

From the AACT Knowledge Base

Choosing the Right Fabric

Concepts and tips for costumers—and those who work with them

By Stephen Peithman

Fabric—how it looks, how it feels, how it drapes, how it reflects or absorbs color, how it affects the actor, and how much it costs—all impact the choices of the costume designer. To get some perspective on these choices, we asked costume consultant Charlotte French to give us the benefit of her experience.

French offers suggestions concerning types of fabrics, fabric color, and ways to use fabric shopping as an element in the final design of the costume.

Fabric Types

Despite all the jokes over the years about polyester, you'll hear no catcalls from French. She uses manmade fabrics often—if they suit her purposes.

"I do try to use natural fiber for anything that touches the skin," she says. "For the men in *The Mikado*, I chose rayon for the material that would be next to their bodies because we had people who really sweat. To put polyester next to their skin was inviting problems and would make them really uncomfortable. Once we got to an outer shell I did use polyester, however."

French chose rayon instead of cotton for the lining because "rayon breathes and it's soft. Cotton didn't have the right 'hand,' the right drape for what I wanted, but the rayon did."

Even with natural-fiber linings, French insists that the men wear undershirts.

"It protects the costume and absorbs perspiration, making the actors feel cooler. They *think* extra clothing will be warmer, but actually it's cooler because the perspiration is evaporating from the cotton. Women have it a little easier because they usually have some skin that's bared, so they're not dying of heat. Men tend to wear tailored costumes that are close-fitting. That's why perspiration becomes a problem for them."

Once she's dealing with fabrics that don't have to touch the skin, however, French is far more liberal in her choices.

"Wool is very warm on stage and it's also very expensive," she points out. "Luckily, there are other things that look enough like it on stage. Polyester gabardine, for example, is a far better thing on stage than wool gabardine because it doesn't wrinkle and it cleans well. It has a lasting quality. To buy the same quality in good wool gabardine would be exorbitant--if you could <find> it."

For a homespun look, French has used tablecloth fabric on occasion. She has also used burlap that has been washed.

"I did that for *Man of La Mancha*," she recalls. "I washed burlap for Sancho's costume--before it was cut--and it had a really unique look to it. Washing softens it up."

Sometimes you wash a fabric to give it a different quality," she notes. "Also for *La Mancha* I washed some silk and then dyed it so that it looked old. It was a beautiful silk underneath and you could still see it, but it wasn't pretty anymore. I used that for Aldonza."

Silk is expensive, French admits, but sometimes using an expensive fabric is worth the money because it has the right look.

"Felt is also good for certain looks," she says. "It can be made to look like leather, for example, by coating it with a varnish. I've made armor out of felt by painting it. You use felt for pieces, for trims. But you have to be careful because it stretches. Felt today isn't wool so it doesn't have the same properties as the old stuff, which could be shaped and molded. That's why you often have troubles when you follow the directions in old costume and clothing books--the fabrics have changed."

Favorite fabrics

When asked what her favorite fabrics were to work with, French responded quickly--faille, a ribbed, soft, plainly woven material of silk or rayon.

"For any 19th century women's costumes it is wonderful," she says. "It has a very subtle rib to it--not like corduroy, which has more of a pile--just this subtle, subtle rib. It has a lot of life, a beautiful, stiff 'hand', but it will also fall nicely. It's ideal when you want a full skirt, a big sleeve, or even something that is tailored yet delicate looking.

"Also, the satiny look of silk charmeuse just can't be replaced. Even polyester just doesn't look the same on stage. But it's not very practical because it doesn't last very well. I've used it, but only on occasions where really nothing else will give me the look I want."

Practical Concerns

Asked what fabrics she *doesn't* like, French thinks for a moment before answering.

"I don't use corduroy much. Some people think it can be used in place of velvet. But it doesn't really have enough pile for that. And it's too heavy for most uses. Close up it may look like velvet, but at a distance it doesn't move the way velvet does. Frankly, when I want to suggest velvet, I use velvet.

"But I've used most fabrics at one time or another," she says. "About the only thing I won't deal with is a fabric that can't be cleaned--unless it's a trim, because there you can take it off or you can buy enough and replace it. Otherwise, if you can't clean it, you can't really use it again. And costs being what they are, that just isn't practical."

Considering Color

Costume design is more than shape, line and fidelity to period. Designers find that color can be a powerful tool in shaping the impact of the costume and how it relates to the character who wears it.

And yet practical considerations do intrude.

"If your costume design concept depends on color," says French, "you may have to settle for a fabric you're not so fond of but that is the right color. In that case you may have to work with the fabric to get the feel or look you want. You may be able to dye it, for example.

"Unfortunately, if it's got polyester in it, that can't be dyed by ordinary fabric dyes. You can paint on it with fabric paint but paint changes the 'hand' of the fabric. Sometimes, you find the right color, but it isn't heavy enough. In that case, you may be able to back it and use it successfully."

Color On Stage

The color you want may not be the color you think you've bought, French warns.

