5.1: Costume Design

Costume designers create the entire visual identity of a character. Hair, makeup, accessories, and even body shape, along with clothing, are all a part of this visual presentation, each carefully selected to give clues to the audience about a character and his or her world. By giving these clues, the costume designer is helping to tell the story in a nonverbal way.

Every story has a setting in which it takes place. Sometimes it is specifically defined by the playwright, such as “mid afternoon on a cold December day in Maine, present day.” Sometimes it is partially defined or not defined at all. No matter how much information is provided by the playwright about the setting of the story, the director and designers must make choices that define the world of the play. Those choices help to convey information to the audience such as geographic location, season and weather, time of day, a particular occasion or activity, and time period. Clothing has many functions, one of which is protection from the elements. For the setting just described, for example, a costume designer might choose to dress characters in snow boots and heavy parkas as opposed to flip-flops and shorts. The choice of clothing could help to indicate a geographic location that has a colder climate, a season that is cold, and weather that includes snow.

Clothing also functions as a statement about the wearer because it offers information about the amount of money the character spent on the clothes, his or her adherence or access to fashion trends, and the degree to which societal rules about appropriateness of clothing are important to this person. We attach meaning to those choices based upon our own understanding, experience, and prejudices. If the characters wear jeans and plaid flannel shirts versus wool trousers and cashmere sweaters underneath the parkas and snow boots, a less urban and more rural location and/or activity can be conveyed. Because fashion is continually changing and there is a recorded history of these changes, the costume designer is able to use choices in clothing, hairstyles, and makeup to help indicate when the story is taking place. All of these choices are visual cues that help orient the audience to the setting of the play.
The costume designer also provides visual cues about the characters themselves, such as gender, age, occupation, and social status. Sometimes the costume can even provide insight into relationships between characters and their psychological or emotional states. We all attach meanings to the visual cues we are given based upon our personal experiences and the culture in which we live. Particular colors evoke emotion or have symbolism —red can mean anger or passion, purple is for royalty —some of which are culturally shared and some of which are unique to each individual. Society creates rules about what clothing is appropriate based upon activity, social standing, and gender (tuxedos are worn by men to formal occasions, pajamas are worn to sleep), which can be followed or broken. Fashion and the amount of money spent in its pursuit have different levels of priority for each of us, and we pass judgment on each other based upon our own level of priority. Exposure or accentuation of particular body parts sends unspoken messages that are based in personal and societal ideas of sexuality. Uniforms are worn by members of particular groups for reasons of identification and cohesion. By understanding and using the meanings attached to these visual cues, a costume designer can impart information about characters through the choices the designer makes in clothing them.

The audience makes some assumptions about the people they see onstage. For example, think about the image of a person wearing jeans, sneakers, and a tank top with long scruffy hair. Imagine that person and think about who they might be —their age, occupation, how much money they make, and so on. What if the jeans are tight and the sneakers are high heels instead? Does that change your ideas about this person? It is possible you are now imagining someone of a different gender and maybe even a different social status. Now imagine the jeans and sneakers are designer brand. Who is this person now? What if those designer clothes are dirty and torn? What if the person has smeared mascara and a runny nose? Or is covered in tattoos? All of these specific choices provide different information to the audience about the character and how he or she fits into the story. The costume designer carefully selects from the many choices available to provide the visual image of the character that will best tell the story.

Sometimes the character is not a specific person, but rather a visual representation of an idea. In this ease, the costume designer still makes choices based upon the personal and societal meanings we attach to visual cues. However, they are not made to define a particular person in a particular situation. The designer may choose to evoke a feeling, create an atmosphere, or visualize an idea of something that is relevant to the story, such as the inner turmoil of a character or the environment in which a character exists. These meanings, many times, are operating on a more emotional and instinctive level than meanings based upon rules or fashion that define a person's place within society—but that does not mean they are any less important or well defined. Sometimes these meanings create the visual image that best assists in telling the story.

