Photographing Your Costumes for Your Portfolio, Onstage and in the Studio

With Tara Maginnis

Basic Terminology:

Camera Types:

- SLR (Single Lens Reflex) Pro-type film camera, good adaptability, difficult to learn, but can produce highest quality results.
- Snapshot Camera Simple film camera, easy to use, cheap, but very limited in what it can do.
- Digital Cameras Do not use film, so they pay for themselves quickly, despite being fairly pricey. Models now available range from junk that makes disposable snapshot cameras look good, to fancy professional models that can do anything an SLR can do and more. Quality of images is counted in Mega pixels. Do not bother getting anything below 3MP. Most digital cameras are easier to operate than a normal SLR, but less easy than a snapshot camera.

Film Speed:

- Fast film (400asa and higher) is good for low light and/or fast movement. 400asa is the slowest film you would dare use to film a brightly lit show indoors.
- Slow Film (360asa and lower) is good when using a tripod to photograph still objects for a long exposure, or for color- rich photos taken in bright outdoor light.

Film Type:

- Daylight film (what you can buy anywhere), color is correct for outdoors and with flash, but will tint orange under incandescent and stage lights. Tints a little green-gray under fluorescent light.
- Tungsten film (For sale in specialty camera stores and online), color is correct for incandescent/stage lights, but tints blue outdoors in daylight. Also tints a little bit green-gray under fluorescent light.

Hints for taking Portfolio Pictures

- The Simon/Maginnis Family method: Take LOTS of photos and throw out the bad ones. If for some reason *you* can't take photos of an event, consider doing the wedding reception method: hand out lots of cameras to *everyone*, then gather them up, process the pictures, and see what you get.

- "Not even Kodak can take pictures yesterday". Don't put it off. Start taking photos *while you are building* the costume and don't stop till you have several good shots of every aspect of the costume. A digital camera often encourages this because of its photos' cheapness.

- Photograph important details up close. These are photographed best with bright, diffused lighting. You can use squares of heavy buckram as a diffuser on a clip light. If you are doing photos outdoors pick an overcast day, or get a couple of friends to hold a white bed sheet over your costume like a giant diffuser.

- Get a cheap tripod especially for studio shots. Then you can use slow film 200asa and lower for these shots to get the best color and detail. You can also take good photos of yourself in costume using a camera's timer.

- Clip lamps are a great thing, you can buy lots of them because they are cheap, but even if you use "Reveal" bluish looking bulbs, the light coming off them is orangey-yellow (tungsten), this means you will need to color correct some way, either with a blue filter on the camera, blue gels on the lights, tungsten (not daylight) film, or a lot of fiddling in Photoshop later.

- Mannequins look great if you spend just a few minutes adjusting and pinning the costume so it looks like a big puppet of the character. You can fatten out arms just by stuffing net into the cut off legs of a pair of pantyhose. Consider posing multiple characters together in relationships.

- You can make a great neutral backdrop for photos by sewing together two bed sheets. Put one end beneath the mannequin, and hoist the other over the top bar of a rolling rack, or a curtain rod.

- Photograph costumes on the performer(s) while they are in character. If you can't get the original performer(s), make sure your live model(s) or mannequin(s) stands in a characteristic attitude, not just like a lump.

- For photographing live performances use "fast" film, 400asa or HIGHER if you can't use a flash. Usually a flash is a bad idea even if it is allowed.

- WHEN TO SHOOT THE ACTORS: Good times to snap during a live show are at still moments, and at the ends of actions like the momentary "freeze" at the end of a musical number, or the second's pause of reaction in a fight. Even in a dancer's leap, the point at which the body is fully extended in the leap, is held a moment longer than the motions leading to it, and is besides, more visually exciting to look at.

- Try to get a formal "photo call" for posed shots of at least 2 hours put into the rehearsal/performance schedule for the show as early as possible so everyone expects it (the least annoying time is often just after the 1st Sunday matinee). Work out (with the other members of the production team) a list of which scenes you want to photograph, who is in them, and in what order, and make sure everyone has a copy so the process moves fast. Since these are posed shots you can use a tripod.

