

## Bringing Characters to Life on Stage: A Guide to Theatre Costuming

**Costumes play a vital role** in any production, helping to define characters, set the tone, and transport audiences into the world of the play. A well-designed costume can enhance the storytelling, highlight character traits, and create visual impact. Whether you're working on a large-scale musical, an intimate drama, or a period piece, theatre costumes are key elements in immersing audiences into the performance.

In this guide, we'll explore the importance of theatre costumes, key considerations for costume design, and tips for creating costumes that not only look great but also support the needs of the performers.



*Photo: Des Moines Playhouse production of Disney's Beauty and the Beast*

### The Importance of Theatre Costumes

Costumes are much more than just clothing on stage—they are an essential part of the storytelling process. Here's why theatre costumes are so important:

- **Character Development:** Costumes help to define a character's personality, status, and background. The way a character dresses tells the audience about their profession, socioeconomic status, and emotional state before they even speak.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** For period plays or productions set in specific cultures, costumes are crucial in establishing the time and place of the story. Accurate costume design transports the audience into a different era or world.

- **Mood and Atmosphere:** Costumes can evoke certain moods or atmospheres, helping to align the visual aesthetic with the tone of the production. Bright, colorful costumes can enhance a lighthearted comedy, while dark, muted costumes might reflect a more serious drama.
- **Visual Cohesion:** Costumes work together with lighting, set design, and makeup to create a cohesive visual language that supports the director's vision. Consistency in style and color palettes across all elements of design helps create a unified look.

## Key Considerations for Theatre Costume Design

Designing costumes for the stage requires a blend of artistic vision, practicality, and attention to detail. Whether you're a professional costume designer or working on a community theatre production, here are some key considerations to keep in mind when creating theatre costumes:

### Character Interpretation

The first step in designing a theatre costume is understanding the character. The costume should reflect the character's personality, role in the story, and arc throughout the play. Here are some questions to ask:

- What is the character's background, profession, and social status?
- What emotional journey does the character experience?
- How do the character's costumes change as the story progresses?
- Are there symbolic elements that can be incorporated into the costume design?

Collaborate with the director and actors to understand the character fully and ensure the costume aligns with the overall vision of the production.

### Time Period and Setting

If the production is set in a specific historical period or culture, the costumes must reflect that accurately. Research is crucial to ensure the costumes are true to the time period, including fabrics, silhouettes, and accessories. For example:

- *For a period piece:* Historical accuracy in dress, hairstyles, and accessories is essential. The wrong silhouette or fabric can break the illusion of the time period.
- *For a contemporary play:* The costumes should reflect current fashion trends or the specific subcultures represented in the play.
- *For fantasy or abstract settings:* Costume design allows for more creativity and experimentation, but it's important to keep the costumes grounded in the world of the play.

## Color and Fabric Choices

The color palette and fabric selection play a significant role in how costumes are perceived on stage. Different colors evoke different emotions, and fabric textures can contribute to the character's appearance and movement. Here are some tips:

- *Color Symbolism:* Use colors to represent character traits or themes. For example, red can symbolize passion or anger, while blue may convey calmness or sadness.
- *Fabric Functionality:* Choose fabrics that allow for movement and comfort, especially if the character has to perform dynamic actions or dance. For historical or fantasy costumes, consider how fabrics like velvet, silk, or linen can create a specific mood or aesthetic.
- *Lighting Considerations:* Remember that stage lighting can affect how colors and fabrics appear. Test your fabric choices under different lighting conditions to ensure they look as intended.

## Functionality and Comfort

While aesthetics are important, functionality and comfort are equally essential when designing theatre costumes. Actors must be able to move, perform, and change costumes quickly without difficulty. Some tips for ensuring functionality include:

- *Ease of Movement:* Consider how much physical activity the character has in the production. Dance-heavy musicals or action sequences may require stretchy fabrics, flexible seams, or lightweight materials.
- *Quick Changes:* Many theatre productions involve rapid costume changes. Design costumes with fastenings like zippers, Velcro, or snaps to enable quick changes backstage.
- *Breathability:* Actors often spend long hours in costumes under hot stage lights, so breathable fabrics like cotton or lightweight synthetics are ideal to keep them comfortable.

## Creating Your Own Costumes

For many smaller productions, costume budgets may be tight, requiring DIY solutions to create impressive costumes on a limited budget.

### Thrift and Repurpose

Thrift stores are excellent resources for finding inexpensive pieces that can be altered to fit the costume's requirements. Look for:

- *Vintage pieces* that fit the time period or can be modified to suit the character's look.
- *Basic clothing items* like jackets, skirts, and shirts that can be dyed, embellished, or adjusted to fit the costume design.

## Accessories and Props

Accessories like hats, gloves, and jewelry add the finishing touches to a character's look. These can often be made at home using materials such as:

- *Foam and fabric* for hats, belts, or headpieces.
- *Jewelry-making supplies* like beads, wire, and chains to create custom necklaces or bracelets.
- *Paint and craft supplies* for detailing shoes, bags, or other props.

## Sewing and Alteration

Basic sewing skills go a long way when creating DIY theatre costumes. If you have access to a sewing machine, you can:

- *Alter thrifted garments* to fit your actors better or to match the costume design.
- *Create custom pieces* using sewing patterns or by draping fabric on a mannequin.
- *Add embellishments* like lace, buttons, or embroidery to elevate simple costumes.

## Costume Rentals

For productions with a larger budget or more specific costume needs, consider renting costumes from professional costume houses or theatre companies. Rentals are a cost-effective way to obtain high-quality, historically accurate costumes without the time and expense of making them from scratch.

## Collaboration with Set Design, Lighting, Hair, Makeup, Props

Costumes are just one part of a character's overall appearance on stage. Working closely with the hair and makeup teams ensures a cohesive look. For example:

- **Set Design & Lighting:** Costumes will need to work with the set as designed, so it's important to get complete plans for set pieces, including stairs or anything else that might need to be taken into account when creating costumes. Likewise, stage lighting (especially light color) needs to be considered, since it can enhance or reduce the impact of a costume.
- **Hair:** Wigs, hairstyles, and facial hair should match the period and style of the costumes.
- **Makeup:** Stage makeup should complement the costume's colors and enhance the character's features without clashing with the design.
- **Props:** Collaborate with the props department to ensure that accessories like hats, swords, and handbags match the costume style and are easy for the actors to use on stage.

## Caring for and Maintaining Costumes

Once the costumes are created, maintaining them throughout the production is essential. Here are a few tips for costume care:

- *Cleaning and Repairs:* Stage costumes endure a lot of wear and tear, so schedule regular cleanings and repairs between shows. Consider using gentle fabrics or designs that can be spot-cleaned if full laundering isn't possible.
- *Storage:* Store costumes on hangers or in garment bags to keep them wrinkle-free. Organize costumes by character or scene for easy access during quick changes.
- *Emergency Kits:* Keep a sewing kit backstage for quick repairs like fixing loose buttons, repairing tears, or reattaching accessories.