for me in the USA was adjusting to how strict the union system is (Romania doesn't

have one), but I also learned the benefits of having a union. The costumers' local union for the Los Angeles area (Local 705) operates under a system of three levels: entry-level, junior and key/supervisor. You join the union by accumulating thirty union days within a year, then you stay at entry level for one year, working a certain number of hours to qualify stepping up to junior. A junior must work for three years (and at least 400 hours) before qualifying as a key or supervisor. Before I was allowed to supervise, I needed to work for more than four years, and basically start all over again. The demand for supervisors at that time was high in Los Angeles, which helped me obtain a waiver, based on my previous experience, and I was allowed to work as a supervisor under the union: IATSE Local 705.

I'm always interested in observing how things are done differently wherever I am, and to respect that. Without imposing my own ways, I like offering my knowledge and to merge both together. Operating this way has served me well, not only from a work perspective but from a human one too.

Visit Claudia's IMDb page.

GABRIELLE DALTON, Theatre Costume Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 293 of *Get into Costume* book)

Are opera, ballet and musicals all on the same circuit?

I've worked in all those areas, but that's often because I'll be working with a director/choreographer who works in all those areas too. I do think you can easily get put in a box; I feel I'm in the opera box! As I work a lot in opera, I find the timeline for theatre quite tricky, they green-light projects much later now, and the casting happens later in the process too. This can be very frustrating, as it can cause delays, and budgets are so challenging now, they are smaller than they ever were. You can make a living in costume, but only in very rare circumstances. For example, only if you have

a West End 'hit', the only time the designer receives royalties, will you be rich.

Can you design costumes in theatre without designing the sets?

It's possible to only do costumes, especially in opera, because of the numbers involved. It's important to have great drawing skills, but it's something I lack and need to work around. I use Photoshop, reference and drawing.

Visit Gabrielle's website.

Rates of Pay and Negotiating Fees

'Never take a job for the money. Take work because it's exciting. It's not that life is too short but that life is too LONG to do work that you hate.'

Jean Bolte, VFX Artist

You'll need to start earning as soon as you can, but volunteering or low-paid work could be the fastest route to getting paid work. Hold out too long, and you could miss out on the opportunities that come from doing low-paid work (provided it's not exploitation).

STANDARD RATES

For those employed by the day or week, unions set pay guidelines, working hours and conditions across all sectors of the industry. Current rates are available online. Producers, supervisors and agents negotiate pay 'deals', taking other factors into account: the number of days worked in a week, overtime (preferred!), holiday and sick pay, transport and catering.

Film production rates are based on a five-day week, a six-day week or an eleven-day fortnight (with alternate Saturdays as working days, not subject to overtime), normally for a ten-hour day. Theatre hours are closer to office hours, for those who are employed – less so for freelancers. The rates are similar to film and are also governed by unions for people working in a theatre costume department or running wardrobe. Moves are afoot to establish regulated pricing for freelance theatre costume makers in the UK.

OVERTIME RATES (UK)

Overtime is on top of the basic daily or weekly rate which varies across film, TV, commercials and theatre and only applies where agreed. Workshop hours and shooting hours are not always the same, and pay reflects this. On film, TV and commercials, overtime typically kicks in after a ten-hour day (excluding lunch). Overtime rates range from 'single time', which applies to higher rates of pay, 'time and a quarter', 'time and a half' and 'double time' on lower rates of pay. 'Triple/golden time' applies after midnight, which producers avoid like the plague!

Penalty payments apply for missed official meal breaks and for working past the minimum 'turnaround' time (eleven hours) between wrap and call time the following day (also called a 'forced call', or 'time off the clock'). A penalty payment is made if it's less. There is rarely overtime on prep days, which is at the producer's discretion. Union or overtime rates don't apply to freelancers or subcontractors working outside the studio or theatre. Those not on payroll (freelancers) negotiate their fees or prices for individual items (costumes, hats, shoes, etc.) or an 'all in' price for the job, agreed in advance.

PER DIEMS

When working away from home, staying overnight, travelling for fittings, rehearsals or filming, crew are paid a 'per diem' (per day) for subsistence. It's a standard non-negotiable rate – everyone gets the same. It's taxable, so keep related receipts to offset against it. When location filming, lunch is provided for crew but not when based at a film studio where there

are restaurants. On filming days, crew often leave the hotel before breakfast is served, but it will be catered at the studio or location, so you won't go hungry. Dinner, drinks, laundry and food on rest days are paid out of the per diem. Any per diem left over is yours to keep.

