

COSTUME BIBLE

BY iris Dorbian, Stage Directions Magazine, January 2004

It's a corporate truism that organization is key to success. And one way to uphold this tenet is to keep solid, updated records of all transactions at one's workplace. In theatre parlance, this means having a reference that takes into account everything you need for your production that not only fulfills the collective vision of the director and designers, but meets your budget as well. An excellent example of this is a costume bible, which identifies for costume-shop personnel the entire inventory of items and fabrics – including yardage and estimated costs – needed for a given show. Having this resource at your disposal while you build your production's wardrobe will help avert potential disasters should they arise financially or aesthetically.

But what if your shop has never used this reference before, how do you begin? According to Susan Davis, costume shop manager of the Seattle Opera and co-owner of the local Period corsets, which manufactures historical undergarments, the first step is to photocopy every costume sketch for your show and then discuss with the designer the pieces that need to be bought or constructed

"From there," she explains, "we do a spreadsheet for each costume so we can make sure that our estimates of how much yardage we need and how much it costs matches what we've budgeted for the show." Davis, who has also done stints at Santa Fe Opera and Seattle Rep, has been creating costume bibles for about seven years. Its primary mission, she says, is to "organize by character and costume – identify what and how much you need to purchase and what you expect to spend to make sure you're staying on top of your budget." It is imperative through this process to update the bible in order to make sure all changes have been recorded and everything is on track.

After you've done this, you can embark on your shopping trip. "[Here] we create the working part of the budget in the bible that the workroom will use for their reference while they're building the show," says Davis. For each character's costumes, there are slot sheets that contain the items required for each piece, places to write in the name of the vendor to be used (and decided upon during the shopping trip), the price of the items purchased and the yardage of fabric. Specifying the name of the vendor in the bible is invaluable in case the shop needs to reorder additional fabric if the show is remounted and there's not enough fabric for costumes that might not fit a new cast.

The length of yardage is an excellent detail for the cutter when working on costume pieces. Due to his or her innate knowledge and instinct, a cutter should be able to quickly determine whether or not the yardage is enough for a particular item. "They'll know we're in trouble right away," maintains Davis, "then we'll need to buy more. Of course, there should be a swatch of the material next to the item [in the bible]." The swatch should be large enough "so [that] you can clip a piece off the anyone who asks, because the dyer is going to want a little piece, the designer is going to ask for a little piece, and all of a sudden, you're going to end up with a little half-inch by half-inch square!"

Other details that need to be recorded in your bible are special notes for each costume. "Maybe it's a shared fabric," says Davis, "or maybe two or three costumes have the same fabric for their petticoats or it might need to be dyed, so that information should be in there." But once again, you must update all of your information. Keeping track of all changes may be the most time-consuming and challenging aspect of maintaining your bible, but you'll be thankful in the long run – especially when you encounter snags that force you to choose a different fabric and vendor. "You better make sure you change [the name of the vendor] in your bible, take out the old swatch, put in the new one, and keep everything updated as you go," cautions Davis.

A costume bible is a great reference to have at your disposal for future production. Davis cites an impending restaging of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, which Seattle Opera premiered several years ago, as a paramount instance of the usefulness of having this resource at hand. "I wasn't here for the first production," she says, "so it's going to be a really good source for me to both learn what pieces are involved in each costume and what the show looks like without actually digging around in stock and finding each individual costume. It gives me a snapshot of each design."

Davis' advice for costume bible neophytes is to be consistent. "If you're always writing down the yardage," she continues, "then don't skip it on one piece of fabric – write it down for all. If you don't know, then put in a post-it so you'll remember to go back and fill it in." She also recommends checking out *The Costume Technician's Handbook* by Rosemary Ingham for additional pointers. Just whatever you do, always remember to be current, be organized and keep the bible in a central locale where everyone – from the cutter to the draper to the designer – can easily find it.