

FROCKING UP

The Art of the Costume Maker

How do you dress a Greek god or turn an actor into a dinosaur?

What are the differences between a costume for an opera singer, a ballet dancer or an actor?

Frocking Up showcases the special skills of the costume maker. Starting with detailed discussions with the designer, through fabric selection, patternmaking, cutting, sewing/assembly, fittings and finally in performance, the costume maker's ability to interpret the designer's two-dimensional concept drawing into a fully-formed garment can greatly assist the performer to make the transformation into his or her stage character.

Drawing on theatre, opera, and dance costumes and design sketches from the QPAC Museum Collection, *Frocking Up* features garments created for many different performance styles. From Joan Sutherland's elaborate costumes from *Lucia di Lammermoor* to the lavish handprinted robe created for QTC's *Richard II*, this exhibition from the QPAC Museum celebrates the art and craft of the costume maker.



THE COSTUME MAKER

The ideal costume maker combines the skill of a Paris couturier, the budgeting ability of Scrooge, and the wisdom of Solomon.

Costumes for the theatre are still largely hand made originals. Even when some garments can be found or purchased, they often need to be adjusted to a specific performer's needs. Each performer brings a unique physical challenge – and often a strong idea about what suits them best. The costume maker needs to solve the practical challenges while still remaining faithful to the overall vision of the designer, and keep the performer happy.

Costume designer and costume maker work closely together to select suitable materials for the garments. Each element – including buttons, braids and trimmings – needs careful consideration not only for look and practicality, but also for cost and long term endurance.

The costume maker uses his or her knowledge of the changing shape and structure of contemporary and period clothing to develop a silhouette that realizes the essence of the two dimensional sketch in a three dimensional garment.

Often a toile or first version of the costume in an inexpensive material is prepared and fitted on the performer. The designer and costume maker can make adjustments to fit and detailing before the more expensive material is cut out.

The next fitting in the selected material allows fine adjustments to be made, trims to be checked, hem lengths to be decided etc.

A final fitting ensures everything is as it should be, and that the performer is comfortable and able to do everything they need to when on stage. If there are unusual costume items such as corsets or hooped petticoats or especially long or trailing sleeves or skirts, the performer is encouraged to rehearse in these as soon as they are ready.

The costume maker is available during the final on-stage rehearsals – when the costumes are seen with make-up, wigs or final hairstyles and under stage lighting – to make any minor adjustments. This is the last opportunity to ensure everything is working together, that the performers are comfortable and safe, and the costumes achieve the desired overall effect.

As every costume designer knows, the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful costume is very often the skill of person who made it.



FROCKING UP OPERA

The earliest operas were often about gods and goddesses and other mythical subjects. Spectacular sets and costumes quickly became part of the opera tradition, and audience expectations still keep that tradition alive. Although today's operas can be about anything from the development of the atomic bomb to a setting of a classic Australian play like *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, many of the most popular works are still set in distant times and places. The costume designer and the costume maker need to find a way to recreate the splendours of the past on a budget.

For many singers an opera performance can also be a test of endurance. Elaborate period gowns, armour, uniforms or mythic disguises are not what most would choose to stand and sing in for an hour or two, or three, or even longer. Designer and maker must ensure that the costume is as comfortable as possible. Singers come in all shapes and sizes, and the shape or size might not be what the composer had in mind, so the designer learns to 'accentuate the positive'. With some judicious stage illusion, the short tenor can appear a little taller, and the 45 year old soprano look more like a willowy 18 year old.

The costume maker for opera must learn what a singer needs to do his or her job. Comfortable shoes are a good start, nothing too tight or close fitting at the neck. A corset can be useful for the final look of a period gown, and if fitted carefully, can work with the singer not against them. Most importantly, both costume designer and costume maker must work with the singer so that they understand why a costume is designed and made a certain way, and how it can enhance their performance.



FROCKING UP DANCE

People have always danced, and it didn't really matter what they wore. As dance became an element of the elaborate entertainments in the courts of Europe, a more formal dance costume developed. At first it was just a slightly shorter version of what everyone else was wearing, so the audience could admire the footwork of the dancers.

In 1832 in Paris, Marie Taglioni danced *La Sylphide* in a simple multi layered net skirt. The tutu was born. As dancers became more skilled, and the audience more demanding, the tutu became shorter and stiffer, developing into the familiar shape we see today.

Dancers are highly trained athletes and the costumes they wear need to allow maximum movement possibilities. Obviously each dance style requires a different range of movement, and the designer and costume maker must be aware of these factors. The classical ballerina needs a costume that fits securely, with a skirt with the right amount of stiffness, a midsection that allows her partner to firmly grip her when needed and a bodice that stays put whatever position she ends up in. Contemporary dance can be even more demanding. Anything is possible, and the choreographer, designer and dancer need to work closely with the costume maker to ensure that the dancer can safely execute whatever movement is required.

The designer can borrow styles from the complete history of dance to help tell the story or set the right mood. In the past, the choice of materials was limited but the development of reliable stretch fabrics and nets that don't go limp has made life a lot easier for dancer and costume maker. The leotard can now be made to fit smoothly and to hug every movement of the dancer's body. No Prince needs to have baggy tights ruining his elegant line and his Princess can wear a tutu that never droops.



FROCKING UP THEATRE

In the vast outdoor stages of the ancient Greeks, oversized masks, flowing robes and built up shoes helped to make the lead actors visible and understandable. By Shakespeare's time, play going was a more intimate experience. Even in the open-air Globe the performer was relatively close to the audience. And the actors were generally dressed much like the audience. Almost all plays were 'modern dress' with a few additional items to indicate the character came from another time or place. In fact until the nineteenth century most plays were in modern dress, that is dressed in clothes of the present day.

