

Dress Up Your Shakespeare: Utah's festival costume demands keep couture crew in stitches

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CEDAR CITY - Look for stress in the seams of Jeffrey Lieder's work as the costume director of the Utah Shakespearean Festival, and the psychological stitches appear to be holding.

"We've been doing this for so long, it's not that remarkable," Lieder says in his downstairs office in the busy main costume shop, just hours before the dress rehearsal of "H.M.S. Pinafore," one of six shows opening this week to launch the company's 45th season. "People think it's glamorous and exciting, but it's a bit like a factory. We know what the patterns and rhythms are going to be."

Just then the interview is interrupted, and Lieder is called away to solve a "problem." "I have a crisis to handle," says Lieder with a laugh. Now marking his 20th season as USF's costume director, he has supervised more than 120 shows. "We need two more buttons, covered buttons with either blue or red fabric, for a dress for 'Pinafore.' Everything else is done."

Welcome to another undramatic morning behind the scenes at the festival, where a variety of houses, tents and backstage wings serve as busy costume and set shops for what's thought to be the only theater repertory company in the world to launch six plays in six days. That requires a level of logistical organization and scheduling that's akin to playing a chess game, or actually, six chess games at once.

"Costuming is one technology that hasn't changed much in 200 years," says R. Scott Phillips, USF's interim director. "In the words of our dear friend Hillary Clinton, 'It takes a village.'"

This year's festival showcases a new production of "Hamlet," a masterpiece among masterpieces, as well as the rarely produced tragic love story of "Antony and Cleopatra" and the return of the roguish schemer Sir John Falstaff in "The Merry Wives of Windsor."

Several of the festival's non-Shakespeare plays are best known in their cinematic adaptations: the 1930s-era Broadway farce "Room Service," which became a 1938 Marx Brothers flick telling the story of a bankrupt theatrical troupe that resorts to deception to stage its new play; and "On Golden Pond," the Ernest Thompson love story that became a daughter-father struggle in the 1981 film starring Jane Fonda and her famous father.

In a quick look behind the curtain at Utah's Tony Award winning festival, it's the numbers that make the work of creating a season's worth of costumes appear both intriguing and practical.

- The average Shakespearean play requires between 30 and 55 costumes, and each of those requires between 35 and 55 hours of labor, Lieder says.
- One elaborate Elizabethan gown requires 7 to 12 yards of fabric.
- Costumes for the contemporary drama "On Golden Pond," set in a Maine cabin in the 1980s, cost just several thousand dollars. " 'Pond' is not about the clothes at all," the costume director says.

That's in contrast to a wardrobe budget of \$10,000 for a Shakespeare play such as "Antony and Cleopatra," where the designs are intended to evoke Roman and Egyptian courts. Cleopatra's death robe is made of patterned fabric that's silk-screened, then foil embossed with gold mylar and folded into pleats. "She dies in it," he says, "so it's really important to the plot."

- The Cedar City shop employs a seasonal staff of 60 people who stitch and bead and hem until the season opens, then some two dozen employees stay on to help with costumes through the summer.

- During the season, the staff washes 65 loads of laundry each week, as well as pressing, steaming, mending and dry-cleaning duties, all of the maintenance chores aimed to help the costumes appear as attractive on closing night as they did when the shows opened. "Audiences pay the same amount of money, don't they, so they deserve the same show," Lieder says.

Job duties range from the mundane - removing underarm shields with tongs or rubber gloves after shows - to the theatrically essential - helping actors with quick costume changes backstage during performances, some of which are allotted as little as 40 seconds. "It's choreographed just like a ballet or a fight would happen onstage, so it happens the same way each time," Lieder says.

If there's a deep secret behind the illusion, it's that costume duties require as much problem-solving as sewing skill. USF costumes aren't designed to be technically authentic, but instead to look right for the period, says Lieder, who spends the rest of his year as an associate professor of theater at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

Each play's look and color scheme is set by designer and director. For "Antony and Cleopatra," the design scheme called for golden-hued, expensive-looking royal costumes, and Lieder and his crew purchased Indian saris from New Delhi manufacturers, looking for fabric that offered the kinds of textures and borders that will show up well to the back row of the theater.

To evoke the richness of Cleopatra's court, characters will wear bracelets and neck collars beaded with turquoise and wooden scarabs, jewelry purchased for \$120 at Cairo's Grand Bazaar by one of Lieder's students, who thought it looked like the show's design sketches. "It's perfectly suited to the show, and it would have taken us a week to make it."

Such rich details are a marked contrast to the wool and leather costumes worn by the cast of "Merry Wives," which are designed to show the dirt and grime of everyday wear as well as the characters' middle-class standing.

"It's a head-to-toe thing, not just fabric and buttons," says Lieder, noting that costumers shop at hardware stores, electrical supply companies and leather tanneries, whatever it takes, to find the right accessories. The parasols for "Pinafore" were purchased from a San Diego importer, for example, then staffers extended the handles with banister poles purchased from Home Depot.

And speaking of using their heads, for Gilbert and Sullivan's light operetta featuring a cast of "sisters, cousins and aunts," wig master Kelly Yurko has outfitted actors (including festival founder Fred Adams, who plays the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Porter, KCB) in varying shades of red-haired wigs. "I wonder if anyone will notice, but if anyone does, they'll laugh," Yurko says.

Whatever the details, whatever the problems to be solved, the play remains the thing, says Lieder. "I don't want people to go away singing the costumes," he says. "It's not about sparkled, pretty costumes, because if they don't help tell the story, they're not good costumes."