ROBERT KUSEL

Dressing the Part

What it takes to create costumes for a Lyric production

By Kamaria Morris

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When envisioning costumes from some of Lyric's most iconic productions, a few standouts come to mind. Cio-Cio-San's beautiful kimono in *Madama Butterfly.* The black cape Méphistophélès donned in *Faust*. Lucia's haunting, bloodstained white nightgown in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Perhaps the sultry red dress worn by the heroine of *Carmen*. These memorable looks not only help describe the characters who wear them, but also work to set the tone of the entire production – no small feat.

Indeed, the skilled professionals of Lyric's wardrobe department have a tough job. Not only are they tasked with sewing immensely intricate costumes and conducting fittings and alterations – they must also flawlessly execute speedy backstage wardrobe changes for roughly 90 performances each season. All of this occurs behind the scenes, as these craftspeople hope the discerning eyes of audiences will only experience costumes as seamless garments of perfection. Fortunately, because of their years of experience and carefully honed expertise, Lyric's wardrobe team continues to masterfully produce costumes season after season.

There are essentially three types of productions for which the Lyric wardrobe department creates costumes: rentals, remounts, and new productions.

Each mode of production presents unique challenges. With a rented show, for example, usually the wardrobe staff can't make significant alterations to the original costumes for the new artists who will be wearing them. Instead, they often must create copies of those costumes, ensuring that their look will fit perfectly within the production's basic visual scheme. With a remounted show, although Lyric owns the production and the wardrobe staff is allowed to make alterations, a lot of creativity is needed to refurbish costumes that may have been stored in a warehouse for many years. Additionally, directors for a remounted production often request all new costuming! In that case, the staff must create original designs to meet the director's vision. And of course, a new production is challenging because it requires working with designers and directors over many months to make certain that their concepts will be reflected in the end result.

For rentals and remounts (where the costumes are usually already in existence), costumes arrive at Lyric months in advance so the wardrobe department can begin their work. This allows the team enough time to unpack, prep, and compare the costumes to the measurements of the production's current cast. It's also the time to make decisions regarding whether a costume will need to be remade to fit an artist's unique dimensions. Costumes for new productions are generally constructed off premises by various contractors and are fitted closer to August, with the designers and key members of the wardrobe staff all present to ensure that their visions mesh.

If a costume has to be refurbished or newly created, the wardrobe team begins with a search for the perfect fabric. Usually a costume is based on a sketch by the original designer or a photo of the costume, so it's a matter of matching a fabric type or color to that design concept. Unfortunately, according to Maureen Reilly, Lyric's wardrobe director, Chicago leaves much to be desired in the realm of fabric shopping. Reilly laments, "Chicago does not have a lot of fabric shops! There are really only two or three to choose from, so we use catalogues to try to find similar fabrics." If the right fabric can't be found in a catalogue, Reilly has to place a few special calls. "We sometimes order fabric from other places," she explains, "like Fucotex in Germany, Whaleys in

Opposite page, top: *The late Pet Halmen designed more than 200 costumes for Lyric's production of* Aida*, premiered in 1983 and pictured in its 2004-05 revival.*

Far Left: Carmen *at Lyric Opera, 2010-11 season: the heroine (Katharine Goeldner) and Escamillo (Kyle Ketelsen), resplendent in their arrival at the bullring.*

Left: *Costumes by Susan Mickey brought a rainbow of bright color to this season's new production of* The Marriage of Figaro. *Left to right: Luca Pisaroni (Count Almaviva), Christiane Karg (Susanna), Adam Plachetka (title role), and Amanda Majeski (Countess Almaviva).*

Right: *Two longtime Lyric colleagues, wardrobe supervisor Lucy Lindquist and costume director Maureen Reilly.*

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In Bel Canto *(2015-16, world premiere), Danielle de Niese, portraying opera diva Roxane Coss, is pictured in her concert gown and then in the clothes she wears after being taken hostage.*

London, or other companies in New York City. We cut a piece of a sample fabric from a costume we're trying to recreate and send it off to find a close copy."

