

HOW TO COSTUME A SHOW

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When I think of costuming a play, a couple of questions come immediately to mind. How much money do I have to spend? How accurate do I need to be in attempting to capture the period? Other questions do come to mind, but those are the two I feel I must deal with first and then the others will naturally be answered.

Budget, for a lot of directors, is the dominating factor in selecting costumes. However, I do not feel that you must sacrifice quality just because of budget. There are some fairly inexpensive ways to costume a show and to have it appear realistic without spending a large sum of money, but you have to be creative.

First of all, is there another school in the area that has done the show recently, or another show of the same costume period? If the answer is yes, this is where you should begin. Contact the other school and discuss what they have available that might work for your show. Usually it is possible to work out a swap with another school. You probably have something the other schools could borrow.

Secondly, if you can get parents involved you will find a wealth of help available. Not only are they usually willing to help by looking through basements, attics, and closets, but you will find that they can become so involved that you might even be able to get parents to sew costumes. Also, parents sometimes have the time to search through St. Vincent/DePaul's, Salvation Army, or Goodwill for you. These are excellent sources of costumes, even for period shows. Often you can find women's formal wear that, with a few alterations, can look very different and fit a multitude of costume periods. Also, you can purchase old drapes, tablecloths, linens, and lace that can be cut and used for fabric.

Budget is important, but accuracy is the biggest concern of the high school director. The best place to go to determine the "look" of a costume period is art work and costume books. When looking at these books, you should look for the general lines of the costume first. Detail work comes later. Questions you should ask are:

1. Where is the waist?
2. What type of sleeve are we dealing with?
3. Is the neckline high or low?
4. Are there any outstanding features that immediately capture my eye?

When you have answered these questions, you are ready to start browsing through pattern books for patterns that highlight these features. Often you can buy a bridal pattern, and by changing some of the lines, create a period costume.

You must also pay attention to the fabric you select for authenticity. Polyester, for example, is a modern creation which does not fit any costume period other than modern. Secondly, a character's social status dictates what fabric should be worn by that character. A character of lowly birth would not wear silks or satins. Therefore, wools are ideal for showing a character of lower rank. Corduroy, at a distance appears to look very much like velvet. Once you have achieved the basic look of the period, you can go on with other concerns such as unity of line coordination of color, and overall appearance of the show.

In conclusion, it is not easy for us to costume a play today because we have become so aware of the cost that we think we have to take short cuts when it comes to authenticity. Probably the one thing that will help us the most is to keep a creative eye open to see what we already have in storage that will work and also remember that we can consult our colleagues in other schools, use the parents of our students, and rummage through second hand stores. Somewhere out there is the perfect costume...if we only take the time to look.