THE COSTUME BUDGET

The costume budget itself is quite separate to pay and fees. It is the money that pays for the costumes that are being made/bought/hired/cleaned, etc. There are often budgetary constraints, so ingenious ways are always needed to make it stretch. Producers often say, 'The budget is tight; you will just have to be creative with it' – a skewed implication that it's possible to do an equally good job on a micro-budget! While there is some truth to this statement, because limitations can instil resourcefulness, creativity and lateral thinking, if the budget is *that* tight, it risks a substandard result. Before taking on an impossibly low budget, remember that you still have to deliver, and it must still look great whatever hardships you face. There are no mitigating circumstances for delivering to low standards or for missing a deadline.

When there's no funding, some cheeky producers ask crew to work for a 'deferred payment', stating that if the film/show makes money, the cast and crew will be paid, but it's unlikely you will ever see a penny unless a star name is attached. I would decline such a proposal.

'Out of cheap, fast and good, pick two.'

Jim Jarmusch. (This applies to all projects!)

RATES FOR TV COMMERCIALS

The internet is now an advertiser's platform of choice over TV ad campaigns, which has pushed budgets down, although pay rates can be higher than in other sectors. The APA (Advertising Producers Association UK) govern costume and wardrobe rates for TV commercials which increase annually. Production companies are obliged to abide by the APA rate card, although not all do. Deals may also be negotiated between producer and crew members. If the producer offers substantially below these rates and is non-negotiable, consider turning the job down if you can afford to, because when people accept less, the more commonplace it becomes.

Visit the Advertising Producers Association UK website.

WORKING AS A FREELANCE COSTUME MAKER

Freelance costume makers in the UK working from their own premises are normally paid 'per costume' at 'going rates', typically including fittings and rehearsals but excluding fabrics, haberdashery, deliveries and travel. This varies between theatre and film. In the UK, working freelance means being self-employed, as a sole trader and responsible for your own accounts (tax, VAT and National Insurance). Setting yourself up as a taxpayer needn't be daunting: the UK Tax Office (HMRC) has become quite user-friendly. Check it out at www.gov.uk/set-up-sole-trader

Accounting packages like Quick Books are helpful for keeping accounts and doing self-assessment tax returns. Once you're established, or when employing others, it may be

time to hire a film/theatre-friendly accountant who knows the industry, with other clients in your sector, knowing what can be legitimately claimed as expenses and any current loopholes. It's said that a good accountant should pay for themselves (for the money they can save you) so get recommendations and meet them before making a commitment. Make sure they can communicate on your level, not blind you with accountant-speak. Your money is in their hands so you need to find the right one.

A PORTFOLIO CAREER

There's not always continuous paid work from the start. Gaps are inevitable between films and shows so having a 'portfolio' career can fill the financial gaps until consistent costume work comes in. This means having several (related or unrelated) jobs, providing alternative income streams when costume work is quiet.

It takes work to get work: it doesn't just happen. You won't have total control over job opportunities, but there are things you can do to help shape your career and steer it to a place you want it to be. When there are gaps to fill, be proactive. Network on social costume groups (on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) to find out what's going on and who is doing what, and when jobs are posted or help is needed, put your name forward – because you never know who will see it.

In the UK, we can learn from our American friends who have no problem doing mundane jobs while achieving their dreams of becoming actors, designers, writers or musicians by waiting tables, driving cabs or working remotely doing tech while making inroads into their chosen profession. Take a tip out of their book.

Register on platforms like Upwork and Fiverr doing graphic design, Photoshop, CAD, ZBrush, Illustrator, or offer illustration, presentations, editing or compiling databases, etc. Working remotely from anywhere in the world can be fitted around your own schedule.

COSTUME-RELATED JOBS

- costume assistant (film or theatre)
- costume dresser (film or theatre)
- costume runner (film or theatre)
- costume trainee (film or theatre)
- Illustrator/Photoshop/ZBrush/CAD work
- ironing
- personal shopper or salesperson in fashion retail
- seamstress/alterations/customizing clothes
- stagehand/roadie
- supporting artist (SA) work in film or TV (join a casting agency)
- ushering or bar work in theatres or cinemas

If you're able to find part-time work in a theatre, front of house or backstage as a dresser, you'll be that much closer to those you want to connect with. Without being a stalker, ask the stage doorman who's who in the costume department and leave them a note.

