

Theatre People: Costume Designer

The costume designer creates the look of anything that actors wear. Depending on the show or the theatre, they might design hair, makeup, headpieces and masks, or these areas might have their own separate designer. The costume designer reads the script, thinks about the characters, and discusses them with the director, working together to develop a concept. Once they have collaboratively decided what is important, the designer turns those themes into articles of clothing. They sketch ideas, do research, and create drawings and lists so that elements can be found or built.

Designers are creative problem-solvers. The costume designer makes sure that elements support the story and convey character, but they also consider if actors are playing more than one character and how changes might work, ensure that the scope of the design is appropriate for the budget and the amount of time the theatre has to build it, and come up with ideas about how to approach challenges in the action. During the rehearsal process, the costume designer attends many fittings to make sure that actors are comfortable, and the costume is looking and behaving as desired. Most costume designers are self-employed or independent contractors, who are hired by a theatre for a particular show on a short-term contract.

Tasks and activities in a typical day

The costume designer's day varies depending on whether they are creating the concept for a show and working towards deadlines, or whether the show is being built and they are in residence at the theatre. (You could be working on multiple shows in different stages at the same time!) Some activities a costume designer does regularly are:

- Read the script and respond to it, with particular emphasis on the period the production is set in and the characters' personalities and relationships
- Have discussions with the director
- Brainstorm and sketch in response to discussions and research (how historically accurate do you want to be? What kinds of statements do these items make?)
- Research - time periods, different locations, art movements, and more
- Create engaging visual representations of the costumes
- Provide references or drawings that give more detail of building a piece
- Conduct fittings for each costume piece
- Shopping with wardrobe staff, or pulling pieces from the theatre's stock
- Collaborate with actors to make sure that the costume suits their needs, lets them perform their actions, and helps them portray their character
- Attend meetings to clarify information and make choices
- Respond to rehearsal notes, to help come up with solutions to challenges the actors encounter
- Attend rehearsals to understand the needs of the action, and technical rehearsals onstage (later in the process) to ensure things are working as they should and observe any notes needed



A designer may drape fabric on a form to create the costume shape.



A rough colour palette lets the designer think about how costumes will appear together.

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10 skills that a costume designer uses:

- Time management
- Organization
- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Research
- Art skills, for digital or hand-drawn renderings
- Visual, verbal, and written communication
- Decision-making
- Analysis (of story, theme, character, and action)
- Attention to detail



Costume designs for Shakespeare's Dog by Brian Perchaluk and Bang Bang by Joseph Abetria as sketches and onstage.

(Shakespeare's Dog set by Brian Perchaluk, lighting Scott Henderson, actor Harry Judge; Bang Bang set Adam Parboosingh, lighting Scott Henderson, actors Beverly Ndukwu, Alex Poch-Goldin, Sebastien Heins. Photo by Dylan Hewlett.)

Building Abilities

There are probably lots of things you are already doing, and things you can start to do, that will serve you in a career as a costume designer. Some of these are:

- Figure out ways to express your ideas visually that connect for you! Is that sketching, painting, collage, something else?
- Notice design trends from today and different eras.
- Observe the qualities of clothing and how it works (where are the seams? How does that make the fabric drape?) and different kinds of fabric (how does it fall, what is the weight like, what kind of noise does it make?)
- Do some people-watching! Think about and observe how clothing represents personality, background, and occupation.
- Follow a budget.
- Find an organizational system that works for you to track different tasks and projects.
- Get comfortable with presenting in a group. Practice helps a lot!
- Understand colours and how they work together - important for costume choices and how they interact with other design elements like set and lighting.
- See and participate in theatre whenever you can, and watch movies and TV! Think critically about what choices you see being made, how they make you feel, and what the intention might have been.
- Learn about other theatre jobs. The costume designer might not need to know how to sew a ballgown, but they should be able to have a conversation with the experts in wardrobe about it. They will need to be able to discuss movement and character with actors and directors.
- Creative practice of any kind, to learn about your own process and aesthetics!