

name _____

period _____

A stitch in time

Coaching student costumers through design and construction

BY SHIRLEE IDZAKOVICH

COSTUMES ARE AN important aspect of producing a visually appealing and successful show, which is why many schools rely on outside professionals to help design and build costumes. I am one of those professional costumers, and I love working with schools. One fundamental I've learned from the experience is that your students may be your best costuming resource, but they need your help — especially in setting and sticking to a production schedule.

Based on the unexpected popularity of my costume workshops at the 2018 International Thespian Festival — we expected 15 students, and 82 showed up — it's a mistake to underestimate student interest in costuming or the educational benefits of getting them involved in this rich, exciting field of technical theatre.

Obviously, having students design or build costumes requires a theatre

department to invest time and treasure. For this article, I'll focus mainly on the former, which I see as the larger challenge for school theatres. Students (and teachers) can't work on the production full time, so it's important to learn how to allot the correct amount of time for costume creation — from concept to completion.

Effective time management requires defining and planning the

design and construction process, and to do that, one must be familiar with the tools and materials needed. So, if you are coaching students to design and construct costumes, then the costumes should be one of the first design elements you start planning — as soon as you choose the show!

The design

Like any good costumer, Emily Marshburn, a senior in Thespian Troupe 2215 at Stratford High School, begins each garment with thumbnail sketches that will inform





the final costume rendering. According to Marshburn, "Depending on the artist's skill level and amount of effort required, a rendering can take anywhere from 15 minutes to eight hours." For example, including sketches, her rendering of Katherine Plummer's costume for her school's winter 2019 production of *Newsies* took Marshburn about four hours to complete.

Thespian alum Brett Rose, of Troupe 7050 at Cypress Woods High School in Texas, recalls well how much time a beginning costumer

can spend on design. "It would take me hours upon hours to do sketches and renderings for shows I was working on in high school. I focused so much on every little detail and getting the proportions just right that I would barely have time to paint things when I finished drawing them."

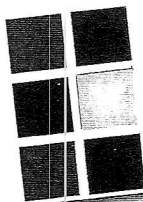
Now, as an assistant costume designer and sophomore at the Theatre School at DePaul University, Rose can draw and paint a full set of renderings in a day, depending on the size of the show. "My skills



Emily Marshburn's rendering (right) for Katherine Plummer's red dress took four hours to create. The final product (above) was featured in the Stratford High School production of *Newsies*. A decorated NIE competitor, Marshburn earned superiors at the state level (Texas Thespians) and the 2018 International Thespian Festival, where she also received the Doug Finney Festival Grant and the Judges' Choice Award in costume design.

Katherine Plummer
 CATHERINE PLUMMER
 "NEWSIES"

- SLIGHT TURTLE NECK
 (JUST ABOVE ANKLE)
- TIGHT (FIT) PATTICOOT W/ SUFFLES
 "LINED"
- BLOOMERS
 "TO WAIST"
- SMALL MUTTON SHOULDERS ON BLOUSE
- LONGER SLEEVES ON TIE
 "SQUARED OFF"
- STRAPS TIE DOWN SKIRT AND COLLAR
 "BUTTONS FOLLOW DOWN SKIRT"
- STRIPED SLEEVES
 "PLAIN WHITE NECKW COLLAR AND BOWTIED CUFFS"



have improved greatly since high school, and even though I still have a lot to learn, I think it's really amazing what I can do in a fraction of the time I could back then. However, I still try to factor in a couple of weeks for sketching and rendering, since a complex show requires time for researching, selecting fabrics, and finding the right patterns."

This research requires several production meetings. I teach students that their designs should be informed primarily by the director's vision, which is based on careful script and character analysis. Secondly, costumers need to work with set designers to determine the colors and shapes to use onstage that will complement those designs and with the lighting designers to find out the color schemes lighting each scene.

The key to a successful show is collaboration among all the designers, working as one to arrive at a cohesive final project. Those production meetings should result in designs of complementary visual elements for the show. Once the designs get the director's approval, construction can begin.

The construction

Timing varies from school to school and show to show, depending upon available resources, but the average high school spends two to three months working on costumes, meeting about two times each week for at least two hours each time. This does not include any time that students spend working on their costume projects at home.

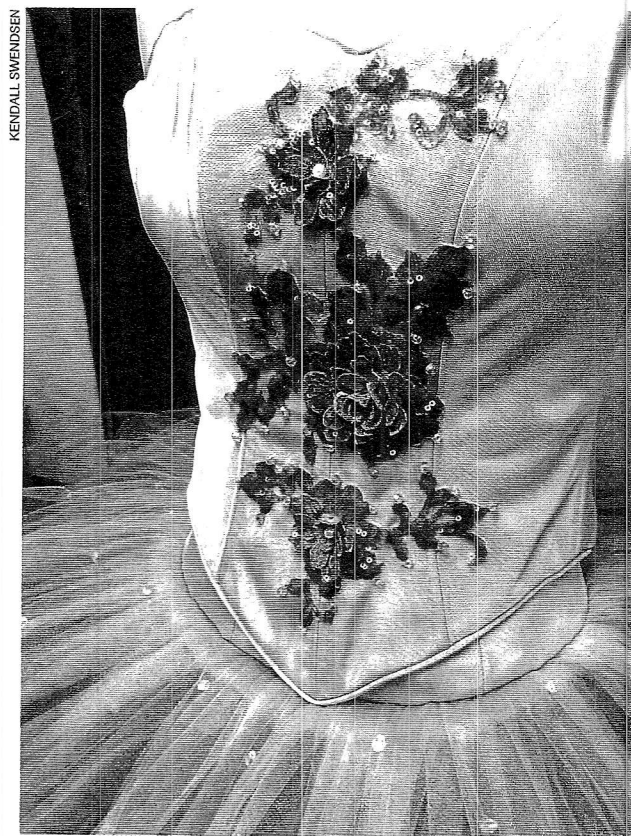
Although it's nice to have a generous costuming budget, with

resourcefulness, talent, and time, beautiful garments can be made on a shoestring. Thespian Briann Johnson had a budget of only \$80 to produce what became her favorite costuming project: the dress that Amber Von Tussle wears in the finale sequence of *Hairspray*. Johnson spent about a month tweaking her design and, excluding the time to gather the materials, about 15 hours to complete the garment, including fittings.

