

Costuming #1: A Quick & Dirty Guide to Costuming

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<http://greatstorybook.com/quick-guide-to-costuming/>

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Many things can cause a stage production to fall flat. Costumes can be tricky and in the midst of the many moving parts of a play can get lost in the minutiae. Suddenly you find yourself at the last minute throwing whatever on whoever, your main goal now being that nobody is naked (probably) and you're willing to call it good enough because, after all: **the show must go on!**

But when the costumes are random, flat, colorless, mismatched or any number of bad things, your entire production will suffer. People write books on this stuff. They make serious study of it and get degrees in costuming.

If you're an actively working but novice producer or director in the midst of putting a show on stage, you don't have time for all that. But you also don't want your production to be a flop, so here are four things to keep in mind.

1. Color matters.

Color communicates a number of things. In western culture a woman in **red** sends a message, usually that she is "loose" or immoral. Take Nancy from *Oliver*. She is a prostitute and frequently costumed in some shade of red. Red also communicates danger.

Blue communicates justice and is often the color for a male hero.

Pink communicates innocence while white communicates purity, **green** is lively, **yellow** is happy and so on. If you are from a non-western culture, color will communicate things according to your own customs, but you can still apply the principle.

There are exceptions. Perhaps you are purposely going against the grain, throwing out stereotypes, then you can make some specific choices, like purposely dressing an innocent in red or hero in black. Bottom line: think about it and make a choice on purpose.

2. Vibrancy matters.

Unless your heroine is sullen and drab because that is the story you are telling, then she should not be outshined on stage. A leading lady or leading man should have costumes that communicate their position. This is nothing to do with the importance in comparison to the supporting cast. It has completely to do with the storytelling process.

The lead character is the lead character because you are telling a story about that person. If your lead character shrinks into the background, you are altering the story.

3. Cohesive concept matters.

Suppose you are directing a play in which all the characters are animals, like *Animal Farm*. This is not a children's play, but instead is political allegory. You can costume the actors as close to the animals they are portraying as possible.

Alternately, you can go with high concept costuming and merely hint at the animal. This can be done with hairstyle, or color choice. But you should not mix concepts. It will be confusing to your audience. If one looks like an animal then they all must. If one is high concept, then all should be high concept. Pick one and go all out.

4. Character matters.

This is really just common sense. But make sure characters are dressed in clothes that make sense. For instance, in *A Christmas Carol* Ebenezer Scrooge should have expensive looking clothes, but they might be a little worn because the miser won't replace them. Bob Cratchit should have a very tatty costume. He's poor, after all, and can't afford a new set of clothes.

Whoever your character, whatever your play, your costumes should make sense to the audience.

Remember, costumes are part of the storytelling. They communicate at least as much as the dialogue. They should never feel like an afterthought. If they do, trust me, the audience will notice.

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