

Behind the scenes: Creating costumes for “A Christmas Carol” at Clarence Brown Theatre

Ciera Noe | November 27, 2018

The Clarence Brown Theatre is preparing for their seasonal show “A Christmas Carol.” The Costume Shop details the design processes from start to finish that provides actors with their costumes.

The Costume Shop at the Clarence Brown Theatre dedicates themselves to providing actors with hand-crafted costumes for every production. A behind the scenes look at the wardrobe preparations for this year’s “A Christmas Carol” proved that time, skill and an eye for design are fundamental to providing actors with the costumes to bring their characters to life.

“Every script of “A Christmas Carol” is an adaptation that somebody has created for the theatre based on Charles Dickens’ original work,” Melissa Caldwell-Weddig, Costume Shop manager said.

The director and design team decide each production’s concept and script before the Costume Shop works on any of the costumes.

Kathleen F. Conlin is the director of this production. Bill Black designed all of the costumes for the Victorian-themed production of “A Christmas Carol.” The three rows of design cards for each character hang on a bulletin board in the Costume Shop. The Theatre has used this specific production for the last three years.



“Designers analyze the script because there are a lot of clues in the script about what the characters are wearing,” Caldwell-Weddig said. “We are doing what Charles Dickens intended, and our designers do a lot of historical research too.”

Members of the Costume Shop go through what is in stock to see what they need to add for the production after the director and designers declare a concept and script.

“I meet with the director and designers who show me the costume drawings,” Kyle Schelliger, Draper, said. “I have to look with a really critical eye about how much fabric we may need and exactly how we are going to turn the two-dimensional drawings into three-dimensional garments.”

Schelliger either pins fabric onto a dress form or uses mathematical equations to proportion the costume drawings to life-size. The actors try on mock-ups that the costumers alter to fit them. The costumers use the fitted mock-ups to help with the creation of the final costumes.

“Our costumers are also in charge of wardrobe during the shows,” Caldwell-Weddig said. “We have to make a plan during dress rehearsals so that they can help the actors change costumes efficiently throughout the show.”

Actors utilize the fitting room to try on all of their costumes that they will wear in the show. Most actors in “A Christmas Carol” will wear an average of three costumes.

“We didn’t have very many things that we had to replace design-wise, so we took the opportunity to make things that fit people really optimally,” Caldwell-Weddig said. “A lot of our coats have been in every production for 20 years, so they are getting tired.”

The CBT assembled a display in the lobby with the costumes for the Ghost of Christmas Past from three different productions. Bill Black designed two of the costumes on display, and Kathryn Rohe designed the third costume. Guests can look at the display and get a sense of how the theme has evolved over the years.

“We do all of the styling for the wigs, and we can create small hair pieces,” Caldwell-Weddig said. “Custom wig making is labor intensive and a specialized skill.”

The Costume Shop currently does not employ a wig maker, so they order any new wigs that are needed for the shows. Some of the actors have custom wigs made to match their hairline. Wig makers individually hook each strand of hair into a lace material to create a natural hair growth appearance.

The CBT’s production of “A Christmas Carol” will begin Nov. 29 and will conclude on Dec. 22. Information about tickets and show times are listed on the theatre’s website.

Featured image by Ciera Noe

Special thanks to costume designer Bill Black

Edited by Vanessa Rodriguez