





## The Art of Building a Costume

Kay Robinson, Professor and Interim Chair, Theatre and Communication Arts

Several years ago when I was doing costumes for a large production (*Cyrano de Bergerac*), the local newspaper interviewed me; as I talked about my work, I frequently referred to how we “built” the costumes. The reporter was intrigued by my use of that verb in reference to clothing. Her puzzlement made me realize how little non-costumers (even those who can sew) know about the process of planning and then “building” a costume. Because theatre is a cooperative effort utilizing a wide variety of skills from a wide variety of workers, planning is crucial and begins many months before a production opens. Before I ever start my work as a costume designer, university theatre has done much planning which will affect my own planning and design process. For instance, as we select a season, we must consider all of the following:

- appropriate balance of classic and modern plays which give our students a wide variety of experiences
- appropriate choices for our budget
- appropriate choices for our likely pool of student actors and workers
- appropriate choices for our community (campus and beyond)
- choices which are challenging to work on but not overwhelming
- choices which will stimulate creative responses

My planning as a costume designer begins as soon as a show has been selected. I must:

- become familiar with script
- confer with the director and other designers about a design concept (which is sometimes quite radically different from previous productions or the obvious choices we could make about the designing and presenting the show)

- research the show, the period, special needs of the production, etc.
- create designs based on the design concept, my research, and the actors who will wear the costumes
- select fabrics and trim
- determine what needs to be ordered (shoes, wigs, ribbon, dye, etc.)—if I wait too late on this, we won’t have what we need in time, so planning ahead is critical.

Once the designs are approved, I study them to determine how to draft the pattern. Sometimes a costumer uses a commercial pattern (at least as a starting point), but often the pattern is drafted “from scratch.” I tend to do flat pattern drafting, but others prefer draping the pattern on a mannequin. In either case, the material for the pattern is not paper, but cotton muslin. Muslin is strong and economical and a mainstay of the theatre. Once drafted and cut, the pattern pieces are stitched together with a basting stitch, a loose stitch which can be easily ripped out (we’re planning ahead, as you’ll see). These patterns are fitted on the actor with the seams on the outside—another part of the planning process, because it is much easier to make adjustments to the pattern with the seams on the outside. Then the loose stitching easily comes out to convert the garment back into a flat pattern so we can cut it out of the “real” fabric.

Because actors are notoriously hard on costumes, another part of the planning process is deciding whether to “flat-line” the costume. In this process, the muslin pattern pieces are sewed to the “real” fabric, and then the two pieces of fabric are treated as just one piece in further construction processes. Flat-lining gives strength to the costume and helps deal with actor perspiration. As we put the pieces together, we use 1-inch seam allowances—another planning device, since adjustments are frequently needed and the larger seam allowances make that easier

(especially when a costume is being re-used in a later production, another way in which we try to plan ahead).

After the basic construction is completed and fasteners are attached, we add trim, such as ribbon, lace, braid, decorative buttons, sequins, fur, or appliqués. Many people don’t know that this is where much of the cost of a costume lies. The fabric in a costume with a lot of trim generally costs a good deal less than the trim. Edging lace is \$2-3 a yard and up. A period dress may have yards and yards of such lace. Fancier laces and braids can be as much as \$25 a yard, even in Bemidji. Buttons are often \$1 apiece. The trim is a big investment, and we need to plan ahead for it in our budget because it is the trim which gives a costume life and makes it visual exciting.

Not surprisingly, what goes under the costume and what serves as accessories for a costume also requires advance planning. If corsets, padding, and petticoats are to be worn, they’re needed early in the fitting process—and actors need rehearsal time in them in order to get used to working with them. Shoes, tights, stockings, gloves, jewelry, hats, handbags, parasols, bucklers for swords, etc. are among the many accessories the costume designer must plan for and select and/or build.

When we’re “building” costumes, we’re not erecting a building, but we are following a plan that sets budget guidelines, reminds us of deadlines, provides for the wear-and-tear costumes are subjected to, reflects the size and ability of the staff available, considers the importance of trim and accessories, accommodates the creative drive of the costume designer, and compliments the design concept for the entire production. A well-planned design for the costumes in a production will be an easy “build.” A not-so-well-planned design for costumes? Well, that usually leads to chaos!



