

EVERYTHING NEW IS OLD AGAIN

By Erin Auerbach, STAGE DIRECTIONS, April 2004

When the villagers of Anatevka sing of tradition and struggle in the Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*, their new clothes mold to their bodies, showing the natural scuffs and damage of garments worn for many years. Before designer Vicki Mortimer's costumes were built, river stones were used to weigh down the heavy wool fabrics worn by Alfred Molina's Tevya as well as most of the other characters. Fabrics have been washed and dyed to make them look worn.

Martin Izquierdo is the man responsible for distressing these costumes (the process of aging and breaking down the fabric to make new clothes look well-worn and authentic). After more than 20 years of costume distressing, Izquierdo has worked on outfits and accessories for numerous theatrical productions and films in New York. When he begins the distressing procedure, Izquierdo receives a description of all the characters in a production and the history of each. He works directly with the designer to ensure that aging the costumes coincides with every aspect of the production, from the character's profession to the lighting in each scene.

"In *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a class system," he says. "Their level in society determines the breakdown of their clothes. Lazar Wolf, the butcher, has more money, so his clothes will be in better shape. Tevye is poor and has done more physical labor. His clothes must show that."

Tracy Christensen, the New York design assistant for the show, explains the extra steps she and Izquierdo took to make the costumes look successfully aged. Before they made the clothes, they washed the fabric, even the wool. "It's kind of unusual," she concedes. "Normally you never wash wool first. We started the process of worrying the fabric (breaking it down) by washing it ahead of time. This takes all of the shrinkage out of it, leaving it in a totally open state."

Izquierdo uses prongs to snag the fabric. Distressing should reflect the extra physical strains of a character's physicality, occupation and lifestyle. "When you wear clothes all the time, they become a part of you," says Christensen. Distressing cuts out the time and produces effective results. It's especially important for this musical because, "Essentially everyone has only one costume because it's a poor town and they need to look realistically worn without looking like a pile of old rags," she adds.

So why not just use naturally worn-out garments? Equity rules state that principal actors must wear new clothes.

IT'S EVERYWHERE

Just about every kind of theatrical production, movie, TV show and print ad involves costume distressing or breakdown. Film distressing involves a more subtle look than theatre, as the camera is much closer than the stage and will easily pick up the flaws in a fabric. "Teching down and doing a rinse on something to take the white and bright edge off of it is important for movies," says Izquierdo.

Edwina Pellikka, owner of A Dyeing Art in Los Angeles, clarifies the difference: "Breakdown involves taking the 'newness' out of a garment, to wash down and fade the fabric so it looks like your favorite sweatshirt. Distressing involves huge changes in a costume's appearance – the result of time and physical stress on the garment."

THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The only rule of using objects to distress costumes is that there are no rules. Wood, cheese graters and wire brushes are good for snagging fabrics, according to Tim Blacker, purchasing manager at Barbara Matera Limited, the New York City-based costume shop that constructed the costumes for *Fiddler on the Roof*. He worked with Izquierdo to pant and dye the fabrics.

Izquierdo does a lot of distressing for print fashion shoots and is often asked to distress denim. He uses sandpaper on denim jeans to make it look as though the models have worn them for years. "Stages of washing, sanding, rewashing, and using chemicals to break down clothes can vary anywhere," he says.

Pelikka also uses sandpaper as well as tile and a saw rasp to distress fabric. The process can take anywhere from several hours to several days, depending on the garment and fabric. Leather coats take longest (about two days) and jeans take about a day, according to Pelikka

THE HOME FOR THE AGING

According to Izquierdo, the process of costume distressing really depends on the item of clothing or accessory and how much distressing it needs. The whole procedure, from the washing and drying to the dyeing and the scuffing, varies from piece to piece.

"There's a bad-guy gray and good-guy gray," says Pelikka. "The difference is subtle." Her 4,000 square foot factory contains steam-heated dryers that can hold up to 50 yards of fabric, and dye vats that can hold 100 yards of fabric. Print tables, a dye lab and large washers and dryers allow Pelikka to do the base work on large amounts of material at a time. A 6X6 foot airbrush booth holds alcohol-based dyes, which Pelikka says are essential. "Alcohol can be dry-cleaned," she adds. "Water-based dyes are there for life."

Pelikka has operated her business out of Glendale, CA, for the last 20 years and estimates that about 25 percent of her job includes distressing costumes. She works with just about every major film studio, as well as the Los Angeles Opera, Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson Theatre.

"You have to be an artist and figure out the actors' anatomies," she says. "Where do they lean? Where do they sweat?" To do this, Pelikka usually attends several tech rehearsals to see the actors performing under the lights, so she can see how to properly age the fabrics.

For *Fiddler*, everything has been prewashed and dyed, so that nothing is really the same color as when it was bought. Although audiences may never understand the amount of time spent making each jacket, shoe and babushka look authentic, the reward lies in a presentation that looks realistic.