EXTRA WORK, EXTRA MONEY

I don't mean extra *work*, I mean *extra* work! Working as a background extra (supporting artist, or SA) is a great way of observing costume from the 'inside'. On filming days, if wardrobe look busy (they will be), ask if you can help. There's always ironing, mending, cleaning, packing, tidying up, making tea/coffee, running things to set ... If you're a genuine help, you could make a couple of contacts this way, and there's nothing better than personal contact. But it will have the opposite effect if you're just hanging around asking questions – they won't be able to get rid of you fast enough! Think about what helps them before what helps you, and by helping them it will help you too.

NEGOTIATING FEES

There are unions to uphold fair pay and protect those less able to stand their own ground, but they won't do your negotiating for you. I used to think negotiation was a kind of argument so I'd avoid it. But it really shouldn't be confrontational; it's more effective when it's not!

When I started in theatre aged eighteen, you were told what the money was. Negotiation didn't come into it. In today's more commercial world, life is a bit tougher, which can be hard when you're starting out. Money can be a tricky subject to discuss when faced with a supervisor who is experienced in negotiating fees. It can be easier to negotiate by email than face to face or on the phone because they can't 'read' you so easily to know if you're a bundle of nerves – or if you are bluffing.

Don't agree to anything on the spot without having time to think it over. Ask if there's room for negotiation, and, if you're unsure, buy yourself some time. Say you need to think it through. This gives you a buffer. They should respect you for this: it shows you have mettle. A little breathing space helps work things out without feeling pressurized by someone impatiently breathing down the phone expecting an answer there and then. But you won't have long to make up your mind ...

A **course on negotiation** is available through Bectu.

Ask yourself:

- Are fees at the going rate or below?
- Have enough days/weeks been budgeted to complete the job?
- Is the deadline feasible?
- Are there enough assistants?
- Is the costume budget realistic?

If the answer to any of those is 'no', go back and propose whatever you feel is realistic. It must have a basis which you'll need to justify. Don't bluff or try to outsmart the person hiring. They will sniff this out, and it could backfire on you. You must be straight, even if you think they're not playing straight with you.

You can only give your best estimate. It's impossible to be 100 per cent certain about everything, particularly when production 'goalposts' have a habit of moving; the filmmaking process is always a moveable feast.

Gauge each situation on merit. Do they want you, or do they just want someone? Have others already turned it down for good reason? You may be just one person on a list of interviewees. The next person might grab what's on offer without hesitation or negotiation. Time is always an issue: take too long to respond, and they may move swiftly on to the next person. After thinking it through, if you're happy with their offer, let them know promptly, and, if not, politely decline. You are likely to come across them again.

I'm not suggesting you negotiate for more money on principle. They may genuinely have no more. It may not be great but still okay, with other less obvious benefits like working with an up-and-coming director, designer, cutter or actor, etc. Only you can decide. You will pick up the knack for gauging these things and be able to 'trust your gut' more and more.

It must also be said that if someone shows signs of being a pushover, the supervisor will pick up on this too and could be less likely to budge when someone shows no resistance, thinking it's fair play – even if it's not.

Representation: Agents and Diary Services

Agents and diary booking services represent costume designers and stylists for film, TV and commercials. Theatrical agents represent theatre designers, who are in a different market. Professional representation, when you are ready, should result in increased fees and better deals, raising your profile and opening doors which were previously closed. It can be impossible to get past reception to someone in a position to hire you by cold-calling, so agents are a conduit to production companies, making introductions to directors and producers, increasing their clients' chances of working on bigger and more prestigious productions, getting their names in front of the right people who trust agents to send them talent who are worth seeing.

Agents will negotiate fees, vet contracts and get the best expenses, travel, screen or programme credits, making the process of closing a deal less stressful for their client, keeping working relationships untainted from potential disagreements. Before taking on anyone new, agents will need to see that there's a body of work (a track record), to assess them as a viable proposition, to be sure that their marketing efforts will pay off. With some credits under your belt, to show your capabilities for getting work on your own, when you feel the time is right, consider an agent or diary service for the benefits that representation could bring.

