

Costuming #3: Performing Magic on a Shoestring Budget

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<http://greatstorybook.com/costuming-performing-magic-on-a-shoestring-budget/>

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Getting a play on stage requires resources. There's no way of getting around that fact. Costumes are an integral part of creating a world for your audience and need to be taken into consideration when planning any production. You can't put on a Shakespeare play and stick people on stage with jeans tucked into their socks and a feather in their caps and expect your audience to buy it.

Audiences come to a show to be transported into the world of the play and costuming is vital to accomplishing that. Costumes are an artistic statement that communicate a plethora of messages to your audience: who are the leading characters, what kind of people they are and where they come from.

If your character is in a street gang, he wouldn't wear a suit. A dowdy woman wouldn't wear sequins and a diva wouldn't wear a dowdy dress. Costuming is a challenge that requires a lot of thought and will take up a good deal of the show's budget.

So what do you do when producing a show on a shoestring?

You have 4 options.

Require participants purchase their own costumes.

There are some challenges that come with this choice. If you leave it completely up to the actor or actor's parents you can end up with a hodge podge of mismatched costumes, both in color and stylistic choice. And it will show on the stage. These mismatched items will make no visual sense to your audience and will detract from the storytelling process.

If you choose this route here are some steps you can take:

1. Give very detailed parameters.
2. Set a price limit that everyone can afford and make it clear not to go beyond that limit. Trust me, some actors, but especially parents, are willing to spend quite a bit for the "best" costume. However, not everyone can afford to spend that much. Make it clear going above the set limit is prohibited.
3. Show the actor or parent pictures of what you have in mind. You can even find the costume you want the actor or parent to buy and let them know that it is the required costume.
4. All time periods are open to you, but period costumes cost more money.

Make the costumes yourselves.

This gives you a lot more control since you are choosing exactly the style of costume and materials yourself.

It allows you to fulfill your vision for costuming much more precisely, but it also comes with challenges. The biggest of these is, well, actually *making them*. A close second is gathering the resources required for making them.

Here are some things to keep in mind if you choose this route:

1. You can require actors and/or parents to sign an agreement to volunteer some of their time in order to participate. Sewing costumes can be one of the volunteer opportunities. It still costs money to buy sewing materials.
2. Consider charging a costuming fee. Material is roughly \$6-\$9 per yard. Each costume will likely require no more than 3 yards (3 meters is a good approximate value) and sewing patterns are about \$10. \$30-\$35 per person will probably be adequate to costume each actor.
3. Remember that it requires time to make costumes. Plan ahead as much as you can. Start working on costumes right away so you can troubleshoot any problems that crop up.
4. All time periods are open to you and it costs less to make a period costume than to buy one ready-made.

Bargain shop second hand stores.

Of course the benefit of second hand stores is that everything is dirt cheap. Some real show-stoppers can come out of the bargain bin. I recently bought a French hand-tailored 3 piece suit for \$12 for a play I am currently directing. This, however, is a rare find.

When shopping discount stores, keep in mind:

1. You have to dig through rack after rack of items to find what you're looking for.
2. You may have to visit many stores to find just the right item.
3. Even if you find the right item at the right price, fit is still an issue. A volunteer who can sew may be able to adjust the fit for you, if it's not too small or wildly over-sized.
4. You are limited on time period. Bargain stores generally only have clothes that can pass for the 20th century or later.
5. It still costs money to shop at second-hand stores, just less.

Choose a modern play.

An entirely different method of solving the costuming problem is to simply choose a play that can be costumed right out the actor's closets. This means it must have a modern day setting in which the actors cast might realistically fit.

Things to consider when choosing this option are:

1. Your choice of plays greatly reduces. You will knock a huge number of plays out of the running as viable options.
2. You still have to consider the artistic statement of the costuming. It can't be just any old thing. You may have a leading lady and a supporting lady. You need to be careful about the supporting character outshining the lead because of the mere color of her costume.
3. People's personal clothing style might not fit the character they are playing.
4. It is actually free! So you don't have to spend any money. That's a big plus.

Remember, putting a production on the stage is a unique work of art. Like all works of art, the devil is in the details. If you get the details right, people don't even notice them, they make the whole appear flawless and pleasing. If you get just one or two details wrong they glare out at the audience, causing them to be unable to see all that's right.

Think about what you want your costumes to communicate and then choose the best path for costuming your production. If you take the time to think it through, you'll bring your production to the next level.

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