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### **Stage Costuming: The magic hidden in the wardrobe.**

He had not changed a lot since last time I met him in the same place; a tall man with the big smile that could make me happy and relaxed. “Nice to meet you again,” he said, and his palm brought me warmth when shaking hands. His name is Russel Terwelp (Rusty), the Wardrobe Supervisor and Costume Designer at Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland, Oregon. In 2010, I went to this Theatre with other members of Costume Design Activity of my school to borrow costumes for a school play. Rusty was the man who showed us around. He was patient and funny, but what impressed me most was the huge wardrobe; there are hundreds of dresses, suits, pants, shirts and accessories from different time periods that were made for different plays in this theatre. For me, a girl who loves to watch plays and likes to design costumes- that wardrobe became the coolest place, and I decided to come back again.

Artists Repertory Theatre is “an inspiring place where local artists and audiences can appreciate the profound and stirring plays” (“Artists Repertory Theatre”). It was established in 1982 and has kept bringing more and more excellent plays written by artists around town and let local artists perform (“Artists Repertory Theatre”). The red cubic building is not very large but the redness fully embodies the enthusiasm for acting and watching shows. As soon as I stepped into the theatre, the passionate interior design using only dark gray and red brought the strong visual impact to me. Three minutes after the friendly woman sitting at the front desk told Rusty that I had arrived, he rushed down and was ready to be interviewed. I asked if we could go around the theatre again because I had forgotten a lot of details of the place. “Of course, I’d love to show you this amazing place for as many times as I can,” Rusty said grinning.



Rusty was born and raised in the Mid West and he really wanted to move away. He comes from Missouri, and he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Degree at the University of Central Missouri. The emphasis was in costuming and literature. BFA is a four-year plan professional performance degree in art and theatre (“2011-2012 Application”).

There are a lot of production opportunities, it offers “countless design, technical and crew positions” (“Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree (Design/Technology Option)”), and students have to work hard for achieving the degree. Before he graduated, one of his friends came from Portland to visit him; he told Rusty that Portland was the right city for him. “I never had good luck with cars,” Rusty whispered and started giggling, “so I had to find a city that had a really good transportation system and I would not need to buy a car!” Also, after he talked to some people in the industry and looked around some places in Portland, he felt impressed because this is such a beautiful city with a lot of nice people who like to share ideas with each other. There are plenty of good theatres in this city, and they are not enemies to each other but actually working with each other harmoniously.

Rusty did some work in the costume shop at Portland Centre Stage in 2009. He got this job at ART about the same time he got jobs first designing job. Most of his costuming designing jobs were for the theatre companies around town. ” I just told the head of the wardrobe here, “I have income, I am just bored and feeling useless so I want to find an interesting job here.” Luckily Rusty got this job at ART and the work here keeps him very busy.

Rusty brought me closer to the stage; the set was full of drinks. “Did you see the poster for this show, *No Man’s Land*?” he asked me. “There are two whisky tumblers crashing together and one of them is broken, so you may guess what those characters do when they are on the stage performing.” Then he burst into laughter.

Then we left the stage for the dressing room; I wanted to know more about the play and the costumes. He nodded his head and opened the door for me. Heat waves rushed to me as soon as I got into the dressing room. “It is cold now,” Rusty said, “and when the actors are changing they may get sick if we don’t turn on the heater.” *No Man’s Land* is a show full of drinks: plenty of vodka, whiskey and champagne (“Artists Repertory Theatre”). There are only four characters played by four men, and each of them has one or two costumes. Those four characters each have different qualities of life: one is wealthy and another one is very poor. Rusty was so patient when showing me their costumes, and explaining. “The young man is too poor, so I have to find a low-rent suit for him.” As he was talking to me, he pulled out the light colour linen suit and then lifted up the cuffs. “See those dirty blots and the

scratching?” He also lifted the trouser legs: those blots fully showed the poverty of the character. “In order to get this effect, Jessica and I put a lot of effort in; I scratched the cuffs and used paint to make them dirty. You know, when the show starts, everyone is close to the stage. People here are so careful that they can easily pay attention to those details; even though those small blots may be insignificant, audiences will be so satisfied if we made every costume perfect for the show. This is our job.” His eyes always were glittering when he talked about costumes; I could even see his burning passion for this career through his glasses.

After we went across the hall, we got to the backstage; the shower space, craft room and laundry room are in the same space. He pointed to the simple shower and told me, “Actors can take a shower over there; they will give me their costume when they finish the show every night and I have to do laundry then.” Rusty walked straight to the laundry machines, began to get the towels out and fold them into a pile. “I am glad that the play only has four characters and few costumes so I had to do one load of laundry every day,” he said, still folding the towels, “I did a play a few months ago and there were forty costumes; I had to spend a lot of time doing laundry, drying, and even washed the towels they used.”

A Wardrobe Supervisor has to take charge of the costumes for the show and has to be responsible for the organization and maintenance of all the costumes and accessories in the wardrobe. He has to deal with attending the rehearsals, knowing the show pretty well, doing quick-change and adjusting during the play, doing laundry and repairing after the performance. (UW-Madison Job Description—Wardrobe Supervisor).

