

DISTRESSING MATTERS

AGEING COSTUMES ONSTAGE AND OFF



An assemblage of Distressing Tools

Distressing Tools

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Distressing tools are almost exclusively improvised from other original purposes. You can often find good working tools around your own home or buy them cheaply at dollar stores and garage sales. All tools capable of fraying or tearing fabric will do some damage, and the choice of which to use generally depends on how badly you wish to damage items, and how fast you need to do it. Heavy Damage Tools that work very fast and do a lot of damage include:

- Power drills fit with a hole cutter
- Hand Ruffer aka Shoe or Leather Ruffer
- Power Drill fit with a wire brush
- Heat Gun (for nylon/poly melting)
- Wallboard & Pruning Saws
- Dull Seam Rippers & Broken Scissors

Article “Tools” continued on Page 2

Two hand tools, a curved file cleaner and a straight file cleaner, used for distressing. The curved one is on the left and the straight one is on the right.

SIMILAR BUT NOT THE SAME: A curved hand rougher at left does more damage than the similar seeming file cleaner at right. If you are needing a lot of big tears it is the right choice, but detail work is easier to control with a file cleaner.



BEFORE AND AFTER: “Blue Jeans” Covered iPhone Case, before and after applying distressing techniques. Note: “Overdoing” distressing gives you the opportunity to mend tears. Most highly damaged clothing that is still being worn shows signs of repair, especially in the past.

Keeping Safe While Distressing

While distressing, it is common to get so excited by your work process that you inadvertently distress yourself. My students, as well as myself have often been so focused on our work that we only realize we have sliced open our own skin when we notice there are red spots getting on the fabric. Distressing many items quickly is a very strenuous process, and one is operating on enough adrenaline that one genuinely does not feel the injury when it happens.

High damage tools (see article at left) are especially dangerous in this regard, and those that are power tools have the added issue of being dangerous to begin with, and then being used for an off-label purpose. You must at all times keep your hair pulled back, your legs/lap covered in leather or heavy canvas fabric like jeans and your non-dominant hand encased in the heaviest glove you can find.

In addition, when working with power tools you should use glasses or safety glasses, since power tools tend to kick up bits that can fly into your face and elsewhere.

Irons and burning tools also require caution. Less because of fire issues than burning exposed skin with the tip of a heat gun or iron, or getting mildly cooked adjusting fabric in front of a heat gun. Ordinary cotton garden gloves and long sleeve cotton shirts can usually keep you safe from the perils of your own enthusiasm.

If, despite these cautions you do get injured, immediately, make yourself bleed, and wash out the wound, disinfect it and bandage up. Distressing is a messy process, that includes lots of loose particles of stuff that can infect a wound. Taking the time to disinfect and cover your injury will discourage it from turning bad.

IN THIS ISSUE

DIRT & CARS? 2

DYES & PAINTS 3

REVERSABLE DISTRESSING 4

SHOPPING

Where to Buy Exotic Distressing Supplies:

Manhattan Wardrobe Supply:

<https://www.wardrobesupplies.com> sells an extensive array of distressing supplies including Schmere Sticks, hand ruffers, ready made pounce bags, (as well as Dirtworx, Ben Nye and Meheron powders for making your own), an array of dyes, arificial greases, theoretically removable spray paints as well as a full array of costume making supplies like millinery wire, corset bone tipping fluid, Foss Shape and Worbla.

Patin-A:

<https://www.patin-a.de/en> located in Germany, sells Patin Wax (similar to Schmere sticks), Fullers Earth in many colors, distressing tools, powder shooters and sprayers, and some useful artificial mud, ice/snow and oily dirts. A seriously varied and comprehensive line of distressing products, many of which are intended to come out of costumes with cleaning.

Reel Creations:

<http://reelcreations.com> sells Reel L.S. Dirt, a cosmetic developed for the film “Life Sucks” that can be sprayed on actors’ skin, and it instantly falls into the creases to give that grubby living-on-the-streets look, while feeling and smelling like an agreeable moisturizer.

More links can be found at

<https://sites.google.com/site/costumedistressingworkshop>



SCHMERE STICKS: are soft large costume specific crayons that are heavily pigmented for creating a greasy ground in dirt effect.