The choices that a costume designer makes are developed through a multistep process that begins with the script. The costume designer, the director, and other designers first study the script and the information provided within the text; then they combine that information with their individual impressions of the story, the characters, and the world of the play and what they want the audience to understand or feel. The director and designers work together in a collaborative process to determine a particular approach or concept to the visual elements that is unique to that production. This collaborative process involves the sharing of ideas and visual elements, usually through a series of design meetings. Sometimes designers seek inspiration for the visual world or the characters. Photographs, paintings, even music can spark an idea or help express an element of the story that the designers and director want to share. Many times, research is required about specific time periods, events, or locations that will be part of the world that is created onstage. From that research, the designers and director can decide how closely to represent that reality or whether to represent it at all. This collaborative process results in a particular concept or design approach that is unique to the production.
The overall design approach artistically affects all the choices of all the designers. The costume designer must always base his or her designs on what best supports the design approach and creates the world of the play.

Examples of costume research from two historical eras, the turn of the century (19th to 20th) and the 1950s.

These choices are also affected by practical elements that must be determined and accommodated. The most basic practical element is the number of characters and the number of different costumes they require within the production. This information is usually compiled into a **costume plot** or list. Costume designers structure this information in different ways according to their own process, but the objective is to determine the specific costume needs of the production. The compiling of this information can bring clarity to another reality of creating a world on stage: whether the performers must change costumes and how much time they have to do so. Also, the physieality of the performance can impact the particular choices that the costume designer makes. Running, dancing, fighting, even gesturing all impact the particular choices of the design.

Once practical needs are determined and the overall artistic foundation for a production is laid, the costume designer must begin to visualize the specific choices for the costumes. Different designers approach this step of the process in different ways, but the goal is always the same—to visually represent the physical appearance of the play’s characters.
Act 1 costume plot of the musical City of Angels.

Costume renderings by Robin L. McGee.

Many designers create artwork to visually communicate their intentions, generally called **costume renderings**, a series of sketches, paintings, or collages.

Many designers also compile research to accompany this artwork to act as the visual representation of their designs.
Magazines, photographs, illustrations, portraits, and even written information can all help to specify how the characters and their world will appear to the audience. Some designers assemble swatches, examples of the colors and textures of fabrics they wish to use. All of this information and visual representation is used to communicate with the director, designers, and performers how the characters will ultimately appear onstage.

The conceptualization and visual representation of ideas is only half the process of costume design. These ideas must be turned into reality. This realization is a multistep process that involves many elements and, usually, many people. Before beginning the realization of a costume design, the parameters of the process must be determined. For every production, a particular amount of time, money, and labor is available and required. Because this is different for each production, the approach to the realization of the costume design is always different. Sometimes costumes are created, sometimes existing garments are used, and sometimes it is a combination of these two approaches. Whichever approach is used, the costume renderings and/or research serve as the plan for what the characters will look like.
Costume Personnel

These job descriptions are not all-inclusive and do not apply to all productions. They are intended to be generalizations to help the reader understand the variety of people and activities involved in costume design.

Costume Designer—Conceptualizes the look of all the performers in the production and creates visual representations or renderings of the design. Guides the realization of the design through the production and rehearsal process.

Assistant Costume Designer—May assist the designer in the conceptualization phase through research or illustration. Assists the designer in the realization of the design through sourcing of materials, organization of information, budgeting, scheduling of fittings/meetings, and documentation of design choices.

Costume Shop Manager—Oversees the realization of the designs into physical garments. This may include acquiring materials, scheduling/conducting fittings, hiring/scheduling personnel, budgeting, and organizing information.

Cutter/Draaper or Patternmaker—Uses the renderings, research, and other information provided by the designer or design team to create or alter the physical costumes. When costumes are created, this person creates the pattern that is used to cut out and assemble the garment. This person generally oversees the construction, fitting, and finishing of the garment.