The nineteenth century saw an increasing interest in the past, and a desire to recreate what people might have looked like. 'Authentic' productions became the latest fashion. As is usually the case, these recreations reflected the present times as much as the past. The twentieth century brought an explosion of different styles and fashions in costume design. Almost anything was possible, and fortunately actors are a remarkably flexible group who will try almost anything.

The responsibilities of costume designer and costume maker remain the same. To tell the story, to create the right atmosphere and to help the performer create the appropriate character for the play or musical or event. The designer works closely with the director to develop the visual world for the production, and needs to keep the broader picture in mind. Sometimes the performer can become focused on one aspect of their character, or how the character might look. The costume maker and designer can help the performer see how all the different elements fit together.

From the detailed period costumes designed by Bill Haycock for *The Game of Love and Chance*, to the everyday clothes designed by Andrew Carter for *Who Cares?*, every item the actor wears, whether specially made or hunted down in second hand shops or exclusive boutiques, has been carefully selected or created to help the performer do their job successfully.



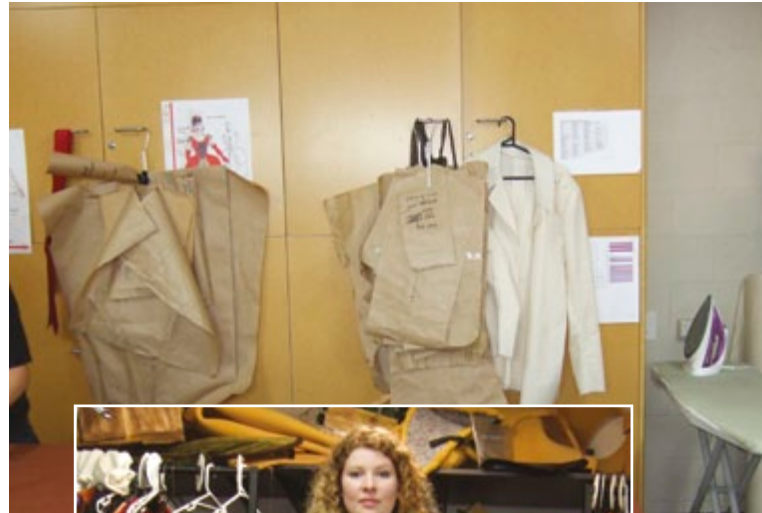
FROCKING UP MERAB

As the curtain rises on Handel's *Saul*, young David has just killed the giant Goliath. The grateful King Saul offers him the hand of his eldest daughter Merab. She is not happy.

After discussions between director Gregory Massingham and designer Christopher Smith, it was decided to combine elements from the time of Handel and modern day to create a unique look for this production. Merab is Saul's eldest child, a princess with a strong sense of her importance in the court and military hierarchy. Her costume combines an 18th century silhouette with military and modern details.

Costume maker Gayle MacGregor suggested that a separate boned corset and hooped petticoat or pannier would be the best way to create the typical 18th century silhouette

Fabric was sampled and purchased. Both of the artists who would sing the role were carefully measured. A pattern was drafted by the costume maker, and the boned corset and pannier constructed. The first fitting checked the fit of these. Adjustments were made as necessary



Laura Coutts in corset and pannier

FROCKING UP MERAB



A calico toile of the overskirt and bodice was cut and sewn. These were fitted over the corset and pannier. Alterations were made and the position of the braided front panel marked onto the calico.



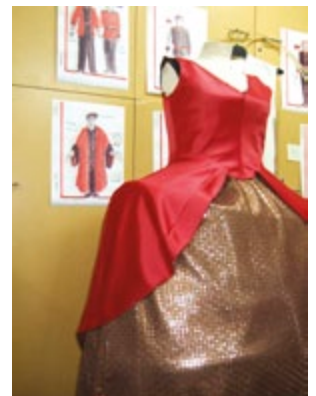
Once the toile had been fitted, any adjustments were transferred to the pattern. The final fabric was cut and sewn. The braided front panel was made as a separate item. The assembled garment was fitted on the artist. The front panel was checked for fit and position, and hem lengths were decided. Any final alterations could then be made to the garments.



As the two singers performing the role were quite different, a separate corset and red bodice and overskirt were needed for each artist, although they could share the pannier and gold skirt



Gayle MacGregor fitting calico toile on Rebecca Cassidy



FROCKING UP MERAB



The garments were adjusted. Some sections were lined; edges were finished off. The corset and pannier were made available for the artist to use in rehearsal. Eyelets were added to the back of the bodice both for the look and to ensure a snug fit. The epaulettes were constructed.

Merab was ready for the stage



Gayle MacGregor fitting Laura Coutts



QPAC MUSEUM

Costume Collection

The QPAC Museum collects and preserves the State's performing arts heritage and provides community access to the collection through research facilities and a changing program of exhibitions presented in the Tony Gould Gallery and selected QPAC foyers.

The QPAC Museum Collection consists of two main parts. The QPAC Archive Collection contains material relating to performances created by or performed at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. The Queensland Heritage Collection contains items relating to performances presented in Queensland or created by Queenslanders.

The Heritage Collection consists of over 55,000 items and includes costumes, designs, programs, photographs, recordings and artefacts.

The '500 plus costumes and accessories include the elaborate gowns worn by Dame Joan Sutherland during her triumphant return to Australia in 1965, a Chinese mandarin costume from the 1920s musical *Chu Chin Chow* and a small dinosaur. The work of 36 different identified designers is represented amongst the 1300 costume designs in the QPACM Collection.

If you would like to play your part by donating to the QPAC Museum, or would like further information about the collection, you can contact the Collections Manager on 3840 7362.

The QPAC Museum catalogue is searchable online at

http://www.qpac.com.au/creative_services/qpac_museum/