REEL L.S. DIRT
'L.S.' Dirt was formulated for the movie 'Life Stinks' ... 'L.S.' Dirt fills the creases, wrinkles and pores for that dirty, greasy, sweaty look.

TOOLS, (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Medium and Light Damage

Medium Damage Tools allow for more precision in distressing but require more time to complete the task. They are ideal for close-up detail work for viewing in a face to face environment or for film and TV.

- File Cleaners
- Nutmeg Graters
- Curved Callus Grinders
- Meat Cutting Knives
- Stiff Wire Brushes
- Dremel tools
- Wood Burning tools
- Scrapbooking heat gun
- Large Grain Sanding Sponge
- Large Grain Sandpapers

Light Damage Tools are mainly useful for really delicate fabrics that tend to run easily, like nylons, nets, sheers, and light silky fabric that will get too damaged by even medium tools.

- Light grain sandpaper
- Softer wire brushes
- Kitchen scrubbers
- Pedi-egg type callus grinders
- Small grain sanding sponges

Dirt & Cars?

WHY NOT JUST ROLL IN DIRT & RUN OVER IT WITH A CAR?

Having gone to the trouble of making a costume, you won’t want it looking too new, yet too damaged to wear, which is what most automotive distressing does. Rolling in dirt, naturally looks as if you rolled in dirt, it doesn’t look weathered gradually over years. Burying in wet mud and digging it out a few days or weeks later can get you some interesting stains, but less than you might get with a day or two of very low immersion dyeing with 1 or 2 colors of dye.

Real dirt also has to be washed out post-exhumation, unless you’d like to go to an event with dirt inside as well as outside the clothes. If you are really committed to dusty dirt however, you can coat the outside of your garment with the pristine clean dirt you can buy at any cosmetic counter.

EFFECTIVE DISTRESSING: A damaged old quasi-Victorian nightgown is given new afterlife as an undead garment, simply with a few small tears in the lace and spraying with several colors of dye in laundry sprayers. After drying, the color is weaker and more subtle.



DYES AND PAINTS

Basic Information on Dye Types

Rit - Cheap. Easy. Available. Low toxicity. Must be heated to work well, but it can be fixed within a very short period by boiling, microwaving or, best of all: steaming. Works best on nylon, and is good on all natural fibers, including wool, silk, cotton, linen and rayon. Doesn't work on polyester. (Rit now has a new Disburse Dye that does, see Disburse Dyes for info on those) Wear medical or dish washing gloves to avoid your hands cracking from the salt additive in the dye, and a nuisance dust mask to avoid breathing in the powdered dye. Available at Joann, Michaels, and even Safeway.

Procion Dyes (Dylon, Procion MX, etc) - must be mixed with a little vinegar or citric acid to work with wool or silk, or a little soda ash to work with cotton, linen or rayon. Neither mix works on polyester or nylon. Mixing in urea makes both mixes work better. Dye can be any temperature to work, but needs to stay on the fiber in wet form for as long as possible, preferably a day or more (!), so you will need to keep spray dyes damp with plastic bags. Wear medical or dishwashing gloves to avoid your hands cracking from the salt additive in the dye, and a nuisance dust mask to avoid breathing in the powdered dye and powdered chemicals. Available at Dharma Trading Co. and some Joann Fabrics.

Disburse Dyes (iDye Poly Dye, RIT DyeMore) -work on polyester and nylon. They only work well when boiled for 30-60 minutes on a stove; however you can get some oomph out of a spray dye by promptly wrapping the moist sprayed item in a plastic grocery bag and nuking it for 10 minutes in a microwave, then letting it sit in the microwave for another 10 minutes. Wear medical or dishwashing gloves to avoid your hands cracking from the salt additive in the dye, and a nuisance dust mask to avoid breathing in the powdered dye and chemicals. Available at Joann's and Michaels.



JACQUARD AIRBRUSH PAINT: Metallic gold and copper paints applied with a sprayer and brush over a black ready-made garment for a messenger in DVC's 2010 "Steampunk" style Othello.