“I don’t really do the same thing every day,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Depends on the plays on the stage and the plan.” He started to talk about his preparation work before designing; he has to read each play at least three times before he meets with the director. He also has to make notes on every detail about costumes in the play. “Last season we had a play, there were only five characters but they got shot to death and their bodies got chopped up, so there was lots lots lots of blood for me to clean up every time after the play ended and it was such demanding work.” He made his voice sound tired and then laughed for a long time, “but everything is worth it.”

“My working time depends on the show. Sometimes I come here for fifteen hours a week, but sometimes thirty five hours.” Rusty is on part-time salary for ten months out of a

year at ART. In June and July he has to find another part-time job to help him go through it because he has to earn money. He lowered his voice. “It is difficult to say how many hours because every week is different to me.” Then he smiled again.

Such a special job which can make every day different is exciting not only to Rusty, but also to me. I got my first sketching book for my birthday when I was in kindergarten, and the first thing I drew using a crayon was a dress. When I was little, I got about ten Barbies in my room, to make them pretty; I bought hundreds of clothes and accessories. I had two huge wardrobes for those amazing collections and the first thing I would do every day after school was to change those Barbies’ clothes and organize their closets again and again. After I went to middle school, I got a role in a school play, *Sleeping Beauty* and we had to make the princess costume by ourselves. I rushed back to my home and opened the Barbies’ closet, I saw so many amazing princess dresses with different styles and colors. I suddenly got inspirations and started to draw a dress on the paper and brought it to the school; then we made the decision, bought the fabric and started to sew the dress. With teachers’ help we finished the dress. I never felt so proud of myself when I saw the actress coming out of the fitting room wearing the dress I designed: she looked gorgeous.

I became crazier about costume designing and I joined the costume design activity in my high school last year; I designed and made costumes for two school plays, *Comedy of Errors* and *The Wizard of Oz*. We spent a couple hours every week making over 70 costumes for the musical and when it was finally on the stage, all the characters looked so amazing and attractive in their costumes.

I love designing and picking clothes from the wardrobe. It is like a magic to me and I can gain endless happiness from dealing with clothes and costumes. I know Rusty is this kind of person.

He invited me to the office where they sew costumes; there I met Jessica Bobillot, the main designer of the costumes for the next show, called *Sherlock Holmes & the Case of the Christmas Carol*. Jessica was a short-haired woman wearing a gray dress over her white T-shirt. She wore black-and-white leggings with a pair of stylish black boots. She smiled to me and then turned back to work with the clothes hanging on the rack: those costumes were categorized by the names of the characters. She told me, “Those are for the play *Sherlock*.

The main actor will come to try on his costumes in few minutes.” I noticed that on the wall there were hanging five mirrors; a folding screen was nearby which could make it more private for actors to try the costumes on. There was a huge table in the middle of the office. Last year when I came here there were a lot of pencils and designing scripts over the top. At that time he pointed to a piece of script and said, “This is the recent play that will be put on the stage in few days, those characters are from the 80s but they will have a lot of movements to do and even have to dance. I came out with an idea that made the pants look like this so they looked formal but still it is easy for them to move a lot.” He was trying his best to explain to us the key points of his design; those costumes were not only pretty but also useful, not only for stage effects but also for the practical applicability and the feelings of those actors. On my second visit, all kinds of costumes and accessories were piled up on the table and seemed very disordered: the designers were too busy to organize them.

*Sherlock Holmes & The Case of the Christmas Carol* is a story about the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and the case he had to solve after a Christmas Eve ("Artists Repertory Theatre"). Rusty told me, “This show has more characters and a lot more costumes.” He brought me to a wall with a big board and there were several pieces of designing there, he looked at me saying, “This is Jessica’s designing script for *Sherlock*.” I took a look at the smooth brushwork and the comfortable matched colors; even from the simple scripts I could get to know the time period the play took place, the style of the play, the roles and even the characteristics of those characters ("Artists Repertory Theatre").

“Jessica Bobillot is an excellent costume designer; she has designed so many good costumes for different plays. There are so many costume designers who are doing a great job in Portland. I like to work with them and get inspired,” Rusty said with hands swinging in the air.

When we were chatting, we walked into a wonderland: the most amazing place- the wardrobe. This was a very surprising collection of all kinds of costumes. Even though there were tons of costumes, they were organized and arranged by Russel himself; if a play is going to be on the stage, he can scan over his mind for the right costume which was already used or made but can be used again. Rusty suddenly started bitterly smiling and saying, “you know, I have a problem now. I need more space for new costumes. In order to get rid of a lot of

useless and old costumes, I even held a big Halloween Sale and I successfully sold 1/3 of the costumes.” He was trying to organize those clothes to make more space but there were truly so many costumes and it was hard to give up any. I looked at those costumes: they were well-made and very special; some of them were designed by Rusty or other designers in the theatre but some were bought from the shops.

