

# Costumes On A Tight Budget



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Several years ago at a Texas Nonprofit Theatres conference I heard a presenter say, "90% of the work of a show is in the planning . . . 10% is in the production."

How very true for any costumer . . . but for the costumer working on a tight budget show planning is even more important! Follow these simple tips and tight budget costumes will become an enjoyable challenge!

Step 1—Begin with what you have.

Step 2—Evaluate importance and durability of each costume.

Step 3—Remember, audience members are not history experts.

Step 4—Make costume flexibility a goal.

Step 5—Reward yourself when costumes come in under budget!

## STEP 1

### Begin with what you already have!

Read the script, reread it, and reread it again so you have some ideas of costume needs before beginning the costuming process!!!

Find out where existing costumes are stored, then explore the place yourself. Will you need to take battery lanterns or does the space have electricity? Are costumes in any order (color, period, etc)? If costumes are in unlabeled boxes, dumped in piles on the floor, or randomly hung on racks what must you do *before* you can evaluate your existing costume options? Are there other people who share your interest in costumes and might be willing to organize a clean-up day? Make a plan for returning items after the show so they are more organized and accessible than when you first saw them.

Ask for help. Ask actors, tech crew, theatre staff, volunteers, and friends if they have items you can use. If your show calls for tool belts, ask the actors or

set shop for extras.

Rummage through existing costume storage or a friend's closet or resale shop. Decide what can be used as is or can be adapted to fit a different period. Don't predetermine a dress or suit can be used only for a 1990's show; with some modifications, it may be perfect for the 1940's . . . and is more likely to fit present-day actors with fewer alterations.

*Before* using items belonging to individuals or other theatres be sure to confirm if the items are donations to your theatre or loaned for the duration of the show.

- Promptly acknowledge all donations, whether donations are from actors/techies/staff or from community organizations, local businesses, or individuals.
- Borrowed items should be returned within a week after a show closes, clean and in good repair.
- Establish and maintain a good reputation for yourself and the theatre!

Choose the basic color pallet from what already exists, even if it isn't your first choice. Use trims, accent pieces,

and accessories to shift colors more toward your original plan.

Meet with the director as soon as you know what is available and show pencil sketches of your ideas. His/her concept may be totally different than yours, but you will have a point to begin discussion. Tell the director what costume possibilities already exist for a tight budget show. Avoid the expensive and volatile situation of having the director see costumes for the first time during tech week!!!

## STEP 2

### Evaluate importance and durability of each costume!

Under what conditions and how many times will the garment be worn? Will wearers dance, play instruments, or crawl on the floor? Costumes that receive hard use for several weeks should receive the most attention during construction . . . sturdy linings, padded knees and elbows, heavy-duty zippers, easy arm movement, ability to go to the bathroom, etc. Does a 30-second walk across stage require a brand new costume or could something be quickly adapted from an existing garment?

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Will the costume be machine washed or dry cleaned? Dry cleaning can easily add 1/3-1/2 to the costume budget. If a show runs many weeks during a hot summer, actors will probably want shared costumes cleaned at least monthly. The advantage of dry cleaning is that fabric choice is virtually unlimited and garment lifetime may be significantly extended.

Might the item later be restyled for another show? A garment that may be restyled should be made originally with that intent—wide seams (1”-2”), sturdy flat linings where seams won’t show and bag linings where they will, good quality fabric, classic style, and all fabric and trim scraps saved and stored with the garment.

## STEP 3

### Remember, audience members are not history experts!

Costumes do not always have to be historically perfect. What is crucial, though, is that the silhouette, color, and fabric pattern and texture be appropriate for the period. Audiences sense, perhaps only subconsciously, when costumes enhance or undermine a show!

Once a time period is decided, use costume history books, vintage photos, art paintings (for fabrics and colors) and sculptures (for drape), illustrations in some children’s picture books, “vintage” sewing patterns, out-of-date pattern books, and internet sources. Some other sources include postage stamps, record album covers, corporate annual reports, paper dolls, and movie posters.

- Use historical costume patterns now available from most commercial pattern companies like McCalls, Butterick, Simplicity, and Vogue. Women’s sizes range from 6-24 and men’s sizes S-XL. Children’s sizes are also available. Avoid “historical” patterns intended for historical



*Costumes used in Summer Mummies, the single biggest fundraiser for Midland Community Theatre. Costume expenses in 2005 were just under \$400 for 28 actors and over 30 performances.*

purists like Civil War and Medieval re-enactors; they are expensive and complex.

- True “vintage” patterns are sized much smaller than present-day patterns. To use one, compare the old pattern to the actor’s measurements, then cut and spread apart tissue pieces. After piecing together a new tissue pattern, cut it out of heavy-weight muslin so scotch tape, pins, and tissue don’t shift while cutting the actual costume fabric.
- Making your own patterns for really large actors is time-consuming and a job for advanced seamstresses. Time, money, and fittings are worth it, though, when you see a shy actor glow in his well-fitting jacket.

If you are deliberately mixing styles and periods be obvious!!! Is your purpose to differentiate one group from another? Is it to make a play on words in the script? Is it to make the audience laugh? Is it to save money and keep under budget? All are valid reasons for mixing costumes but be careful not to end up with a messy stage and confused audience.

## STEP 4

### Make costume flexibility a goal.

To create a dress look, make a skirt and blouse of the same fabric. It is much easier to fit two pieces on an actor than one with a no-give waistline. Add at least 2”-3” to the length of the *dress bodice pattern* so the *blouse* can be tucked in the waistband neatly. Add weight to the hem with bias tape or a double-rolled hem so blouse lays flat.

Make waistlines adjustable with elastic, drawstrings, and long, over-lapping flaps or multiple sets of hooks and bars. Elastic and drawstrings are also ideal in peasant blouses and many period under-dresses because they allow flexible fitting.

To avoid creating two complicated appliquéd panels, make one panel then attach it to the front of a blouse, dress or shirt with snaps. This is an easy way to accommodate multiple actors playing the same role but wearing different size costumes.

## STEP 5

### Reward yourself when costumes come in under budget! ■