- Even a whiny uncooperative cast will willingly line up to pose for you backstage in character in costume if you tell them that you are taking their photos as their opening night gifts, and then order double prints so you can give them photos of themselves, and have a set to keep.

- If you do renderings, make sure that you also get a photo of the costume that demonstrates how closely it resembles your original drawing. You can ask performers to pose in a manner similar to your drawing, or choose a "live" onstage shot where the performer is in a similar pose.

- If your costume involves a spectacularly transforming makeup, make sure to get a face photo of the performer both with the makeup and without, so people can see the "before and after" difference.

- If you have done something clever to make the costume that isn't obvious while it is worn, do a detail photo of the inside where you have hidden your secret.

- Learn to use Adobe Photoshop (Adobe Photoshop Elements is fine too) for fixing color problems, removing extraneous background details, and combining photos into portfolio layouts.

- Portfolio page layouts (whether done in Photoshop or by normal scrap booking methods) are especially effective if they include multiple images of a costume. An ideal layout might include a rendering, a build and/or detail shot, a show shot, and a posed close-up. Swatches help too.

- You should try with your portfolio to state in simple visual terms what it is that you can do, by showing pictures of what you have done. Ideally, the portfolio should be clear even to somebody who cannot read the captions. HOWEVER, LABEL EVERYTHING ANYWAY SO PEOPLE LOOKING AT YOUR PORTFOLIO ARE SURE TO KNOW WHAT THEY ARE SEEING.

- For more info see my online article on taking Stage Photos of live shows: http://www.costumes.org/ADVICE/1pages/PHOTO.HTM

- For designing your portfolio, see my article on Costume portfolios at http://www.costumes.org/ADVICE/1pages/PORTFOLI.HTM

- The main two keys to building good portfolios are simple: collect information (renderings, sketches, swatches, photos, etc.) on everything you do, and edit and remount the new information you have every six to twelve months.

- Once you get good photos make a point of keeping them together and semi-organized so you can find them when needed. If you have them in digital form, back them up and store the backups with a willing relative or friend.

Materials to make your own temporary photo studio:

- Camera & tripod

- Dress forms, head/hat stands, mannequins as available for displaying the costume items.

- Chairs, boxes & stools to hold small items up to a level where they can be photographed, and/or to serve as lamp holders.

- Hat racks, music stands, or any upright poles for clip lamps to grab on.

- Clip lights, or various lamps with the shades taken off. A bright sunny window with a white sheet across it as a diffuser. AS MUCH LIGHT AS POSSIBLE, ANY WAY YOU CAN MANAGE IT.

- Bed sheets, bulk fabric yardage in various colors, or roll paper for background.

- Clothesline, clothing rack or pole to hold up the background

- Extension cords with power strip surge suppressors for safety and easy turn-off of multiple lights between shots.

- Buckram squares, theatrical light gels, colored squares of silk to diffuse and tint the lights. Clothespins to hold them onto clip lights.

- Nylon stockings, netting, fiberfill, clothes hanger wire to make bendable "arms" for a costume on an armless dress form.

- Crumpled newspapers to fill out skirts or sleeve puffs to correct fullness.

- Duct tape, for keeping lights in place, heads on mannequins, and the background taught and smooth.

- Straight pins, and fishing line for invisibly getting figures to pose as desired.

Instructor: Tara Maginnis, Ph.D. is the costume designer and an Associate Professor of the Theatre Department of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. However, she is best known for her creation of The Costumer's Manifesto, the Web's largest, and most eclectic, costume site at http://costumes.org She has also written numerous articles on costume design and related topics for TD&T, CRJ, The Ladies Gallery, and Costume. You can view her costume designs online at http://www.costumes.org/SHOWS/100pages/SHOWS.HTM