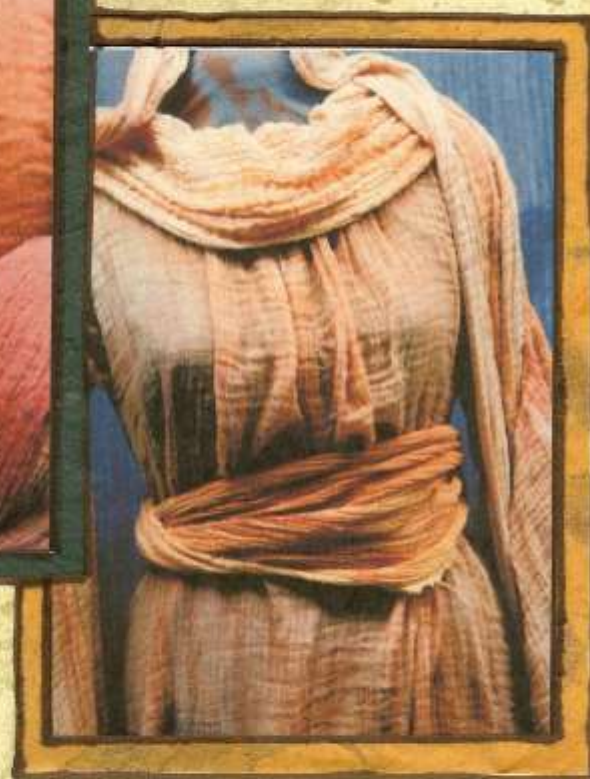


## Spray Dyeing Jesus and Other Distressing Thoughts

Imagine this nightmare scenario: Just before you have to produce a huge period show, your theatre suffers a financial loss, and you find yourself producing Woyzeck (about 30 characters in 19<sup>th</sup> Century dress) for \$300, or Jesus Christ Superstar (60 Characters in Biblical era dress) for \$600. For reasons that will prove obvious, you will either be making a lot of cheap hastily constructed crap, or recycling a lot of used costumes, none of which were made to go together. Dye and paints are the answer to make the cheap crap look good, or the miss-matched old junk look like it belongs in the same show with the same concept. Here is what you do:



Details of costumes made for Jesus Christ Superstar. Each costume was made of unbleached tobacco cloth (heavy gauze) then sprayed with 3 colors of liquefied household (Rit) dye using pump laundry sprayers. So, to make peach color, we would use golden yellow, tangerine and fuchsia, for blue we'd use turquoise, royal blue and violet, etc. applied in gradations that made each color more dimensional.



#1: Begin with a garment or fabric that will "take" your chosen dye. The main color is applied to most of the cloth in streaks that emphasize the lines of the fabric and/or

seams of the garment. Unevenness will make your end result more interesting than a perfectly even color.



#2: The darker color is applied to edges, the bottom, and in the crevices of the fabric like a soft outlining, overlapping the main color at the edges.



#3: The lighter color is applied near the top, and on the prominent areas of the fabric like a highlight, again overlapping with the main color.

#4: Touch up with each of the various colors as looks best visually, till the garment is slightly darker than you intend it to be when dry. If possible, steam or iron the garment while it is still wet to set the dye and get the strongest color. Dry. Run the garment through a short cold water rinse, or rinse it out briefly in the sink to remove excess dye. Dry.





The end result looks richer than using the main color alone. This holds true not only for three adjacent colors like this, but for two adjacent and one opposite. Refer back to section "Why White is Never White..." to understand why this works. →

This technique is also the underlying basis for much distressing with fabric paint. *Woyzeck* was a show where we took a lot of garbage stock, made some quick and dirty costumes, and tied the whole lot together with a saturated yet distressed color scheme. You can see many examples of this from this show in the following photographs



← Detail of one of the military uniforms in *Woyzeck*. The colors of the tunic are enhanced with several colors of bright blue paint, outlined, then distressed down with spray dyes and paints in wine, black and brown, to make the look more German Expressionist than Disney.

Three Soldiers from *Woyzeck*, showing the blue painting, outlining and distressing applied to all the uniforms. The grubbiness of the distressing stops the bright cartoonish uniforms from looking nice or light hearted. →





Costume for the title role in *Woyzeck*. This costume had to somewhat resemble the striped tunics of the soldiers, then convert, on stage into a madhouse straight-jacket. An unbleached canvas was made into a straight jacket suit, then stripes in a faded looking pattern were sprayed to the suit. →



A comparatively "clean" shirt worn by one of the little girls in *Woyzeck*. Brown dye is spattered on with a spray bottle, and the seams are carefully outlined with a brush and dye. →



← Beggars in *Woyzeck* in costumes that have been distressed with dye and paint.