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## FROM GUTENBERG TO CRAIG’S LIST OR HOW TO INVENT A BETTER MOUSETRAP

Deanna Evans, Professor of English

Invention. When I hear the word invention, I tend to think of names like Eli Whitney and Thomas Alva Edison. However, I also know that for the last twenty-five years or so, invention has become a “buzz word” with Composition Theorists (i.e., specialists in the pedagogy of college writing). In that context, it is a fancy word for techniques designed to help students overcome writer’s block, things like “brainstorming” or “making jot lists”; the techniques are supposed to help students “invent” ideas for their essays. However, at a recent faculty retreat sponsored by the BSU Honors Program, the word invention has taken on new meaning for me.

The focus of the retreat was team-teaching. We had a guest speaker, Dr. Judith E. Miller, the Associate Dean for Special Academic Initiatives from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her approach was to lecture some of the time, and during this time she presented us with an excellent bibliography, but most of the time she served as a facilitator of group projects. Ah, yes, we were to become the students and, like it or not, we had to participate. It was a beautiful but frigid February day at the Concordia Language Village, and I was quite comfortable just sitting and looking out the window, drinking hot coffee. But the “retreat” experience was spoiled when I was asked to participate in small group activities. I knew from the start, that coming had been a mistake, that I would be embarrassed.

To be perfectly honest, as old Nixon used to say, my embarrassment started before the lecture had begun. (Note my use of the past perfect tense there. Yes, perfect was definitely past.) The home planning team had put us into groups, and we had to discover our group after we discovered our nametags. Well, I quickly found my name,

boldly written on a blue paper fish. When I said something like “who else around here is a fish,” a youngish, tallish math professor responded, “I believe it is a dolphin.” As I looked down to where Dr. Marty Wolf was sitting, I noted that he had the same blue tag. Although I’ve carried on friendly conversations with him for years in the faculty lounge, often about violin music, I was soon to learn that just as Dr. Wolf was not a fish, so also was he not a math professor but actually a professor of computer science. That was the first new thing I learned that day. As it turned out, he was sitting with the other dolphin, Dr. Kay Robinson, a theater professor. I joined them and soon we were given our assignment, to design a possible “Honors” course that the three of us could team-teach. Immediately I knew that this would prove embarrassing. After all, what do you get when you cross a medievalist with a computer scientist? (No, this is not a riddle and I don’t have a cute answer.) Even though I was supposed to be a dolphin, I definitely felt like a “fish out of water.”

Yet perhaps because dolphins continue to fascinate the human race for their strong communication abilities, we dolphins decided to combine our diverse talents and create a communications course like no other. Our first task was to write down to some course objectives. Now I must admit that even when I was a student in an education “methods” class, I found this a daunting task (rhyme intended). Happily Dr. Robinson who seemed more comfortable began writing objectives down, even as she talked about them, and Dr. Wolf began tossing around phrases like “the evolution of communications technology” and “text messaging.” About all I could say was that I didn’t own a cell phone, barely knew how to use one, and found text messaging less comprehensible than Korean (note that I didn’t use the cliché derived from Shakespeare’s JC. “it’s all Greek to me.” Dr. Robinson said she was sure that I



must know something about Gutenberg and that the printing press could be seen as “a stage in the evolution of communications technology.” Wow! My eyes lit up and I smiled. I said that in our class I could talk about how manuscripts were made, and I proceeded to tell them about how I had heard esteemed Shakespeare critic Harold Bloom say (on a TV show) that it was “a great day in the history of Mankind” when humans went from scrolls to the manuscript corpus, and that he found it sad, as I do, that now in the “Computer age,” we are forced to read “scrolls” again and while sitting scrunched up in front of a computer screen. I don’t think my story impressed the other dolphins very much, but anyway we had our first objective: “Students will understand the evolution of communications technology from scrolls to text-messages.” We also had a course title: “From Gutenberg to Craig’s List: Shifting Communication Codes.” (I’ve explained the “Gutenberg” part and, yes, Dr. Wolf explained “Craig’s List,” but I’m afraid I don’t remember, something “nerdy” that only computer people can understand.) Soon we had a total of five objectives, including a much admired (at least by the administration) “service project.” Of course I can’t take credit for that; it was Dr. Robinson’s brainchild.