You hear how people's agents don't get them enough work, or the work they want to do, so it's important to talk through your goals and areas of professional interest with prospective agents. It needs to be a good fit both ways. Check the agent's client list and credits. Are they busy doing the type of work you're looking for? Signing with an agent is a business arrangement with a legally binding contract, so take your time, do some research and meet different agents to find the best match. If they tell you their books are full, they'll still need to scout for fresh talent from time to time, so ask if you can go back when they are actively looking. Agents may expect to take a percentage of any work you do, even if they haven't generated it. Expect to pay between 15 and 20 per cent commission for professional representation on fees earned.

Contracts and Confidentiality

BOOKINGS AND PENCILS ON TV COMMERCIALS

TV commercials rarely use contracts (or purchase orders) the way film, TV and theatre productions do. They simply confirm bookings by email, using a 'pencil' system on a first-come-first-served basis.

- First pencil: Interest is expressed with no commitment, but they have first refusal.
- Second pencil: Another company expresses interest for someone already pencilled.
- Heavy pencil: If the job looks likely to be green-lit imminently, although there's no booking until the job is confirmed in writing (by email). Cancellation fees only apply to confirmed jobs.

DEALS ON FILM PROJECTS

At the start of a film project, the producer negotiates 'deals' with agents, or directly with HoDs. In the same way, the supervisor agrees fees and conditions with the team they hire. Money isn't the only consideration to getting a good deal. If the rate is lower than it should be, the producer or supervisor is aware of this. Whether negotiating through an agent or directly, use it as a bargaining tool, trading the lower fee for (say) an extra assistant, a runner, an improved costume budget, more prep time, a better hotel, a bigger wardrobe vehicle, etc. All are costs to the producer, but they may be easier to find somewhere else in the production budget. You may not get more time or a higher fee, but you might get another assistant for a day (or a week, or a month), which buys you more time.

Producers and supervisors are there to support their crews. They want to run a smooth operation without drama or conflict which is draining on time, energy, budget and morale. Those hiring will expect some negotiation or a bit of bartering. There needs to be enough, if not all, positive reasons for doing a job. Deals should be reciprocal, fair on both sides, so speak up if you need to, in a non-confrontational way to avoid feeling hard done by, which can cause other problems down the line.

Producers like the predictability of deals which are like a price for the job and easier to budget. They always drive a hard bargain and will never give anything away. It's their job.

DEAL MEMOS

Once details are agreed, both parties sign a 'deal memo', which sets out the agreement/contract, covering pay and overtime rates (where applicable), the estimated time period, screen credits (if known), travel rates, holiday and sick pay. It's important to proofread deal memos and contracts before signing. If it looks like Double Dutch to you (they often do!), get clarification on confusing terminology and iron out the finer details.

The longest deal memo I had was twenty-seven pages long. It was daunting to read, impossible to understand, and I had no agent at the time. I signed it anyway and still wonder if I signed my life away! Rogues in the film industry are thankfully few and far between, but there are plenty of 'operators', so check before you sign anything!

CONFIDENTIALITY AND NDAS

When approached about a job, you may be asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement (an NDA). This is a confidentiality agreement that forbids the signee to disclose any information whatsoever to the outside world – and it's imperative we keep schtum! It's a sackable offence to be in breach of an NDA. Ensure that no images are shared anywhere, least of all the web, until the production is in the public domain. After that, tread carefully with information or images that could be construed as sensitive. Costume designers are not the copyright-holders in film. All rights are retained by the film or publishing company. That is not to say that we can't use images for our portfolios, but, wherever possible, get permission for their use and make sure they are credited correctly. Scripts given to crew have the recipient's name printed across every page. Should anything be leaked, it can be tracked to the source. This is how seriously confidentiality is taken.

PRESS

It's paramount to keep everything under wraps, with nothing leaked to the press, who are forever hovering, looking for rich pickings. Don't be drawn in by them, you'd be in breach of your contract and NDA. When I was working on *Batman Returns* for Warner Bros, a Polaroid of Michelle Pfeiffer at a Catwoman fitting was leaked to the press. All of us were suspects, although costume designer Bob Ringwood and I were in the picture ourselves. This was a major breach of confidentiality; Warner Bros took legal action. I never knew who was responsible, or the outcome for the perpetrator, but it would not have been pleasant being on the wrong side of Warner Bros Legal. Studios with studio tours whisk the stars from their trailers to the set in 'stealth mobiles' (covered golf carts) so that the public or lurking paparazzi can't glimpse or snap an artiste in costume. The big reveal is when the film is released – not before.