First Hand—Assists the cutter/draper. Activities may include altering patterns, cutting fabric, assembling the garments, overseeing stitchers, altering garments, and assisting in fitting garments onto performers.

Stitcher—Sews the garments.

Craftsperson—Creates or modifies elements of the costumes that require skills in millinery, armor, dying, painting, distressing, and jewelry.

Wardrobe Supervisor—Oversees the appearance of the performers during rehearsals and performances. Oversees the care and maintenance of the costumes during the run of the show.
If the costumes are being created, then the rendering becomes a blueprint. The people responsible for the realization of the costume analyze the rendering to determine its elements and how to make them. For the person or persons creating the clothing, they must combine what they see in the rendering with their own training and knowledge of fabrics, construction methods, and historical clothing (when appropriate) to turn a two-dimensional illustration into three-dimensional clothing. Many times this process involves creating a mockup—a version of the garment made out of inexpensive fabric. This allows the designer to see the idea in three dimensions and also see how it fits the actor’s body, allowing adjustments to be made before the garment is constructed. The costume designer is generally involved in or in charge of selecting the fabrics from which the garments will be made. Many choices are available for different colors, textures, and types of fabric. The costume designer must select fabrics that are appropriate for the construction of the garment and fulfill the plan for the visual representation of the character.

If the costumes are not being created, and existing garments are being used, there are several means of acquiring them: pulling, borrowing, renting, and buying. Many theatres maintain a stock of costumes used in previous productions from which they “pull” items they need. If a particular theatre does not have an item that they need within their own stock, they may be able to borrow or rent it from another theatre that does. There are also businesses that rent items or whole sets of costumes for use on stage. Another option is to purchase needed items from stores, online businesses, or other merchants. It is very common to use a combination of all of these methods to assemble the needed items for a show. The costume designer must be able to coordinate all costume items, whether created, bought, rented, borrowed, or pulled, into a cohesive combination that fulfills the plan for the costume designs.

Whatever the origin of the costumes, the ultimate goal is for them to be worn by the actors onstage. This means that they must go through a process of fitting—each costume is tried on the actor and adjustments are made so that the garment fits that particular actor correctly and creates the appropriate image of the character. During this fitting, many of the specific choices for the costume are made—how the garment fits, the extent to which the actor can move in the clothing, which undergarments create the correct look and body shape for the actor, what accessories complete the outfit, and what makeup and hairstyle complete the look of the character. This is the stage of the design process where
the character’s whole look begins to come together and the costume renderings come to life.

As we have discussed, the visual representations of the characters are made up of a complex set of choices made by the costume designer and many others. These choices must be able to be replicated exactly each night onstage: each actor wearing particular clothes, hair, and makeup in specific ways and at specific times. All of this must be documented, so that it can be implemented each time the actors perform. This documentation varies based upon the organization and the people involved. Some of the common paperwork includes a costume plot and a **pieces list** of every item used in the show. This list can also be used as part of the information given to the wardrobe crew or department. The wardrobe crew is responsible for dressing the actors, making sure they match the design, helping the actors change costumes when necessary, and maintaining the costumes and look of the show for each performance. Their paperwork includes information on costume changes, laundry/maintenance procedures, and check-in lists for costume items that have been created from the pieces lists. All of this documentation is crucial for the consistent creation of the visual world represented on stage each night.

![A costume fitting.](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Theater_and_Film/Book%3A_Theatrical_Worlds_(Mitchell)/05%3A_Costume_Desig…)

The last step for the costume designer is to see everything together onstage during **dress rehearsals**. All the exploration, research, collaboration, planning, construction, fittings, and finishing are done so that the visual elements created and decided upon by the director and designers come together to create the world of the play. Dress rehearsals allow them to see this world for the first time. During these rehearsals, refinements can be made or whole ideas can be reenvisioned. These final necessary modifications ensure that the visual world created for the audience is the best one to tell the story.
Costuming Fantasy and Reality: A Conversation with Designer Stacey Galloway

When did you know you were first interested in costume design?