(continued on page 5)



## TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN? A QUESTION OR A PARADOX?

Elizabeth Dunn, Associate Professor and Department Chair of History

When the CPD staff agreed to focus this year's issue of *Metamorphosis* on planning, I felt we were doing a "good" thing, but were we doing an "interesting" thing? Both words are ambiguous, vague, and even vacuous; I urge my students to be more concrete and specific. But planning has a whiff of puritanical moral certainty that makes it both good and boring. How could we ramp it up as a topic? Our first wise decision was to accept Dr. Kay Robinson's offer to write about planning costumes for theater productions, and other authors and topics fell miraculously in place. We hope you enjoy the issue.

Reflecting on the process of putting together *Metamorphosis* prompted me think about planning in my own professional life. This year is my first as director of the CPD. Though I have been planning classes, research projects, and similar items as a faculty member for many years, now I find myself responsible for planning in a whole new realm. My initial reaction was panic. Luckily my predecessor left the Center in fine shape with a strong established agenda—but where to from here? Another piece of luck, I have a terrific staff, some with many years of experience at the Center. Okay. I can breathe now.

When the staff met and discussed the strengths of Center programming, we agreed to continue a number of items including the undergraduate teaching program, classroom consultations, creation of student evaluations, forums of various kinds, and mentoring new faculty. We hope to fine-tune some activities. For example, new faculty orientation and use of mentors has been very successful, but we wish to be even more effective in the future as we consider ways to make each incoming class of faculty members more cohesive as a group and feel even more welcome to the campus and community. We also

began discussing long-term issues. What are our goals? What do faculty need and want? How well can we expect the administration to support the Center's efforts? How does our mission mesh with the overall goals of the university?

The staff began to consider and discuss more specific questions. How can we support faculty research and creative achievement? This will not be easy since what most of us need to carry out such work is time and money. How can we obtain professional training for individuals new to the CPD staff? Another tough issue since we are now losing longtime fonts of wisdom and terrific story-tellers Drs. Kay Robinson and Patrick Riley. How can we aid faculty who wish to modify their classroom approach in light of new technology and the mysterious "Generation NeXt" who are about to appear on our doorsteps? Here at least we have many human and intellectual resources, but today's faculty face tremendous pressures.

In light of these challenges, how can we **not** plan? We must, of course. I, however, have always been a fan of the spontaneous and the accidental, especially in education. My own most powerful learning moments arrived unbidden by my professors, usually in the context of conversation with classmates or solitary reading and study in the library. Where will these moments happen for our students now? Who knows?

Can we create the perfect plan and always be "intentional" in our approach? Of course not. Indeed we must allow time for the unplanned, unstructured play *and* work that bring joy, inspiration, and real learning that transforms lives. Without some degree of serendipity and even messiness, we no longer have a real university. I can't imagine a school whose motto would declare, "There Will be No Unplanned Unintentional Learning at [fill in the blank] University!"



What we can do, perhaps, is plan a context where students are more likely to have the kinds of experiences that we all cherish in our own past lives as students and pass along to one more generation the joy of university life.



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**Desiderato, continued from page 1:** scenario planning process, but I wonder my College Writing class last semester, I what is replacing all the committees that implemented current projects (the misnamed 'planning committees'). Once plans and policies are approved, someone or some group needs to communicate, instigate, monitor, and evaluate them. Too often these plans die of neglect because the implementation piece has not been put into place.

