

Feature



Becoming Cyd Charisse Maral Agnerian

A tribute to Cyd Charisse and her green flapper dress from the "Broadway Melody" sequence in "Singin' in the Rain."

I'm a big fan of Cyd and I've loved her green flapper dress from *Singin' in the Rain* for ages, so when I saw that the theme for Costume-Con 29 was "Broadway" I knew it was the time to go for it. I spent about five months beading the 34 dress panels and making the rhinestone armbands.

This design is an amusing example of the typical 1950s 'take' on earlier eras. I watch a lot of old movies, and in many they didn't even bother making any gesture at all towards period costume; you'll see movies supposedly set in the 1920s with all the ladies dressed in circle skirts and bullet-bras! In this one, costume designer Walter Plunkett at least gave the costumes a '20s feel with dropped waistlines and handkerchief hems, although most of the dresses are still very tight to the body to show off a typically '50s hourglass figure; Cyd's is no exception.

I wasn't able to find information on what happened to the original costume and there are no photos I could find of this costume outside of the movie itself, so I had to take a lot of screenshots and draw myself diagrams to figure everything out. In some cases it was difficult to see exactly what was going on, so I had to make a few guesses, and in fact I did make some discoveries halfway through that I wish I'd known at the beginning!

For example, I bought spandex thinking it would be my best bet for a good fit on the body. Later, however, when I got some really hi-res images I could see seams on the bodice for the first time. The spandex worked fine in the end, although it would have been easier to bead a woven fabric! I used a very lightweight fusible interfacing to stabilize the spandex for beading.

Cyd doesn't stand still much in this sequence and the costume is constantly



Cyd Charisse's green flapper dress from MGM's *Singing in the Rain*, 1952. Design by Walter Plunkett. Pencil, gouache and glitter on illustration board + fabric swatches. Leonard Stanley collection, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library.



Costume breakdown sketches of Cyd Charisse's flapper dress by Maral Agnerian.

swinging to and fro, so it was fairly difficult to figure out some sections. I had to re-watch the sequence obsessively to determine how many panels went around the bodice and skirt, and then divide that number on my body in order to determine the size of the panels for me.

For the bodice I made up muslin mockups of the tabbed panels and pinned them in place to tweak the fit before cutting my fashion fabric. Fitting a bodice made up of rectangular shapes to a human body was certainly interesting! Fortunately there's a slow, fairly close-up pan up Cyd at the beginning of the sequence, so that gave me a



Cyd Charisse dance sequence with panels in motion.

good amount of detail to work with, particularly for the bodice.

I waffled back and forth initially about using sequins vs. beads; originally I thought it was all beads, and I worried about the weight of beads stretching my spandex, but when I got better images it definitely looked like bugles for the edges and sequins for everything else, so that's what I went with. The 3mm iridescent cupped sequins I bought turned out to be too transparent for my taste, so I layered a flat 2.5mm metallic sequin under each 3mm sequin to give more depth, with larger sequins and sew-on acrylic stones for accents.



Cyd Charisse showing upper bodice detail.

I had tried various methods of transferring the beading pattern to my fabric, and nothing worked on the green spandex.



Publicity still shows pattern for beaded panels on belt, bodice, and skirt panels (above). Beading progress on the panels (below)



Finally I made a plastic template and simply drew the patterns on in pen (the beading would cover the pen)! For the hanging tabbed panels I beaded the centre of each panel, then machine-sewed the backing layer on, flipped them right side out, topstitched the edges, and then beaded all around the edges. I carried my little beading factory around with me everywhere I went!

To keep the weight of the skirt from dragging on the bodice, I constructed the dress in two parts; the main body is built as a leotard, and the skirt hangs from the

matching belt which secures to the leotard with snaps. As in the original costume, there are plain tabbed skirt panels behind the embellished ones; they keep the skirt from being too skimpy.

Some of the smaller armbands are purchased. As I needed them to go all the way



Left: Detail of back panels, shoulder straps, earrings, and necklace. Above: Detail of front bodice panels, shoulder straps, bracelets, earrings, and necklace.

up my arm and most bracelets are designed for the wrist, I had to make the upper-arm ones from scratch by sewing rhinestone chain and acrylic gems to a band of matching spandex. The smallest one is also made by me as my wrists are too small for most bracelets!

The extremely painful shoes are dyeable bridal shoes (learn from my pain and avoid these like the plague!) and I dyed the pantyhose to give them the slight green shade seen in close-up shots in the movie. I also made the earrings, necklace, and restyled the wig.

Once the costume was mostly done, I had to start re-watching the sequence again to learn the choreography! I had to modify it a bit as I had no Gene Kelly, of course, but I wanted to keep some of the iconic moves. The bridal shoes were very difficult to dance in, though, and unlike vintage styles they



didn't have high enough vamps to stay on securely. Fortunately they fell off my feet just as I stepped off-stage, so it all worked out. After the con I found a pair of more comfortable pumps and recovered them in matching satin. I wish I'd just done that to begin with, but I'd thought the dyeable ones would look better.

This has turned out to be one of my favorite costumes to wear, simply because it's relatively comfortable (aside from the shoes) and eye-catching. I'm surprised that most people don't recognize it, though; at DragonCon I only had a handful of people recognize Cyd, and most people seem to think 'random flapper'. Amusingly, this costume appears again on a background dancer in "Deep in My Heart" (1954), as do several others from *Singin' in the Rain!*

Maral Agnerian has been costuming in fandom since her first convention in 1999. Since then she's been systematically covering herself in more and more sparkles, doodads and fancy thingamajigs, and has won several workmanship awards for her obsessiveness. She judges at several masquerades and is active at numerous local (Toronto-area) conventions, where she is always interested in learning new skills and sharing techniques! She also has a small business, [Magpie Creations](http://MagpieCreations.com), making jewelry and hair ornaments.

Modeling costume in character at Costume-Con 29.