

Virtual Soapbox



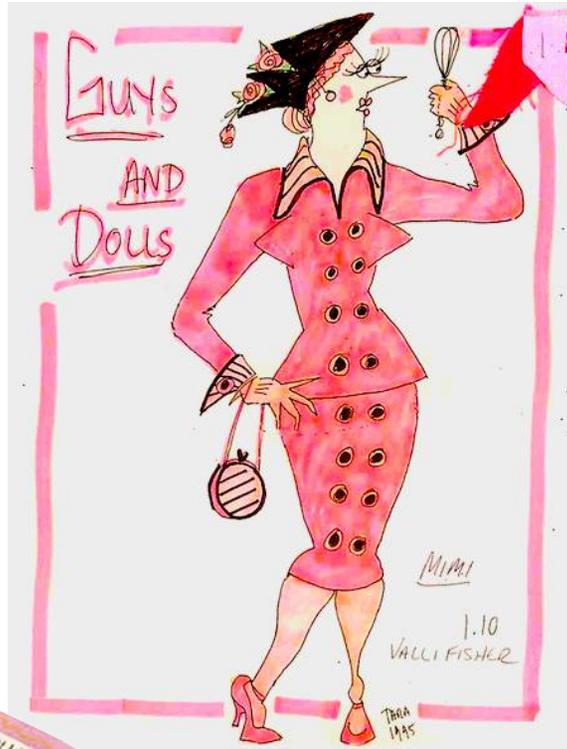
Clothes Make the Star: Making the Most of Actor Bodies

Tara Maginnis*

Adapting theatrical attire to different body types can be challenging but, with a little good humor and a few simple techniques, a costumer can make every actor look good.

The most important raw material to consider when designing and making a costume is not the fabric, trims, paints or structural underpinnings, but that most awkward, squishy, sweaty and mobile of materials: The actor's body. Actors are the real underpinning, beneath the costume underpinnings, the motion that brings your costume to life. Actors are the soul that takes that cool drawing you made, and those nifty fabrics and bits, and gives it breathing life as Don Juan, Titania or Mme Tourvel. Therefore, there will be no whining about actor bodies. Never. Understood?

New actors come to you, frightened, embarrassed, and sometimes full of bravado, for their first measurements after they have been cast. True, they probably really, really wanted the part or they wouldn't have gone



Flamboyant
Exhibitionistic
Boisterous

to the torture of auditions, but the day after auditions, when that cast list pops up with their name on it next to the character name, they belatedly realize that they are nothing like the character, look nothing like how they imagine them, and they wander around wrapped in their fears wondering what the heck they have got into. And, as if auditions and this terrifying realization were not enough, they now have to go into a room where one or more strangers will ask them a bunch of

seemingly personal questions (“Any allergies? Piercings? Tattoos?”), gather all possible contact information, and touch and measure them on parts of their bodies they may never have had measured before. Sometimes, one person measures, and calls out these measurements to another, who writes them down on a sheet clearly labeled with the actor's name and phone number. This is a recipe for making any person feel self-conscious about their body.

It is therefore useful at this point to do several things. First, if there is time, explain who the people are who are witnesses: “Hi, I'm Tara, I'm the costume designer. This is Lorraine, my costume shop manager, she will be making your corset, so whenever you need a repair or modification, you can go to her directly and she'll fix it faster than I can tell her. Over there in the corner is Fiona...” etc.

Then show them your measurement form, and let them fill out their own personal information while you tell them, “This form has lots of measurements we probably won't use on it, but since we don't know



what measurements we will need this year, we will take all the possible ones at once. Unless you get pregnant, or lose or gain a lot of weight, we should not need to call you in for measurements for another year. However, we will need to call you in for one or more fittings on the actual costumes we are making or reusing to make sure they fit. The stage manager will tell you when to come in as this comes up, or we will phone you directly.”

Keep up a smiling, yet sexless, impersonal manner in all you do at this point, like a pediatrician or a gynecologist.

Then, in an ideal universe, measure the actor and write down the numbers yourself, preferably without letting the person be aware of the numbers you are writing down. (Sometimes for reasons of speed, this is impractical, but if it is, at least be discreet in your tones.) Keep up a smiling, yet sexless, impersonal manner in all you do at this point, like a pediatrician or a gynecologist. While measuring, assess if there is anything unusual about the actor's proportions (lopsided, top heavy, etc.) and note it on the sheet in some form of code.