Detail of distressing on the beggar soldier's shirt in *Woyzeck* →



Detail of one of the drunk's shirts in Woyzeck, distressed with spray and brush applied dye in colors of wine, brown, forest green, and black. →



← The two drunks in Woyzeck in clothing that has sprayed and painted distressing. All the costumes other than the uniforms in this show were simply old clothes and costumes from stock which were pulled together visually by extensive distressing with dye, paint and sanding equipment (files, rasps, wire brushes, etc.).

← Distressed pants worn by one of the drunks in Woyzeck. Dyes and paints in wine, brown, green and black are applied by brush to the seams and are spattered elsewhere with spray bottles.



Distressing detail on vest of the Jewish Knife seller in Woyzeck.





← Close-up of distressing on a peasant woman's dirndl dress and shirt in *Woyzeck*. Because the old velour of the dress is dark, we added "fading" in spots by applying diluted white paint.

← Distressing on the Doctor's lab coat in *Woyzeck*. The buttons were covered with lime green felt to resemble oversize peas, in line with the Doctor's obsession with that vegetable.

REAL-WORLD DISTRESSING  
ON A SHIP'S HATCH-COVER  
DONATED TO MY DAD'S  
SEA-SCOUT TROOP DURING  
WWII. OLD EVEN THEN, IT  
HAS BEEN IN CONSTANT USE  
SINCE AS A TARP →





## Distressing with Paints and Dyes



← #1: Distressing begins with taking your garments and wearing off hems and other edges with wood rasps, sandpaper, files and wire brushes. Dampen your garment, then put rocks in any pockets, and use the wood tools to rub small holes in the bottom of pockets, elbows, knees and other obvious places where wear will occur naturally. Let the garment dry with the rocks in the pockets to pull the garment out of shape.



**Polyester** is probably the worst stuff to try to distress ever made. It tries to stay perky and neat, fights dye, and has to be worked on with a cheese grater for hours to show even minor wear. DVC student Martina Jeans here distresses a polyester tailcoat using a grater, fabric paint and powders.





Because you mess about with the color of garments when you distress costumes with dye, you can take clothing items that clash horribly and pull them together in the final dyeing phase. Indeed, it actually helps if the garment has a lot of odd high contrasts in it before you begin spraying, so that spraying does not knock all the contrast out, making the costume too bland, especially on garments like these Undead Chorus Girl costumes from Frankenstein that will mainly be seen in dim or weirdly colored light. So when slapping together and trimming a costume to be heavily distressed you can use all sorts of mismatched, loud, awful looking junk.







#2: Fill several laundry sprayers with liquefied dye or diluted paint in various "dirt" browns, "grass stain" olive, "sweat stain" dull gold, "dried blood" burgundy, "grease stain" or "ash" black, and "fading" of diluted white paint.



#3: Because laundry sprayers have adjustable sprayers, and also tend to clog up, you can get a variety of different types of strokes out of them. You should practice with your sprayers on a large scrap of fabric, learning how to get the spray to go from a fine mist, to a rough spatter, a thick spattery line, and a completely messy splotch. You should use all these different kinds of spraying in different parts of your distressing. Neatness, evenness, and subtlety are the three enemies of good distressing.





#4: Spray swaths and spatters of the dyes and paint. Use logic to work out where these colors go. Obviously hems attract the most dirt, armpits get sweat stains, knees tend to get grass stains, inside edges of seams, cuffs, and collars attract all manner of filth, and fading tends to happen on tops of shoulders, on the thighs of pants, and on raised top stitched seams. Generally speaking, you will need to seemingly over-do your distressing in order to get a strong enough result after drying, and under stage lights.



Nightgown for a zombie, distressed with sprayed on RIT dyes



Distressing, in addition to aging and dirtying garments can also be used to outline and give added visual contours to costumes. Look at the examples shown in the Woyzeck photos to see how combining distressing with fabric paint outlining can make recycled garments look "almost Dickensian in their detail and richness" according to one theatre critic. You can add to this effect by using paint brushes to apply dyes and paints to edges and contours in a controlled manner as your last step. Dry.



