

BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE HOUSTON BALLET

by Anne Marie Soto

At ASG Conference 2012, some of us who were able to stay for the post-conference tours were privileged to take a behind-the-scenes tour of the costume department of the Houston Ballet Foundation, which serves two companies: the Houston Ballet and the Ben Stevenson Academy, which is the home of the Houston Ballet's professional training program.

The Houston Ballet alone mounts approximately 10 productions per year. The costume department is responsible for the execution, care, and maintenance of the dancers' on-stage attire. At least two new productions are mounted every year, which means completely new costumes. It takes about a year from the first meeting with the choreographer until the designs debut on the stage.

Our tour guide was Wardrobe Manager Laura Lynch. When we arrived, she and her staff were getting ready for Houston's annual Theater District Open House, where the Academy dancers were performing. Our first stop was the "staging area" where costumes are brought out from storage for current productions. We were greeted by racks of costumes from "Peter Pan," "Marie Antoinette," and "Madame Butterfly." And tutus were all around us. Some were stacked on poles, ready to be pulled for a performance. Others are stored on specially-made plastic tutu hangers and suspended from the ceiling. (Did you know that a tutu isn't just a tutu? There are three styles: flat, which is made of stiff net and sticks out like a saw blade; droop; and bell.) In addition to the rolling racks, the area contained rails that are permanently attached to the walls. The lower ones can be unscrewed and moved up or down to accommodate various costume lengths.



This area also includes shelves full of boxes where “leftover” fabric in less than two-yard pieces are categorized and stored. This makes it easy for the staff to access what’s needed for repairs. Larger pieces are rolled on bolts and stored in another area.

Since each ballet production has several casts—and often different casts in different years—each costume has to be made with several bodies in mind. The challenge for the wardrobe department is create them with a “range of acceptability” for details like length and to refit them, when necessary, with minimum stress on the costumes.

We moved on from the staging area to the workrooms where the actual construction magic first begins. This whole space, which is light and airy with plenty of windows, is just two years old. It is designed with all the electrical outlets in the floor so that there are no cords to stumble over. The workroom has four sergers. So that the workroom operates more efficiently, two are permanently set for wovens and two are permanently set for stretch fabrics. And, in addition to the standard sewing machines, the area houses a blind hemmer and a Johnson ruffler—a precious machine because it is no longer manufactured. For comfort and efficiency, there are cutting tables of various heights with racks positioned right next to them. Pressing is done with a gravity-feed iron and there is even a “tailoring table” with a special surface so pressing can be done right on the table.

This spacious workroom also has a notions wall that is well-stocked with items like thread, hook-and-loop tape, and elastic, plus occasionally-used items like awls and magnetic pincushions. Everyone in the workroom is responsible for keeping the wall in order. One-of-a-kind tools are

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returned after use; when a roll of tape is empty or the last of a thread color is taken, it is replaced from the supply boxes. When a supply box is empty, a notation is made so the item can be reordered immediately.

Many of the fabrics that are turned into costumes are dyed, painted, and manipulated so they become something else. To accomplish this, there is a dye room that contains a 30-gallon vat, which is actually an industrial-size food vat, the same as is used in food preparation by schools and other institutions. A second room is the spray room—an area where dyes and paints are applied to the surface of the fabrics.

At the other end of the workroom is a wall with design boards. During our visit, the wall was full of sketches for unitards for both male and female dancers for the upcoming production of “Angular Momentum.” On dress forms nearby, we got to see some of these sketches come to life in Lycra fabric with meticulous appliqués.

Behind the design wall are three private fitting rooms and a long corridor for storing more fabric and supplies.

Since all of us on the tour were sewers, the inevitable question arose: what qualifications do you need to work in the costume department? Laura explained that most people come to the workroom with a theater degree, often a master’s degree. It is possible to come in without this degree, starting as a cutter and then moving up, but it takes a lot of experience to advance in the workroom. Even those with a theater degree have to learn the Houston Ballet way of doing things. There is a book of physical examples of the ballet’s method for installing a zipper, attaching hardware, putting in a hem, etc. And hems are never done flat. They are always done at eye level, on a dress form.

As we exited the workroom area,





we entered a long hallway filled with packing cases of costumes for the “Marie Antoinette” ballet that were being readied to go on tour to Ottawa. The costumes all travel on hangers, either metal ones with notches for the garment’s hanging loops or wood suit hangers. We saw uniforms for the French revolutionary guards, aristocrats’ gowns, and the tattered garments of the Sans Culottes, the mob that stormed the Bastille. The latter were a vivid example of the artistry achieved in the dye and spray rooms as these garments truly looked haggard and dirty.

Creating and maintaining costumes for the ballet is a feat of engineering and ingenuity. Laura told us how patterns for costumes with sleeves are cleverly drafted so a gusset is built into the shape of the sleeve. This way, when the dancer raises his or her arms, the garment doesn’t move. Even men’s suits are designed that way. She also described some of the challenges of keeping within a budget. For example, when hot fix stones turned out to be too expensive, she resorted to puff paint and glitter to achieve the same effect. When asked if the costume department ever had a challenge it couldn’t meet, she replied, “Nothing is impossible. It’s just a matter of engineering.”

We were also curious about the challenges of keeping these costumes clean. Laura explained that they are wiped down daily after performances and ozoned, a process that removes odors. They try to avoid dry cleaning, but things are occasionally hand washed. With the exception of wool, every fabric that is used for costumes is prewashed in very hot water and machine-dried at a very hot temperature before it is dyed, sprayed, manipulated, or the pattern is cut out.

So the next time you see a collection of costumes glide across a stage, remember that the dancers aren’t the only artists whose work is on display.