I was that kid that started thinking about Halloween partway throughout the year, and was really excited about what I was going to be that year. I didn’t realize that it was a possibility to do this as a career until I was in college and I had friends who were in the theatre department. I was looking for an elective in my freshman year and I thought I’d take the costuming class because I knew how to sew. I got hooked.

What was your first design?

I got a work-study job in the costume shop but wasn’t actually in the theatre department or taking courses. Because it seemed like I had interest, the instructor there allowed me to design shows on the side. My first design for them was Waiting for Godot. I didn’t really know what I was doing. I tried with the guidance of my instructor to figure out how to go about it, how to learn how to draw things out. How to have a dialogue with the director about what we thought it meant and to bring some sort of concept to it that would help the audience understand the story. And then I took that and tried to make it happen in real life on real bodies on a real stage.

Is there a period or a type of show you like working on more than others?

I don’t actually get asked that question a lot. I find something interesting in about just about every project that I work on. There’s always some part of it that gets me excited about it no matter what type of show, what type of project, what type of period.
Is there any advice you would give someone interested in costume design today?

Wow, so much. I think to be a good costume designer in the long term, you have to have a passion for costume history and history in general, psychology, visual arts. There are so many elements that feed into being a costume designer and the process can be complex. This is not an easy business to be in. We don't make a lot of money. We put in a lot of hours. Your standard, normal costume designer (and there are thousands of them out there) aren't people who are famous or rich. They are just people who are passionate about the storytelling and the creation of these characters that come to life on stage. That is where you get your fulfillment.

If you would, walk me through your design process. You are given the assignment. What's the first thing you do?

Read the script. And read it again. And probably read it again.

Are you looking for specific things each time?

Yes. It's very difficult to process everything you need to about a script in one read. A lot of times I will read the script first just to get the sense and feeling of the story, trying to set aside my costume designer mind and try to experience it as an audience would. That's sometimes very difficult because the costume designer mind wants to take over. The second read is about the design. It's about starting to take down the specifics. Who's in what scene? How many costumes do they need? What do they need to look like? What period is this? What sort of changes need to happen? And that process starts the documentation of the logistics of the design. And for me, I have to start with logistics to begin wrapping my head around the design. I can't process the storytelling without knowing that there are seventeen people and they have five costume changes.

So you have gone through the reading period. What's next for you?

I usually start by creating a costume plot. Every costume designer works slightly different in what they do first and what their paperwork looks like. I start with a costume plot, which is a spreadsheet
of every scene in the production, every character in the production. It's essentially a chart of what scenes they are in and what look they need so I can start to process the show as a whole. After conversations with the director, I research the particular period and stylistic choices that the design team is working toward. I begin to accumulate the visuals to feed into the ultimate design.

I'd like to ask you about a design you did a few years ago for a summer stock production of the musical Nine. First of all, how are musicals different from straight plays from a costume perspective?

Musicals are generally more complex in the way that the characters function because a lot of times there are characters that are named, that we get to know, and then there is a group of people that are generally referred to as ensemble or chorus members that we don’t really get to know. They are background people in scenes. They are singing and dancing in the big production numbers. They transition through a lot of different parts throughout the show, all being played by each individual ensemble member. For example, an ensemble member could be a chauffeur person in one scene, a movie director in another scene, and then they sing and dance in those five musical numbers, and then they are the little streeturchin in the final scene ...

So, how do you find an identity for these people where there isn't much to go on text wise?

For these ensemble-type designs, it is about creating a feeling of the scene that gives the audience information about location, setting, and mood of the number.

So, what were the challenges of designing Nine?

