

Costuming #2: Literal, Conceptual or Literal-Conceptual?

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<http://greatstorybook.com/costuming-literal-conceptual-or-both/>

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When you are producing and directing for the stage you are building a world. Unlike written word world-building the world you are creating is entirely visual. That world must be cohesive and it must make sense to your audience.

If not, you will lose them right from the start. Even if you have wonderful acting, you risk drowning it out with poor costuming choices. They will create visual noise that will shout louder than your best actor's acting.

To a great extent costuming is subjective. How I would do it is not how you would do it, or the next person and so on. However, we all know when we've left a visual masterpiece and we never do unless someone has put a great deal of thought in to it.

As an example let's look at the musical *Honk! Briefly, Honk!* (Anthony Drewe) is a musical adaptation of the Hans Christian Anderson folk tale, *The Ugly Duckling*. You would assume that it is a musical for children, but it isn't necessarily, it's actually quite witty and beautiful and filled with great characters.

However, those characters are all personified animals. There's the ugly duckling himself, his mother and his duckling siblings, a regiment of military geese, a villainous tomcat on the hunt for dinner, a sprightly frog and of course a family of swans. There are a few directions you could go with costuming a show peopled by animals.

1. **Literal:** The goal here would be to make the actors as like the animal as possible.
2. **Literal/conceptual:** Here you might take one really obvious feature of the animal character and include it in the costuming, leaving the rest of the costuming more human.
3. **Conceptual:** The goal here is to costume the character in such a way as to hint at his or her animal characteristics.

What costuming choice you make will set the feeling and tone for your play. Choice number 1 will give your show a decidedly child-like feel and will therefore draw that crowd. The literal nature of the costuming would make it easier for the youngest audience members to understand who the characters are. But be aware that you are making a choice, the childish nature of the costuming will drive away some of the adult crowd.

The literal/conceptual blend will give the show a more artsy vibe and still communicate clearly with the audience who each character is. This blend can give the show a very cartoony feel. There's nothing wrong with that. It's simply one direction.

Purely conceptual costuming can be really cool and artistic. It can give the show a very specific feel. But it can also be a disaster. You can wind up mixing too many concepts so that the story gets lost in the confusion.

Let's take a look at a purely conceptual costuming concept for our example show, Honk! The setting is a farm, but there is no particular time period for this show, therefore the costume designer can choose. Most designers choose to set it in the modern day while dressing a few of the characters in 1950's or 1960's stylized costumes. An example would be Ida, the Ugly's mother. She is often costumed as a stereotypical housewife from the 1950's, with pearls and a perfect dress.

When I had a chance to direct and costume Honk! I was inspired by one particular song from the show with a jazzy feel. I set the entire show in the depression era and attempted to costume all the characters with costumes that matched both the period and the animal.

Rather than give any of the actors animal-like costumes, I researched the animals to find the color schemes that matched. Then I hinted at the animal with some piece of costuming. Hopefully you will see a cohesive concept throughout in which the time period and character are represented in a way that makes visual sense and is pleasing to the eye.

Drake, a mallard and Ida's ne're-do-well husband.

The Cat, the hungry villain.

The Military Geese.

Greylag and Dot (The Goose Commander and his wife).

The Frog, Ugly's encouraging friend.

Ugly, transformed.

Whatever you do, it's important that you understand your goal. Know what your concept is and develop it. This will lead to make great choices when it comes to costuming. There is no one right way, but sticking to the concept is key. Then your audience can understand how the characters all fit together and the story you are trying to tell.

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