When I design costumes, I create a notebook to reference throughout preproduction, and I encourage students to do this as well. This can help students track their process and streamline their efforts. And it makes the process of gathering materials more efficient. My notebooks typically include the spending budget, color and swatch choices, sketches, and reference photos — which all come in handy while shopping for materials.

Considering the busy schedules of students and their relative inexperience, costume construction for high school productions requires considerable guidance from technical directors or designers. Research and mentorship are essential to help students select their materials and schedule their buildouts appropriately.

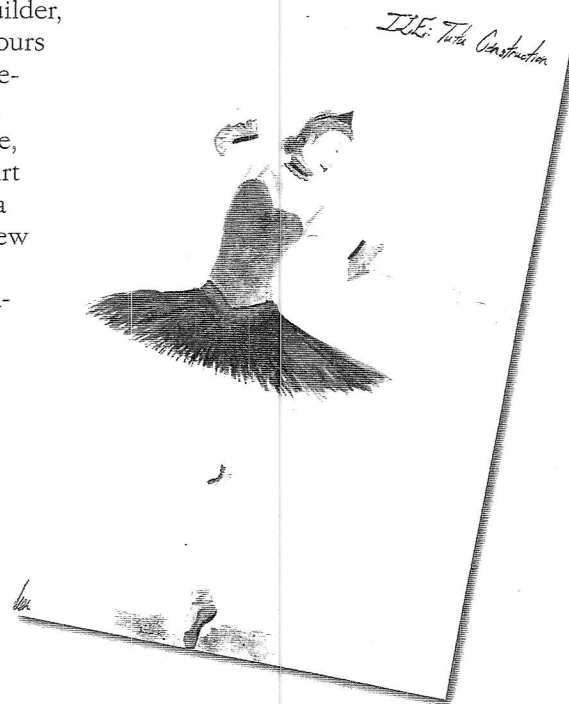
For example, students must allow more build time for textiles that are difficult to sew, such as silks, satins, tulle, and heavier fabrics requiring larger needles or more industrial machines. It also takes time to seek and apply the right accents to make costumes visible and attractive from the audience's view, which Thespian alum Kendall Swendsen learned through direct experience.



Kendall Swendsen's meticulous beadwork is evident in this ballet costume she designed and constructed for a dance major at Webster University. As a Thespian, she received superior rankings at the Texas Thespians Festival and at the ITF NIEs in both costume construction (two years in a row) and costume design (the third year). She also twice worked in an ITF main stage opening show wardrobe crew.

While working on one particular white gown for a stock costume piece and portfolio-builder, Swendsen spent about 25 hours on the beading alone. "In between shows for my school, when I had some down time, I built the 1910s walking skirt and matching bodice from a manufactured pattern. I knew I wanted to push myself harder than I had before. Including the beading, it took me three weeks and \$150 to build the garment — just working on it at home in the evenings."

Swendsen, from Thespian Troupe 7014 at Seven Lakes High School in Katy, Texas, now focuses on designing and building dance costumes as a student at the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University, where her beading skills have come in handy. One recent build (a



4



COURTESY OF BRIANN JOHNSON

Briann Johnson, a senior costume designer and seamstress in Thespian Troupe 4268 at Marcus High School, has designed four school productions and sewn for many more. Her designs for *Hairspray*, including this dress for Amber Von Tussle, won the Excellence in Costume Design Schmidt and Jones Award presented through Lyric Stage in Dallas. Johnson also qualified for NIEs through her superior rankings at the Texas Thespians Festival, placing first in the Texas-only Team Costume Design Challenge.

tutu and bodice for a dance major) took more than 16 weeks, including some 60 hours to construct and 15 hours to bead. "All the beads are individually applied to the bodice and top layer of netting," Swendsen said. "There are four colors of netting blended among the 10 layers of finger-pleated net. The full costume took about \$250 to make."

In my experience, theatre students greatly enjoy sketching costumes, selecting fabrics, sewing, and generally exploring elements of fashion. I encourage every student to challenge themselves in this art and remind them that their designs and products may not be the best at first, but practice certainly will bring their ideas and creative light to fruition. Nurturing these students is critical not only in creating successful shows but also in assisting them along their future path **T**

Model curriculum framework for costuming

I had the honor of participating in EdTA's Model Curriculum Framework project in 2018. Funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the project paired 12 classroom teachers and teaching artists. The focus was to create standards-based curricular units in various aspects of theatre (including costuming), with companion rubrics to measure the quality of student work.

My partner was Joanna Fellows, a theatre teacher at Seneca Valley High School in Rockville, Md. We collaborated on a costume design unit in which students research a design concept based on a given script and create a mood board that addresses the elements of design. Their final portfolios also include renderings and a budget for materials needed to create the designed costumes.

This step-by-step guide will be available online later this year.