In collaborating with the wardrobe staff, each costume designer heavily influences fabric selection. "Working with different designers is another really fun part of our jobs because they're visual artists," Reilly says. For example, for this season's new production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Susan Mickey created designs from fabrics that featured exhilaratingly bold and vibrant colors. The costume designer for this season's *Cinderella,* a production seen in many different companies internationally, was Joan Guillén, "who used fabric to create 3D designs, so that was interesting," says Reilly. "He was great to work with. He said this was the best that the production has ever looked."

Once the right fabric is chosen and the designs are either revived or recreated, the next step is fitting each cast member. Lyric's wardrobe department differs from many other renowned opera houses in not having a costume shop equipped to construct complete shows on its own. An in-house team of 14 specialists, however, can execute all aspects of sewing, alterations, and multiple rounds of fittings. "I didn't realize how differently we do things at Lyric until recently when designers told us they liked the way we work," notes Reilly. "We usually have two people at a time go in during a fitting, one taking notes, and one doing all the pinning." The same two-person team that does the fittings also sews the alterations. According to Reilly, "The designers really like that because whoever is working on the alterations was actually in the room and saw how the costume

Portraying Valencienne in this season's production of The Merry Widow, *Heidi Stober had a quick change in Act Three from her grisette outfit to her formal gown.*

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In Act One of last season's Porgy and Bess*, the chorus went from their everyday clothes in the opening scene (with Jermaine Smith as Sporting Life) to the funeral scene and then the picnic scene.*

should fit. It also allows the designer to get to know all the people in our small department, so it becomes a nice, warm, teamwork environment." The fitting/alterations tag-team format also provides a learning environment for younger wardrobe staff, who are often paired with more experienced colleagues to learn the intricacies of this demanding trade.

Fittings begin just a day or two after the artists begin rehearsals. Principals who often have multiple costume changes in a show generally attend two or three fittings. The wardrobe staff is given their measurements in advance to make sure the basic fit is accurate. Fittings typically last about an hour, but may go longer if numerous costumes are required by a particular role. Reilly says, "It's actually harder than you might think to stand in a fitting for more than an hour, so we usually try to break it up."

It's during fittings that the wardrobe department often faces its greatest challenge. "Clothing is a very personal thing," explains Reilly. "You're portraying someone else, so it's not necessarily supposed to be something you would wear. But for our principal artists, who might be standing in front of 3,000 people for large chunks of time, they can't feel ugly or awkward or ill-fitted. So we have to make sure they love their costumes, and you can always tell when they do." Luckily, this has also become one of the most rewarding aspects of Reilly's job – "When their face lights up once you put them in their costume, that's a great feeling." Scott Marr, Lyric's production design director, agrees that one of the most important goals for the designer and the wardrobe team is ensuring that the performers feel comfortable in their costumes. "A costume is one of the most personal parts of a performer," he says, "other than their voice. Costume designers want the performer to feel confident and help him or her with the portrayal of character."

A secondary challenge lies in the sheer numbers of cast members the wardrobe department dresses. Lyric casts can include principal artists, 48 chorus members, actors, supernumeraries, and dancers. That means there are at least 60 costumes in each show, but normally many more because most productions require more than one costume change. Reilly says, "In this year's *Merry Widow* some chorus members had two or three outfits each. But with a show like *Wozzeck*, they only had one, so it really varies." The largest number of costumes Lyric's wardrobe department has undertaken for one show has been its production of *Aida*, which includes more than 200.

