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Hanson brings realism to theater productions

Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

Hanson brings realism to theater productions

While most audiences pay attention only to the actors in theatrical productions, the fact of the matter is that there is a contingent of people who work behind the scenes in order to make the performances a success. Some of these people design the costumes. One costume designer who is integral to the success of many performances at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is Laura Hanson.

Born in Burbank, Calif., Hanson received her bachelor's degree in theater from St. Louis University, her master's in theater arts also at St. Louis University and her doctorate in educational theater at New York University. With both of her parents working as stage performers, her training in theater began early.

"One of my favorite things to do was to go hang out with my mom in the dressing room and my dad would take me to rehearsals of productions he directed, and I loved it," said Hanson.

Today she is an associate professor in the department of theater and dance at SIUE — another inclination she inherited from her parents, who were both also college teachers. Hanson seemed destined from an early age for a career in theater education. Since she learned how to sew when she was 11, she decided to specialize in costume design.

Costume designers can be quite meticulous in their designs, even for items that the audience will never see, but that an actor can feel. Take underwear, for example.

"Yes, the audience can't see it but you know it is there and certain periods, particularly when women had to wear corsets, it made you move in a certain way," Hanson said. "So if you are not really wearing a corset under your costume you'll be moving in a totally contemporary way that women in the mid 19th century couldn't possibly have moved because they were laced into a whale-bone corset."

Another technical aspect of the costume designer's job is to make costumes that are worn performance after performance

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

always look the same as they did on opening night. "I like to say things have to be sewn like iron," Hanson said. "For a production say at the Rep or on Broadway where things are going to run maybe for years, there is a constant upkeep as well as replacing of costumes." There are wardrobe people whose job it is just to maintain costumes on these long-running shows, she added.

Costume design is far from a lonely job. Designers have to work not only with the director, but especially with the lighting designer regarding the type of light being used or the angle of illumination. "It is also the colors of the gels that can change your costume color completely," Hanson said. "So that is one of the things I think I enjoy too about theater is the collaborative aspect that you have to work closely. You don't want the scene designer to paint a door the same color as a costume of the character who is going to be standing in front of that door, or for the lighting designer to throw a gel on that is going to make the color of your costume change."

Period pieces, where historical ambience has to be recreated, represent a special challenge because of the historical research involved in order to make costumes look real. "There was no costume design in the time of Shakespeare. It is actually a relatively recent discipline because Shakespeare's troupe would get cast-off clothing from their patrons and they would wear contemporary clothing, contemporary to their time, no matter what the show was," explained Hanson.

Even if they were doing "Julius Caesar" they might drape a little something over their doublets and hose (men's clothing fashionable in Shakespeare's time).

That is why up until the mid 19th century there was no such thing as costume



Otis Sweezey

Professor Hanson in her costume shop.

design.

"Actors just wore their own or pretty much their own clothes that they saved or had been donated to them," said Hanson.

As a teacher, Hanson is fully aware about the job prospects for her students who specialize in costume design. "There are lots of small theaters that are looking for designers, but they don't pay a lot," she said. "Now where you can really make a living is as a theater technician." Costume technicians, called drapers, she explained, work in the shop and take the design, take the actors' measurements,

make the pattern and figure out how to make the costume from the design. Really good drapers who are willing to move around the country can make a living doing that, Hanson said.

Hanson recently did the costume design for SIUE's performance of "The Importance of Being Earnest," under the direction of Peter Cocuzza, chair of the department of theater and dance. Cocuzza had decided to set the play a little later (1910) than when Oscar Wilde premiered it in 1895.

"It was a period when there was a change from the fuller skirts and sort

of A-shape skirts and rounded hips and S-shaped corsets of the turn of the century to a more vertical look," Hanson explained. "If you have ever seen the movie "Titanic" those are the kinds of costumes I am talking about. They are much more straight up and down, so this is just before that (time period)."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.