Do *not* write “Big Boobs” or “Lopsided” on the form in big letters, as this will embarrass your actor. If they want to

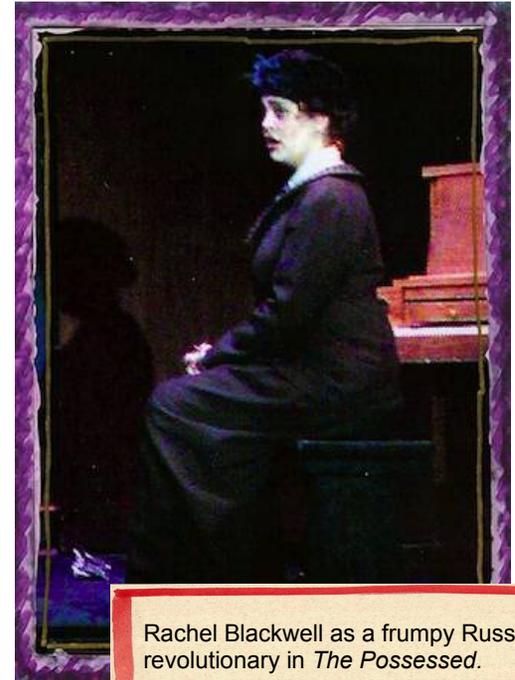
Tara's Magic Codes

V=Wide at Top
 A=Wide at Bottom
 H=Tubular
 O=Round at Middle
 X=Hourglass
 Z=Visibly Asymmetrical
 BB=Big Boobs
 NB=No Boobs
 GF=High “Gush” Factor
 NGF=No “Gush” Factor
 LW=Long Waist
 SW=Short Waist
 LL=Long Legs
 SL=Short Legs

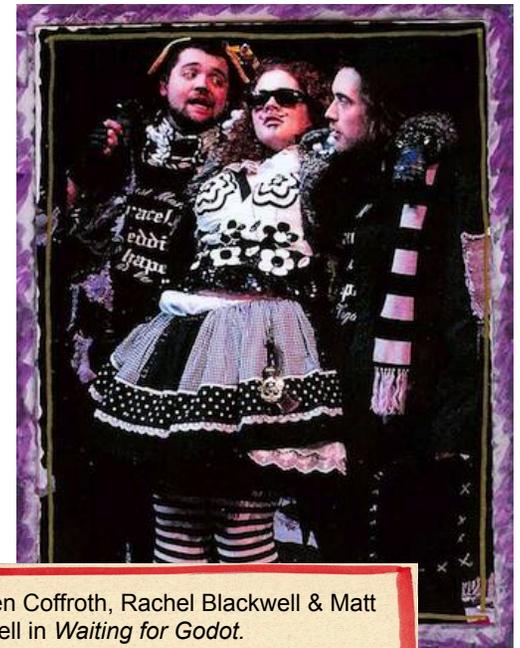
know what the codes mean, tell them the truth: “Well, 'BB' is a note to let the cutter know you have large breasts, but I figured writing 'Big Boobs' on the sheet might get you embarrassing attention, so we use an abbreviation.” If you can manage to easily talk while measuring, also chat with the

No* Boobs*?
 No* Problem*!

(We can just make you some.
 What size would you like,
 Perky, Mid-Size, or Hooters?
 Do you need Tush with that?)



Rachel Blackwell as a frumpy Russian revolutionary in *The Possessed*.



Ben Coffroth, Rachel Blackwell & Matt Krell in *Waiting for Godot*.

