

CAST OF THOUSANDS

By Marie Anne Chiment, STAGE DIRECTIONS, January 2005

The producer of your theater has just announced the upcoming season and it includes a show with a large chorus. The show's director is thrilled because of the endless stage pictures he can create with all those bodies. The choreographer sees a stage full of movement. The actors are happy to have jobs.

As the costume shop manager, you want to be excited about the big show headed your way, but your budget and labor pool are limited. How do you tame this beast? Where do you begin?

I have designed many large chorus productions for both opera and theatre. Fortunately, I had skilled costumers and shop managers to guide me (and my designs) to completion. I spoke recently to some of these experts about the challenges of costuming a large, multi-size chorus. All of them agreed that efficient use of time and labor is the key to success. Their advice is to plan ahead in the three following areas.

The Design Process

Whether your chorus numbers in the single, double or triple digits, the challenge remains the same: a wise costume designer will approach the design process with the goal of creating a costume that is simple to pattern, easy to construct and effortless to wear.

Patterning can be simplified by limiting the number of "style lines" and keeping the seams straight whenever possible. Curved seams are harder to match and sew. Think through the construction of the garment as you design it. By simplifying the seaming of the basic costume, you will save your workroom construction time, while speeding alterations.

Let's say you have a large chorus of peasant girls. The artist side of your brain knows that a variety of costumes will make for a more interesting stage picture, but the practical side knows that creating one-of-a-kind costumes will slow down the workroom. Is there a way to satisfy both sides of your brain and still have everything ready by dress rehearsal?

It is possible to achieve variety in the look of your peasant girls while dressing them in almost identically cut and constructed costumes. Start with a basic pattern for the skirt, blouse and apron. Use the same basic pieces on each girl, creating a kind of uniform for each. The variety will come in your use of color, fabric choice and trim detail.

For example, Peasant Girl No. 1 might have a peach-colored cotton blouse with a lace trim at the neckline, while Peasant Girls No. 2 has an identical blouse with an added collar, pin tucks on the sleeve and a yellow-linen fabric. These two blouses can be cut and constructed from a single pattern but look completely different to the audience. Should you wish to add an elderly peasant woman to the chorus of young girls, simply switch her fabrics to a darker color and lengthen the sleeves and skirt. Voila! Maximum effect with minimum hassle.

The Patterning Process

Creating patterns for costumes is a time-consuming job. The more a costumer can limit the amount of time patterning, the faster a project will progress. "Time is the enemy when it comes to costume a large chorus," explains Carole Tucker, teacher and costume shop manager for Webster University's Conservatory Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri. "We are always trying to beat the clock!"

To help her win her race against time, Tucker divides her chorus into male and female and then further divides each sex into three sizes – small, medium and large – according to their measurements. College students tend to have more toned bodies and therefore fall into a narrower range of sizes than older performers. The

three-size model provides plenty of leeway for most of Tucker's performers.

Kay Stuntz, an experienced costumer, takes the idea of grading patterns a step further. "When I have a big chorus show, I take their basic measurements and put them on a grid so I can look at all the sized in front of me," she explains. "I group the similarly sized women together on one page and the similarly size men on another – just as I might see them standing on a stage.

Stuntz starts dividing her groups into sizes by comparing their lateral measurements – which are the measurements that go around the body and are parallel to the floor. She then creates five groups of sizes for each sex, beginning with the smallest as Group One up to the largest as Group Five. "It's nicer for the performer to see their pattern marked with 'No. 5' rather than the words 'Extra Large,'" she says.

Years of costuming choruses for many different types of performances have taught Stuntz to be flexible in her size groupings. For example, the range of bust sizes found in a professional ballet company will probably be limited to around 30 to 34 inches. An opera chorus, on the other hand, may present the costumer with busts ranging anywhere from 32 to 54 inches or more. But no matter what the sizes, the same principle applies: break your primary groupings into similarly sized smaller groups and you will be able to limit the number of patterns you must cut.

The Construction Process

Large chorus shows require special attention during the construction process. "I ask my staff to balance speed and quality," says Susan Davis, the costume shop manager for Seattle Opera. "We are all aware that time will always be a factor in construction a large show, but quality is the priority." Davis provides the following construction guidelines to her staff.

GENERAL

Don't make your machine stitches too small, as tiny stitches are hard to remove for alterations. Set your machine to a medium stitch.

If your garment laces, use a lacing placket that can be moved to alter the fit, rather than grommeting directly onto the garment itself.

Choose fabrics that are strong enough to allow stitching lines to be changed again and again. Soft, delicate fabrics such as chiffon are hard to alter and will wear and tear quickly.

BODICES

Add seams for alteration points at Center Front (CF), Center Back (CB) and Side Seams (SS).

Seam allowances: CB – 3; SS – 2; sleeve hem – 2".

Finish all piping into the alterable seam allowances, including side seams at waist and back shoulder seams.

SKIRTS

Waistbands include 4" extensions on both overlap and underlap edges.

Waistbands should always have 2-3 sets of hooks and bars 5/8" apart.

CB placket should finish 2" wide and 12" long.

Hem 3-5"

PETTICOATS

On a yoke with a drawstring waist.

Have up to 3" tucks near the hem or above the ruffle as an alteration point.

Hem may be topstitched for strength.

PANTS

Reinforce fabric in knee if possible.

CB split waistband for alterability.

CB seam allowance 3"

Hem allowance 2-4"

COATS

Make cuffs separately to facilitate alterability.

Leave 1-2" seam allowance in both sleeve seams as well as coat body.

Designing for a large chorus demands a different kind of creative process, but it can be just as satisfying as designing one-of-a-kind costumes for your leading characters. When it comes to the patterning process, dividing your chorus into groups helps keep the workload under control. Standardizing the construction process throughout the workroom will help avoid wasted time and potential errors. By following these tricks of the trade, you too can deliver your large-scale production on time, on budget and on target.