

TEN TIPS FOR A BEGINNING COSTUME DESIGNER

Carol Cooley

OVERVIEW

A beginning costume designer's life is like *The Flying Karamazov Brothers* "Big Juggle" – you never know what's going to show up and yet you need to be ready for it. A consistent, flexibly-tailored plan builds on your skills, supports your dream and keeps you actively engaged in building your career. Here are 10 tips to consider:

TIP ONE: SAFETY FIRST

Be as green, non-toxic and eco-friendly as you can possibly be. Learn to read an MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheet). Read Monona Rossol's [Stage Fright](#). Attend trainings. This will not keep you safe when you are working, sleep deprived, alone in your closet of an apartment at 3am, with the windows painted shut and decide spray painting is the answer to your problem. Only you can keep yourself safe.

TIP TWO: DRAW - AT LEAST ONCE A DAY

Drawing is a wonderful process that unlocks your underlying understanding of a character and also what you don't know. The act of drawing creates a container, a furnace, a cauldron for your thoughts by pairing your sub/unconscious with your body. Bonus: You will also develop confidence in your skill; and experience less anxiety about sitting down and getting your ideas on paper.

TIP THREE: READ - FILL YOURSELF WITH PLAYS

We rely on our imaginations as designers. Stimulate yours with words. Pay attention to how you visualize what you read. When you sit down at a screen you are cheating yourself. You are being spoon fed what someone else wants you to see. Read history. Read what the critics think and dispute it. Read about your craft. Follow your heart.

TIP FOUR: PRACTICE USING VISUAL METAPHORS

Like a writer learns their craft; learn yours. Find compelling visual research for the play as a whole, each character, their relationships, and the world of the piece. Be a visual detective. Through your research a thematic image will frequently appear to rise above the rest. Learn visual analysis so you can translate your non-verbal ideas into words to share with your director, actors and production team.

TIP FIVE: LISTEN - LEARN TO BE PRESENT

Learn to be present and truly listen, without your ego trying to commandeer the conversation. Learn to still yourself and listen deeper. Be present in your relationships. Much of the potential interpersonal “drama” expected in theatre can be diffused by cultivating your ability to listen. Also listen to your feelings – they’re your internal guidance system. Honor them.

TIP SIX: COLLABORATE - LEARN TO HOLD AND CONSIDER OTHER IDEAS

Become familiar with other areas of design and other Art forms. Ask informed questions: What is good for the play/project? Being able to pitch your truly stunning epiphany successfully may shift the production onto an exciting new path. Sometimes you have to acknowledge an idea’s brilliance and choose to walk away, since it may not serve that particular production.

TIP SEVEN: BE INDUSTRY SAVVY

What do you need to get a job? Do you know the current and preferred style of presentation for your resume, portfolio, website, or blog? Do you stay current with which theatres are hiring and what productions are in the works? Are you looking for opportunities to assist an established designer or intern with a theatre? Do you research and target your potential employers? Do you attend as much art as you can.

TIP EIGHT: NETWORK

The people we train with are often our strongest network. They know us and trust that we will perform well. Cultivate your contacts. Directors often choose their design team. Show Business is a small business and word travels fast when a designer is difficult or can't work within a budget. Even in tough, emotionally charged conflicts, stay professional. The "war story" you tell about "that idiot!" may be about your new boss' best friend.

TIP NINE: TIME MANAGEMENT

As an early career designer it's often feast: juggling multiple shows in different phases of production, or famine: you can't seem to land anything. Be ahead of your schedule. Plan. Most designers work on a freelance basis and are not connected to a particular theatre. Even when you're working you need to be forward thinking. What is the next job? Are you closing the contract for the one after that (at the very least)?

TIP TEN: COSTUME TECHNOLOGY

You needn't be an expert draper; however learn as much as you can, especially about fabric. Many designers freelance as craftspeople (dyer/ painters and millinery are the most common); also as shoppers or in-house design assistants (knowing where to shop is invaluable). Experienced colleagues can share a wealth of techniques and skills. Safely develop new materials and techniques.

RESOURCES

Monona Rossol, Stage Fright

Theatre Communications Group: ArtSearch, www.tcg.org/artsearch

Rosemary Ingham & Liz Covey, Costume Technicians Handbook

ABOUT CAROL COOLEY

Carol Cooley teaches at Saint Cloud State University in Central Minnesota. As a director, scenographer, mask and puppet designer, creator and performer, and costume technician, she has worked at South Coast Repertory Theatre, The Long Wharf Theatre, The Guthrie Theatre, The McCarter Theatre, The Shakespeare Theatre (DC), and The Kennedy Center among other theatres across the country. Carol is a creativity coach- in-training. Contact her at cooleyc1@hotmail.com