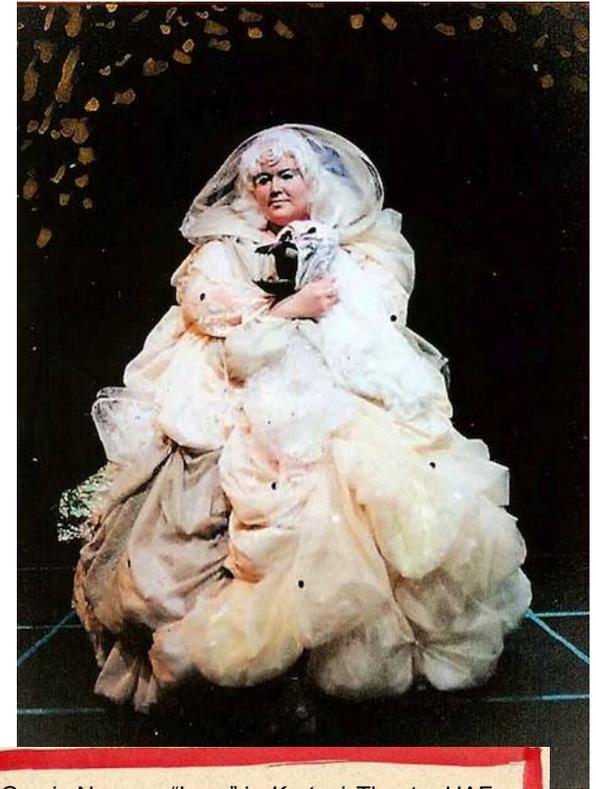


Rachel Blackwell as the sexy "Widow Popova" in *The Bear*.

actor about his/her character and how the two of you see it.

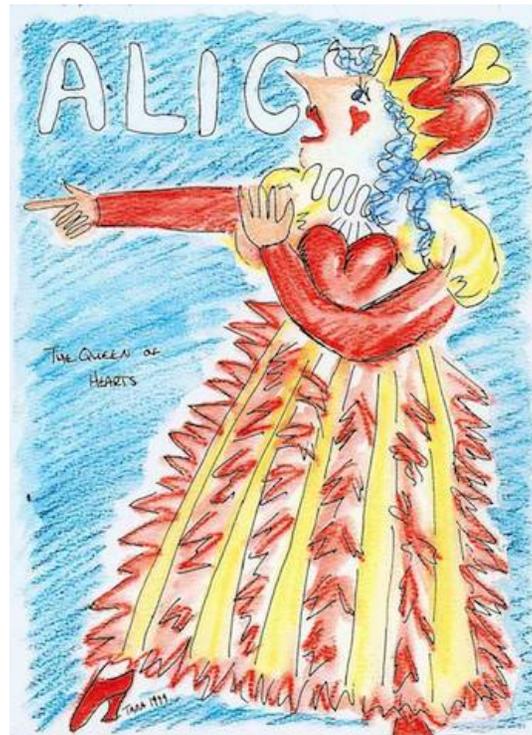
When your director casts a cute young woman to play "Pozzo" in *Waiting for Godot*, don't whine that she isn't a fat middle-aged man. Either make her look like one, or re-think and design the character so it works in your production with the actor that is cast.

If you had to render the show before the show was cast, this is a great moment to show the actor the rendering for his/her character. If, however, the divide between the actor's body as rendered, and the body that was cast is huge, you should seriously



Gracie Nova as "Lucy" in *Kartasi*, Theatre UAF, 2003. Photo by Kade Mendelowitz. This beautiful mother-goddess figure was based on a termite queen crossed with Cybele of Ephesus and included both a hoopskirt and a dress covered with net filled irregular breast shapes. Flat shoes helped the actress move as though she were floating across the stage like a cloud.

Tracy Campbell was padded with waffle-weave mattress pad foam and a hoop as the "Queen of Hearts" in *Alice in Wonderland*, making the hapless man in a card suit cower in fear at her costume hugeness.



consider redesigning that costume to make the design work better with the person who will actually be doing the role. That actor was cast for a reason; so working with the reality of that body can only help the both of you. Ideally, you will be able to design all the costumes after the show is cast so you can



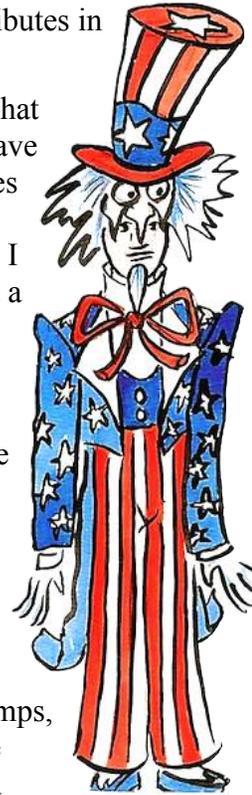
Costume design for a demented wizard-priest character in *Kartasi*. A tall thin actor, Michael Karoly, was exaggerated with a tall hat, and a costume with a huge hoop skirt beneath, to emphasize his mad spinning frenzy. He whipped and bounced the hoop around and actually ended up making his movement pattern match the spirals of the costume, like a whirling dervish.

have the actor's physical attributes in mind while designing.