Nine is a show somewhat based on the life of Federico Fellini, the Italian film director, and it has realism and fantasy all combined into a show that is grounded in reality but not actual reality. The bulk of the show is about the character Guido (who represents Fellini) and his interactions with all the women in his life. In one particular sequence, titled "The Grand Canal," we go into the fantasy of the movie that Guido is creating about Casanova, the iconic Italian lover.
So the function of the costumes was to show us the difference between reality and fantasy? So we would know by the design of the costumes which world we are in?

Yes. It was challenging to create a distinct difference between the visuals of the interactions of Guido and his women in a more realistic way versus the fantasy world of the movie he is creating. I had to set it within a somewhat historical reference so that the audience understood that this was the movie that Guido was making, not Guido's life. Then I had to impart a distinct surrealism to it that helped the audience understand that the movie Guido's creating is a reflection of the stresses in his life. Therefore, everything within the movie sequence refers back to his relationships with all these women in his life. They are all coming out in this movie in a twisted, surrealistic way.

So you actually have colors and styles that have to refer to other colors and styles?

Correct.

That's kind of a Gordian knot of design.

Right. So when I started talking with the director about the Grand Canal sequences, he distinctly wanted a shift in the feeling of them. There are two versions of it. There is "The Grand Canal" and then there is the "The Grand Canal Reprise." And as it goes through these sequences, the feeling of the number needs to begin to feel threatening to Guido. This is because the messy, tangled relationship he has with all these women comes out during his making of the movie and starts to overwhelm him. I started by talking to the director about the different feelings of the two sequences. We started with the idea that Casanova was in Venice. Venice makes you think of canals, Venice and water and reflection. We also talked about how the movie is a reflection of what is going on in Guido's life and what is going on is kind of ugly.

Venice is also a romantic city, but it also has an ugly side.

Just like Guido's relationships. On the surface, it seems like he has this plethora of women in his life, and yet they are making his
life more and more complicated. Venice is also known for Carni-
val, which is similar in feeling to our Mardi Gras in that everybody
wears costumes and masks and it’s a big celebration. Then I be-
gan thinking about the costumes being see-through. We would see
the beautiful silhouette of the eighteenth century, but we would
also see the bodies of the performers. It’s exterior glamour, but
there are real people under there. And real people can sometimes
be messy and not as beautiful as we would like them to be. So I
started to investigate fashion of the period. It didn’t need to be
historically accurate; it just needed to represent and reference the
eighteenth century. So I started looking at eighteenth-century
fashion magazines. And I started seeing there were a lot of sheer
garments. Canals and reflective water reminded me of glass, which
is also reflective. There are a lot of buildings in Venice with clear
and stained glass windows. This inspired me to make the Grand Ca-
nal costumes morph into something more threatening by a color
change. So I started thinking about the first set of costumes being
clear with golds and silvers—beautiful, reflective, and translucent.
Then, as it became threatening, it became deeply, richly colored like
stained glass.

I also was thinking about the shapes, and how to represent the
idea of the eighteenth century without copying it. Since the story
is based on Fellini, I looked at his film work, and I saw he had a
certain obsession with the circus. So I started to feed in ideas of
circus shapes and circus coloration in exaggeration. There is a fun,
overstated, playful quality about the circus which can also become
slightly threatening in that clowns are fun but can also be very
scary.

How much change was there between your original renderings and
the final costumes?

The idea for this particular project was pretty concrete by the time
I got to sketching it out on paper, but it went through a lot of
discussion and investigation and exploration between the director
and myself. We got to the point where I felt comfortable and that’s
when I put it on paper.
Grand Canal 1, 2, 3, and 4 Costumes

Have you ever tossed a design idea into the duster and stared ever?

Absolutely. Yes. Sometimes it just doesn't work out. Sometimes where you think a design is going well but as the project starts to solidify, how the story is going to be told and all the specifics of the
other design elements, sometimes what you initially thought isn't suitable anymore. The whole point is to serve the storytelling. If a particular costume choice doesn't serve the story, then there's no point in having it.