DYES AND PAINTS

What you Really Want is Paint

If you are in a hurry, or if you are not already a dyemaster, or if you need to distress on a dark color, or you'd just like a bit more control of your process, chances are your best bet is actually paint. You can use most any sort of acrylic paint diluted, or spray paint, but many of these (except in metallics) still dissapear on blacks, and both tend to stiffen fabric, which is not always an issue for all costumes, but if you want to have less stiffening, with more control, go for Airbrush fabric paint, applied by brush or laundry sprayer or if you want to go really nuts, an actual airbrush. I tend to recommend laundry sprayers however for a spattery texture that looks amazing (see image at left).



DYES AND PAINTS

Application of Paints & Dyes

Applying the dyes or paints should always be done with a view to the internal logic of stains: how they happen, where they happen, and what type of thing is causing the stain. For example, the same set of jeans will distress differently on a silver miner (grey sludge), ditch digger (brown dirt), farm worker (dirt and clorophil stains), coal miner (black grit), a butcher (dark red stains), car washer (fading), cook (oily yellow and food stains) or mechanic/engineer (oily black and brown stains) though all might be assumed to have sweat stains on the pits, neck and back of their shirts because all are engaged in sweat inducing work.

Observation of the way that real clothing (and non-clothing) is stained, faded and damaged in life helps immeasurably in giving one ideas. But it is also desirable to build a character story

around the history of a garment to think of where to put fading and stains. Details are best put in with a brush, while broad expanses of fading or spattering are usually best done with the irregularity of a laundry sprayer. Or for more control a small atomiser sprayer or even an airbrush. All laundry sprayers clog regularly and you should plan on having many extras to deal with the inevitable die-off.

Big stains and irregular lines can be applied with a sprayer on "stream" setting. To get a wet fade between colors you can bunch wet fabric in a low immersion pan where you stick varying amounts and colors in the water to wick their way up and across the fabric to give a watery faded look. In nearly all cases you want to use at least 2-4 colors in a garment to give it depth.



Real Distressing – Photo of a work boot worn by a plumber of the DVC Maintenance and Operation Staff. The plumbers at DVC do extensive indoor and outdoor work involving a lot of time in holes in the ground and/or kneeling, laying down, and otherwise abrading their boots indoors from the angels they need to get into to reach pipes.

LASTLY

“Reversible” Distressing

No distressing method is 100% guaranteed to be reversible. However, if costuming a show, or using a favorite garment for an occasion where distressing is warranted there are several things you can do that have a high probability of coming out with washing or dry cleaning. Most obviously, those spills and stains that normally can be expected to wash out if treated the right way: food stains, stains from hair gel, face cream, Vaseline, etc. Making a temporary “stain” using these products can usually be washed out or taken to a dry cleaner and IDENTIFIED TO THE CLEANER so they know what method to use to remove it.

Within these parameters there are several cautions:

- Many stains that can be removed, still manage to stain whites.
- Never use foods that have sugar in them, not because they are hard to remove, but because it makes them annoyingly sticky.
- When trying to remove a dark oily stain, start by diluting with a clear or un-colored oil like mineral oil, cold cream, or coconut

- oil first. Only then apply grease cutting soaps.
- When in doubt, take to a dry cleaner and identify all the substances you used to make the stain both verbally and in writing, so you are more likely to get the info to the technician who actually will work to remove it. Expect to pay extra!
- You can’t of course, shred the fabric and expect to reverse the process. You can however shred a piece of similar fabric and sew it to a spot where it will appear to be part of the original garment.
- Many products are made for quickly distressing garments in a manner that aspires to be reversible. Pounce Bags of makeup powders, Shmere sticks, colored hair sprays, etc. all can fail to wash out. Don’t use this on borrowed clothing.
- Pounce bags with light colors reverse easier than dark ones.
- Don’t create clouds of powder to breathe in by having a pillow fight with your pounce bags.

EXAMPLE: THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK



If you need to apply a surface “Stain” or “Fading” to a garment for short term use, you can apply hair gel to the fabric, and then stick powdered “pigment” of talc, cinnamon, or unsweetened cocoa powder (see example below) to create the stain. Set the powder with a coating of hair spray to fix it in place.