This is not to say that what you see is what you get, or have to live with. Most actor bodies can be tweaked so they look sexy or dumpy at will. While I worked at UAF, we have had a series of really great leading actresses who ranged in size from 16-22.

Most women in that size range have a high amount of what we call "gush factor" which means that you can shift this extra flesh around with costuming, especially corsets, so that these women look either like fat dumpy lumps, or the hottest babe since Mae West. We just gently pull and push them into the shape they

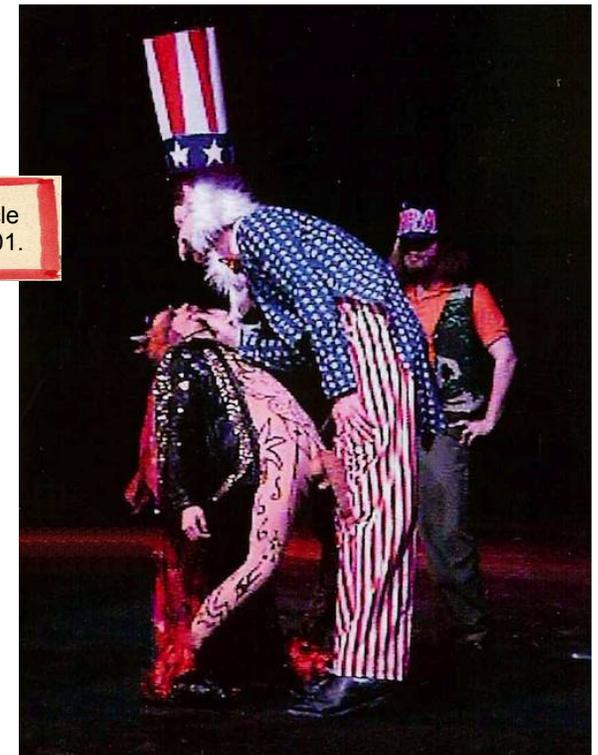
Rendering and photo of Jay Strid as "Uncle Sam" for *Yahoo Nation*, Theatre UAF, 2001.



need for the role, and design a costume around the shape we create. Skinny or flat-chested girls can be padded out at will, and the same thing done to them.

While guys tend to have less gush factor, the most ill-proportioned guy can be made to look hot if you fit him well enough in a smart suit, and the tasty hunk will look like a geek if you deliberately put clothes on him that fit badly.

But, if you have somebody who may be physically suitable for a role, there is no reason you should not use these tricks as well. Take for example the casting of a 7' 1" basketball player to play Uncle Sam in a political satire. While it might seem easy to just make him an Uncle Sam suit and leave it there, that really is nowhere near as fun as taking the 7'+ guy and with costuming, seemingly stretch his proportions, and add height to make a 10' Uncle Sam. Ditto taking a big woman cast in a role suitable





fat as the character should. In a non-realistic play on the other hand, a large body is rarely enough for these larger than life characters. Even if the actor is big, you can use hoopskirts, padding,



Designs for Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* create the illusion of slim hips with the placement of light and dark color.

for a big woman, like *The Queen of Hearts*, or the mother goddess “Lucy” in *Kartasi*.

In a realistic play it may be enough that the actor is large, though most large actors will be pleased to find you still have to tweak their costumes to make them look as

and optical tricks to give the performer the larger than life body of an ambulatory parade float.

Many actors who are very short have never been told, “we need to make you look

shorter.” Ditto for tall people, skinny people, and fat people. I have found very few plus-size people who are not relieved when I tell them they are “not fat enough” for a role, and that we need to expand them. People who are in these extremes often get a lot of crap in the real world about their bodies so you need to make it clear, that whatever their body type, you see their bodies as a beautiful canvas on which to make your art. If you have problems remembering this, try posting up signs to remind you and your actors of these important precepts:

*Your body is not a problem.
It is a beautiful canvas on
which we will create art.*

Sometimes you are dealing with the land of realism yet an actor has been cast in a role where their body type is contrary to the one described in the script. Often the audience will just happily suspend their disbelief, but if you can do subtle things to make the actor match the description more closely it can help your performers.

When we did a double cast *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at UAF, both the actresses cast as “Honey” were rather pear shaped, which ordinarily is not a problem, except that there is a whole conversation in the script about the character where she is repeatedly described as “slim hiped”. So, we made two dresses for the two actresses

that by putting darker colors near the hips

created an optical illusion of narrow hips. The best part was that nobody ever noticed we did it because it worked so well. While not all problems are as simple to fix as this it is important to treat contradictions like this as costume problems, not “actor” problems.