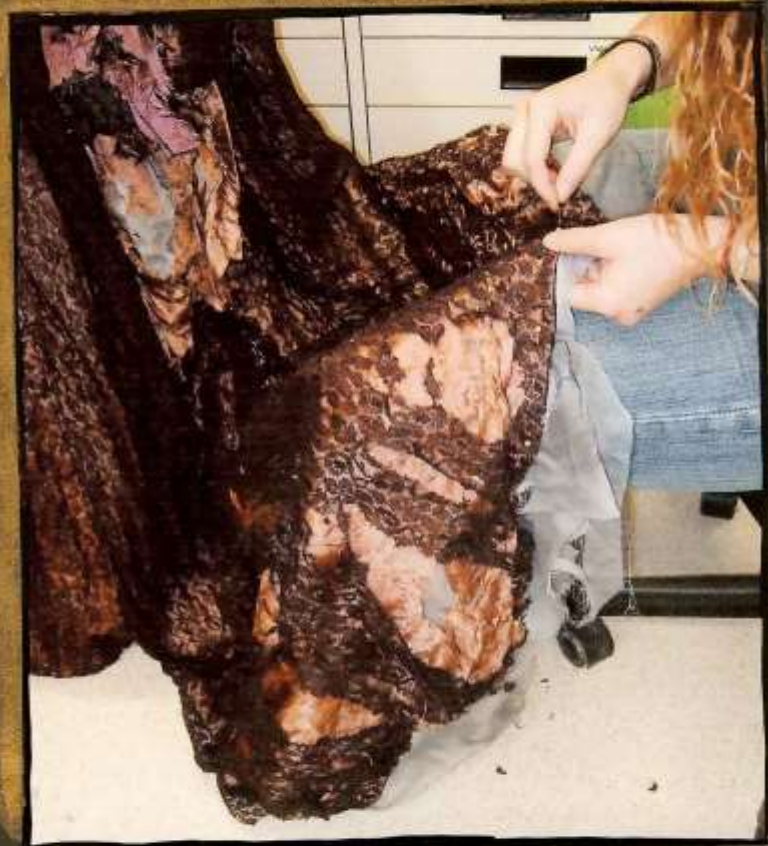


Costumes that have become damaged in the course of their working life also are prime candidates for distressing. At Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, CA, we have a building flooding problem that regularly damages costume items so they can't be used as they were originally intended. In this case I wash out the real mud and ick and then save these items in special bins for future distressing because: A. Half your work is done for you, and B. It often saves having to distress a new or valuable costume when one is needed. Here Martina Jeans of DVC takes parts of three flood damaged costumes, cobbles them together into a vaguely c.1900 style gown for one of our hot undead girls in 2008's Frankenstein. She then adds a ruffle of shredded chiffon and shreds the gown prior to spray-dyeing it.

For more information and photos  
on distressing, go to:  
<http://DistressingCostumes.com>









## Reversible Distressing

If you need to do distressing on a garment that must be returned to something like it's original condition after your show closes, you can use these reversible tips on garments that are dark colored, stain resistant, and washable or dry cleanable. Do not try this with very light colors, silks, and rented, borrowed or fragile items. Do use it on things like overcoats; dark felt hats, suits, jeans, polyester, and woolens.



Do not wear down edges with wood tools. Spread edges of garments, and other areas you want to make dirty, with a thin coating of glycerin, hair gel, petroleum jelly, or any other non-toxic, washable sticky substance.



Apply powders of white, brown and rust color to the sticky parts, and also to other parts of the garment with a powder puff or powder brush. You can use talcum, kaolin clay, cornstarch or flour for your white powder, cinnamon, or Texas dirt makeup powder for your rust color, and Plains Dust makeup powder or cocoa powder for your brown powder. Black garments need the whitest color, and medium colored garments use more brown & tan. You can also use beige and peachy colors of makeup powder for this.





Because this form of distressing is designed to be reversible, it is not very stable, and will need touch-ups most nights. Most actors if shown how to maintain their own grunge for a few nights of dress rehearsals, will be able to grunge up themselves during the run on their own.



After the run, wash the washable items by themselves, so the colors do not get onto light colored garments. If you have dry-clean items like wool overcoats to clean WARN YOUR DRY CLEANER about exactly what you have done to the garments, and accept graciously that you may have to pay extra for them to clean your items separate from normal people's clothes. If you have permission from a lender to do this sort of distressing on a borrowed garment, do not return these borrowed items to the lenders without cleaning, unless specifically instructed to do so.