“The biggest challenge for this job is budget,” he emphasized the word “budget” when he is talking. Not only Rusty, other wardrobe supervisors and designers all have to pay attention not to make the production more expensive than the budget. “When I read the plays, I will get a version in my head so I am thinking about I want this, I want that. And when we are sitting down and talking about how much money we have, I have to give up a lot of ideas.” He looks unhappy because he had to give up so many good details about the costumes during the production. He also told me that he did a show last season which only had two characters; but it spent twenty five years and there were six scenes. Rusty had to have twelve costumes going from the 50s to the 70s. The budget was only three hundred dollars, so that was something like twenty five dollars per costume, and the actors had to get dressed and undressed as well so that included period undergarments, suspenders, the proper 50s bra and all of that sort of stuff. He unfolded hands and said, “Sometimes I couldn’t understand what those local theatre companies thought about. They are very small but they always picked shows that were unrealistic because they only had a small amount of budget.” Rusty smiled again when he told me about how he overcame the problem, “I was very lucky when I was shopping. And, I was allowed to rent costumes from ART for pretty cheap. I let myself do that, because I am the one who organizes that.” He laughed loud and his eyes shone again. Suddenly admiration of Rusty rushed to my heart-- he had to care about so many factors at the same times, the production, the designing, the budget and the laundry. Most importantly, he had an optimistic heart.



“Costume is an indispensable part of an outstanding play” (Zhao). A play with a lot of fine acting performers without appropriate costumes cannot be easily accepted by audiences.

First, the costumes help set the scene and set the right time for the show to take place (McGreevy). *Sherlock* takes place in England in the time period around 1800 to 1900. The costumes should be similar to what the British would dress like at that time. Second, the costumes have to do a good job illustrating the roles of those characters (McGreevy). During a show, the audience will not easily get to know what the characters are by looking at their faces and listening to their voices in the beginning, but the costumes can separate them. People can understand who the detective is, who the criminal is and who the maid is.

When we came back to the office, there was a gentleman standing next to Jessica. Later, Rusty told me that he was going to play the role of Sherlock and came to try his costumes. Then Rusty stopped for a while. "Wait...not only Sherlock. He is going to change his roles into three other characters." I realized again how important the costume is to this show; if the same person is going to play four roles in the same play, the first thing that can make people understand what his roles are is going to be costume.

"Are there any quick costume changes?" I was worried about the length of the dialogue between when the actor is appearing on stage.

"Luckily, there are no quick changes for him and he gets enough time. However there is an actress who is going to change from a female officer to a maid within only two dialogues, and she got a big dress, "after Rusty finished his words; I looked at him surprised, wondering how it was going to work well. Rusty looked relaxed when he was talking, "during the show we are here backstage; we are all going to help change costumes and adjust costumes. It will be all fine."

I looked at all the costumes they picked up for the show; they looked a little bit different from the sketching on the wall. However they still matched the scene very well. A small number of people could easily remember the appearance of all kinds of costumes from different countries at different time periods, even for different jobs. I asked Rusty where he usually got resources from; he pointed out of the window and then said, "the Central Library here has an amazing selection of fashion photography books going, they have books going all the way back to the mid 1800s, drawings and photographs. " For a lot of designers, libraries and museums are the best places to go to when they have to find inspirations and historical backgrounds. Rusty did a play last season; the writer set the play in mid century Italy and

there were rich people. He first searched online about what was happening at that time in Italy; he got the answer, World War II. Then he knew there would not be a lot of very rich people around because they had to have a transition from the war. Then he went to the library, looked through the drawings on the clothes by famous designers and painters as well as the general fashion trends in Italy at that time. After he finished the research he started sketching and designing.



“Have you ever met any problems, such like withdrawing the costume when the actor or director doesn’t like it?” I apologized for the rudeness after I asked this question. Rusty was so easygoing and he answered, “It depends on the costumes, the actors and the characters. Of course I have met this situation; I have had actors tell me that they didn’t like my costumes. I had an actor complaining about his costume even through the whole running of the show. What I like to try to do is tell them that it is not them on the stage, I am not dressing them in person, I am dressing their characters.” Rusty was not very happy because those actors always went to directors or other actors to complain first, “I have to hear it second hand,” he said with a bitter smile.

I felt the difficulty of this job; it is hard to let others like what the designer has made for them. However, the play is the most important thing; everyone should try his best to make the play look good, not himself.

“I just love this job so much,” his eyes shone again when he was talking, “I am also working for other theatres or companies around town, but I work here for free.” The last few words surprised me; I stared at this young man and admiration arose spontaneously in my heart. He is doing abundant time-consuming work; he has to organize the wardrobe very often to make sure each costume is in the right place. He also has to design the costumes and make them for the coming plays, then adjust the size after those actors try the clothes on. Before each play, he has to carry the costume and be ready for people to put them on. After the plays, he has to do huge amount of laundry and then put those costume back again.

I was so happy that I could know such an excellent stage worker in Portland. Each show



is about two hours to three hours, but Rusty has to spend tons of hours on researching, designing, producing, adjusting and washing costumes. When we are clapping for the outstanding work those actors have done for performing, we should appreciate those backstage workers who put much more effort into the production of every show.

I waved to him when I left ART; he wore a passionate smile on his face. It reminded me of what Rusty told me about what everybody else in the theatre said about him, "If it is about the fabric, just give it to Rusty, he will do it."

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