With that many pieces, it's no wonder Lyric's wardrobe staff have their fair share of memorable costuming moments. Reilly recalls a 1993-94 rental of *Don Quichotte* for which "the notes said to lengthen everything, and the person read the notes wrong and thought it said to *shorten* everything. So Jean-Philippe Lafont [who portrayed Sancho] looked like the Incredible Hulk! But he was really nice about it and we got it


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Clorinda (Diana Newman) and Tisbe (Annie Rosen), the heroine's stepsisters in this season's Cinderella.

fixed." Reilly also recalls the 2007-08 production of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* when Robert Dean Smith, playing the Emperor, wore an electric coat equipped with fiber-optics. Another memorable favorite was designer Robert Perdziola's costume for Escamillo in *Carmen*, seen at Lyric most recently in the 2010-011 revival: "It was a traditional Spanish piece that was really beautiful. The costumes from that *Carmen* were just great overall – it was a fun show to work on from beginning to end." Marr struggles to choose a favorite costumes, but includes those designed by John MacFarlane (*Elektra* and *Hansel and Gretel*, 2012) as especially memorable: "His designs are amazingly artistic. John's renderings are works of art in themselves, and that translates as the costumes are being built."

The magic of the theater applies to costuming, especially when it comes to making fast changes offstage. Specifically for that purpose, many costumes are often rigged or faked. Velcro and snap closures (in place of buttons) become a designer's best friend when the dressers backstage have mere moments to switch a cast member's look. At other times, performers may wear one costume on top of another (referred to as an "under-dress"). "What goes into a quick change is something the audience never knows," says Reilly. "I'm always thinking, 'Oh, my God, if only people saw what's going on back here, they would be amazed!'" Costume changes usually happen during a scene change, so often chorus members and principals are changing simultaneously. At the same time, so much else is going on: the chorus master is generally setting up for offstage singing, stagehands are changing scenery, the prop department is swapping props or adding new ones, and the stage manager is backstage keeping everyone on track with timing and cues. There are normally 12-14 dressers for each production, and as many as 22 for especially large casts.

Female performers can be particularly challenging during quick changes because there are usually multiple components to their costumes. Reilly says, "Take Heidi Stober as Valencienne in *The Merry Widow* this season. A quick-change [from formal gown to dancing girl in Act Three] might include switching out a hat, a wig, shoes, a long dress for a short dress, and adding fishnet stockings." Stober required two dressers, a make-up artist, and a wig staffer, who all convened in a small space to execute her costume change. "But luckily, all of that is actually choreographed. The same person does the exact same thing every performance, so no one is bumping in to each other," Reilly says. Things are so choreographed backstage that if a dresser is out sick and has to be replaced, the new dresser is usually given a tutorial on what to do at what time.

Most costume changes happen in about two minutes. But many occur in much less time. The fastest changes at Lyric for the full company of a show have been for *Show Boat* (2011-12) and *Porgy and Bess* (2014-15), which lasted 45 and 30 seconds respectively. Many of those cast members had an under-dressing, so they changed costumes in the wings. Marr adds, "The costumes in *Show Boat* and *Porgy and Bess* really gave the viewers a sense of ease and naturalism."

The current season has seen three new productions, including the world premiere of *Bel Canto*. "Being brand new and contemporary, *Bel Canto* was compelling to work on," notes Reilly. "You might be surprised but older, period pieces are a piece of cake. It's the contemporary designs that are much more difficult, because we all have our own opinions of what they should look like." Looking ahead to the rest of this season's productions, *Romeo and Juliet* will see the principals in mostly new costumes (due to sizing issues and the designer requesting new looks) and *Der Rosenkavalier* will feature traditional costumes with updated elements.

Before it opens, each Lyric production has a final dress rehearsal. Reilly, along with Lyric wardrobe supervisor Lucy Lindquist, always attends the rehearsal to make sure everything is aesthetically pleasing, costume-wise. But there's also a sentimental reason behind the act. "Especially in those times that a show has been really challenging," says Maureen Reilly, "when you finally see the end product of your hard work, it's very fulfilling and it makes everything worth it." Lyric's wardrobe team invariably has an extremely challenging job, but it's the intangible elements that keep them excited about what they do. Marr adds, "It's all about seeing the design -- the research -- listening to a designer's excitement - seeing the fabric chosen - the details selected - the twinkle in the eye of a performer when they look in the mirror. Those moments are sublime."

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