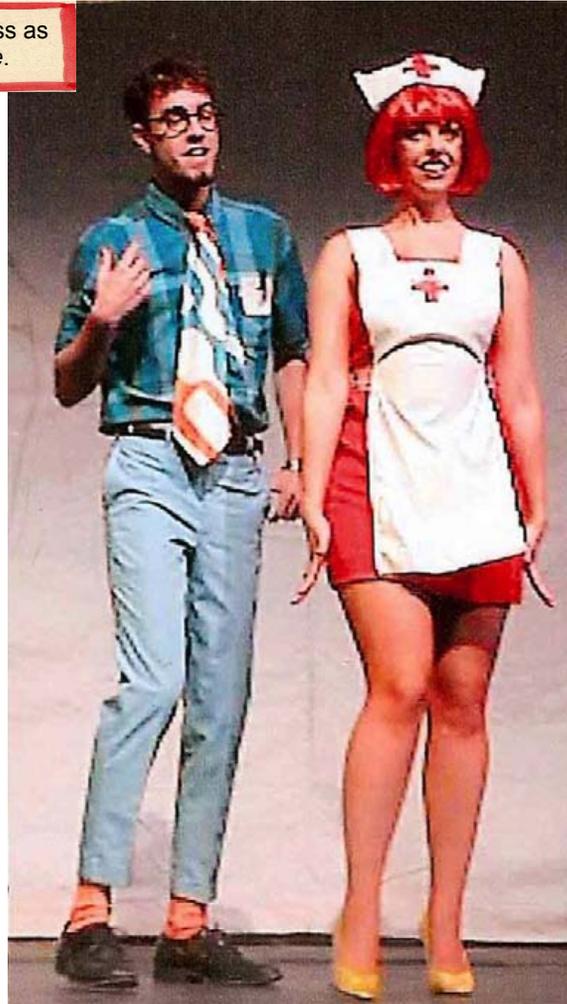
One of our best proportioned actors, Jon Ward, was easily transformed into a geeky “He” for *The Successful Life of Three* by giving him an over-sized shirt and tie, and too short and tight pants. Meanwhile Christy Burgess as “She” wears a white vinyl nurse apron over her darker red dress which draws the emphasis away from her hips and seemingly expands her bust. This is the same trick that we used on one of the two dresses for “Honey” in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*.

Adding extensions to the body in the form of hoops, capes, tall hats or masks, trains, claws, hanging sleeves, etc. can also help actors who are performing roles where they use big movement that requires exaggeration. When doing this it is

Author's Note

The estimable Kristina Tollefson of the University of Central Florida has made many useful organizational forms and charts available on her website, [Tollefson Designs](#), under the category “Teaching” that you can use to track measurements, swatches, budget, etc.

Jon Ward as “He” and Christy Burgess as “She” in *The Successful Life of Three*.



important to: 1) make sure the hat, train, hoop, or whatever is really secure and comfortable so it doesn't make problems for the wearer, and 2) get the costume piece that has the extension (or a rehearsal version) to the actor weeks in advance so she or he can figure out all the fun things to do with the costume that will end up making your work look its best.

One of the shows for which I got the most praise was *The Island*, where I spent a glorious budget of \$20 (on feed sacks). I roughly sewed the sacks to used, dyed bed sheets with yarn, making a pair of full-length blanket-ponchos, which looked like filthy prison blankets after distressing. But the blanket ponchos were handed to our two actors at their very first rehearsal, so they had over a month to think of clever ways to use the costumes as both blankets and as “homemade” costumes for the *Antigone* scene. The end result was more people coming up to me and enthusing about how “brilliant” the costumes were than I've had on any show.

Actors will make you look good if you let them, especially if you return the favor.

Tara Maginnis has a Ph.D. in Theater from the University of Georgia. Formerly a Professor of Theater and a costume designer at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, she now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she teaches Costume Design and Stage Makeup at [Diablo Valley College](#). She is best known for her creation of [The Costumer's Manifesto](#), one of the largest and most eclectic costume websites, and “[Theatrical Makeup Design Interactive](#),” a DVD teaching series.

All illustrations, and photos unless otherwise noted, by Tara Maginnis.