"The artificial fabrics seem to light differently. When shopping, you need to take them away from the fluorescent lights to a window to see the true color. In natural light you have a fighting chance of knowing what it's going to look like on stage. Of course, the color of the stage lighting will affect the

color, too," she adds. "That's why I always send fabric swatches of the main costumes to the lighting designer to make sure the costumes are lighted appropriately."

Avoid subtle tones unless you have full cooperation with the other designers, she warns.

"When you use real subtle tones the wrong gel can just destroy them. I remember one show in which the set and costumes were all in pastels--pinks, lavenders, greens. But the set designer had told the lighting designer that he wanted everything to look like candlelight. She used an amber wash that just destroyed the set and costume colors—they turned to mud. Unfortunately the director was color-blind and it didn't matter to him."

Gels flatten some colors and highlight others. In a multicolored fabric, a gel might bring out one color to the detriment of the others. On the other hand, this same fact can be used to your advantage. For example, a pattern can be muted by certain gel colors in one scene and later made more pronounced by a shift of lighting. French recalls a Canadian production of *The Mikado* that used stage lighting to enhance the costumes.

"The costumes had sequins that were the same color as the fabric, scattered here and there to catch light. This is a great idea, because you don't really know what's catching the light but it holds your interest. It was a wonderful effect. I wonder if the lighting might have 'flattened' the silk, and so the sequins were the solution. It's something I'll probably use myself some time."

Performers and Color

French emphasizes that costume colors are part of an overall design, meant to blend not only with the lighting and set design, but with the psychological and visual concepts of the director. Because people are accustomed to picking out their own clothing, they often believe they should have the same input as actors. Not so, French says.

"I don't usually give performers a choice in what color they wear. That is just the way it is. The only exception is that I try not to put a person in a color they really *hate*. And a lot of people do have real problems with certain colors. I understand—I am an actor as well as a costumer. But we're talking major dislike here—something that would affect their performance. I am not a color consultant and I didn't design for "spring" people, for example, when that was the big thing."

Because costume color is part of an overall design, the designer needs to be hard-nosed at times. Sometimes that stubbornness bears unexpected fruit.

"You'd be amazed at the number of times you hear people say 'Oh, but I don't wear that shade,' she says." But you put them in it anyway, they like the look, and pretty soon they're buying their own clothes in that color."

Shopping for Fabric

To shop for costume fabric you need to have a good idea of what you want and you also need to be flexible.

Notes French, "If you're not flexible you're dead, because you can't always find exactly what you want--unless you can afford to shop in the expensive specialty shops."

She doesn't often shop at theatrical fabric stores because the nearest one is 90 miles away.

"If I need an entire bolt of something unusual, I'll make the trip. But when I need three yards, that isn't always practical. Some of those stores can be overwhelming, too. If I go in just to look, I'm overwhelmed by the quantity and variety. I see everything and I see nothing. It's sensory overload. I stand there for days and say, 'Gee that's nice. Gee, that looks good.... So, most of the time, I shop in the regular fabric stores."

However, French does enjoy shopping the fabric stores to see what is available. She also makes shopping a part of her entire design process.

"I start out with my ideal by painting the design on paper," she explains. "And then I find what is closest to that in the stores. Sometimes I find something that is better, and sometimes I settle for something that will do. Usually when I design I know the *texture* of the fabric I want. That is, I want something that is crisp and shiny, or soft and dull-finished—something that either needs to drape or stand out on its own. Those things are immutable unless you change your whole concept. You can get away with making a soft fabric stiff by backing it with a stiffer fabric, but that's a lot of work. I'd rather start with something closer to what I need."

French recommends keeping an open mind when shopping for fabric. That's particularly important these days because there are fewer fabric shops around, especially locally-owned. So, "Don't be so wed to your original concept that you won't accept anything but a specific color or pattern in a particular weight, she warns. That can be an exercise in frustration."

Remember that a costume doesn't stand alone, she warns. "There may be more than one way to get the effect you want, more than one way to suggest character, social position, period, whatever. It's fine to have an ideal of what you want, but ultimately you need to get the work done. Sometimes you find exactly what you want in a store. Sometimes you compromise. And sometimes you find something even better than what you had in mind originally. Be flexible."

She also watches for sales, and shops them religiously.

"For a recent show I found material that's normally \$60 a yard on sale for a fraction of the original price," she says. "It was perfect for a bride's outfit I was making."

"I also buy backing material--a good cotton blend--whenever I find it on sale. That's something you can stockpile and know you'll use."

"Sometimes you'll find a fabulous piece of fabric on sale and have no immediate use for it. But you know if you don't get it now that it won't be there when you do need it."

That is a familiar situation to most costume designers, she says, and points up the need to design a show's costumes as early as possible. That way you can take advantage of sales that may come up, or be fortunate enough to find that last six yards of material in exactly the color you need.

She also recommends being on the lookout for sale material that can be used to dress up or change an existing costume in storage.

"That's a great way to get extra mileage out of stock without spending a lot of money. To do that well you have to know your stock well, of course."

It's clear from French's observations, that fabric buying is not an isolated task. To get the most out of your budget--and out of your costume designs--it's wise to make shopping and purchasing part of the entire design process.

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