Although I can see the value in Dwight D. Eisenhower's views on the planning process as an end in itself, I would have to disagree that the plans themselves are unimportant. He said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." We need to see that our participation in these efforts will ultimately result in sustained change that will make a substantial difference in the quality of our work - without adding significantly to our work load. Otherwise, these planning initiatives will be viewed as the latest fads in higher education administration, operating on a plane parallel to the real work of the university and not worth the time they entail. For faculty to be truly engaged in the planning process we must commit ourselves to the conviction that collaborative planning results in real measurable progress and that it opens a path that we have intentionally set for ourselves with our eyes wide open to the constraints under which we operate. I have no doubt that this process will strengthen our university during these competitive times in higher education, but we must do it together.

Despite these arguments on the side of encouraging faculty to be involved in university planning, there are plenty of reasons why reasonable faculty members choose to be uninvolved. I have heard it said that a committee is 'a group that keeps minutes and loses hours.' Faculty at BSU carry excessive credit loads and are always pressed for time. We simply do not have the time to invest in unproductive enterprises. While some BSU committees have been extremely productive, many have floundered because their charges are vague, they are not given adequate responsibility or adequate resources to accomplish their task, or the wrong people are at the table. Even worse are the occasions when a committee devotes a great deal of time and energy to its task, only to have its recommendation disregarded or decision(s) overruled. Experiences like these result in too few faculty members being willing to participate in future committees and therefore having to carry too heavy a burden.

BSU has come a long way over the past decade in building trust and a spirit of collaboration between the faculty and the administration. For instance, the new planning process allowed faculty to become more informed about the financial status of the university. However, we continue to experience problems that impede our working successfully together. For instance, the lack of transparency about criteria for allocating positions within the university continues to fuel frustration among faculty. If decision-making is truly a communal process, faculty need to be admitted into the decision-making processes that most affect us.

Also, while the university seems to spend a lot of time engaged in organizational *planning*, there is too little time allocated to organizational *doing*. I am intrigued by the current

started out by talking about The Prince. And I still don't know why I did it then, something about Renaissance politics I guess.

After that stimulating book conversation, we came up with several possible assignments. One of mine was manuscript-making (but the others vetoed the idea of having students rustle sheep to obtain sheep skins). Another idea was to have students use a printing press, if we could find one at a garage sale or something. We also thought we could generate good class discussions and research paper topics by having students discuss Censorship (including the whole Google fiasco in China), the First Amendment, Propaganda, Advocacy. And then someone, not me, suggested modern stuff like focusing on global access and blogging.

Then the most embarrassing moment of all. We had to share our proposed course with the other people present. (Of course we got to hear theirs too.) We found it surprising that there was another communications course designed along the same line as ours (but they hadn't considered The Prince as a textbook or even Castiglione's The Courtier). More surprisingly, we found that some people acted as if they liked our ideas and some people said that we should consider teaching our course some day. (I doubt that will even happen since Dr. Robinson is retiring this year.)

Admittedly, I have written most of this essay touched by the aura of April Fool's Day. Yet I am sincere when I say that I did learn from the experience, and not just that "misery loves company" and "necessity" really is the "mother of invention" or that all those "invention" ideas found in College Writing texts like "brainstorming" and "jot lists" can work and are not included just to sell the textbook. I mean that I learned that sometimes when we come together with our left-brained and right-brained thinking skills, we can "build a better mousetrap." Or, to put it another way, I learned that students can benefit greatly from interdisciplinary courses when taught by dedicated teachers. I guess the retreat wasn't a mistake; I came away feeling excited about teaching again and wanting to try my hand at an interdisciplinary course.

**Evans, continued from page 3:**

She would have our imaginary students "use communication to attempt to influence public perception of an issue." (What that means is that they would write letters to state legislators, including those influenced by lobbyists, to argue against raising tuition.)

Our next task found Dr. Wolf taking up the good fight. I was fascinated by the analytical way he helped us map out our plan. He designed a neat little chart on which he indicated that we would have, and I quote, "diverse (very) faculty" and that our course would employ "a variety of texts: written/printed, oral, visual, technological." Then we had the awesome responsibility of selecting texts. Actually, we came up with only one; Dr. Robinson recommended Machiavelli's The Prince. I can't recall why, or why I agreed with her. Perhaps it was because when I introduced Shakespeare's Macbeth in