

# Feature



## On Loan from the Haunted Mansion

**Debbie\* and Rick Bretschneider**

*The venerable "Haunted Mansion" Disneyland ride and the movie inspired this spirited tribute to its ghostly inhabitants.*

What is it about a headless man that makes us feel uncomfortable?

More than any spook, any apparition, the animated corpse of a beheaded man or woman does seem to evoke a queasiness in us that is unmatched. And why? You'd think that without a head there would be less to fear, less to actually anticipate, as it blindly chases you around. Of course there is all that walking around bit.



Gatepost sign of Disneyland Haunted Mansion ride.

In 2004 Debbie Bretschneider was considering her costume entry for the Bay Area Regional Science Fiction Convention (BayCon) masquerade. All of the

Bretschneider family are big fans of The Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland, and she was focused on creating a ghostly costume, based on The Bride and The Haunted Mansion movies.



Justin and Debbie Bretschneider, "On Loan from the Haunted Mansion."

If you're not a big fan you may not realize that the ghostly carriage that takes you through the mansion actually progresses upwards through the house, finally making it to the attic before springing out the window and down into the cemetery below. But that attic is both the pinnacle of the house and ride, the scariest room in the house. Loud heartbeat sounds, lub-dub lub-dub, and then



The original Disneyland Bride with glowing heart.

you turn to the glowing ghost of the bride, red heart pulsing in her chest, some tragedy pinning her spirit to the mansion, scaring thousands of visitors a day.

It seemed a natural, but somehow it just wasn't enough.

This quickly turned into a family project, as we decided that young Justin (age

14) would take on the role of the headless groom. Justin was young enough to think this was fun, but old enough to cooperate and contribute. Justin was 5' 11" tall, and only around 90 lbs, so he was a natural hanger for costumes and special effects. Ric was a capable maker, and a problem solver



Dress from *Haunted Mansion* movie on exhibit shows layers and torn fabrics. Design by Mona May.

when we didn't know how to do something. Debbie had the fashion sense and skill at the sewing machine. A formidable team.

The bride costume seemed straightforward. While at Disneyland, two of the dresses were on display, designed by Mona May, from the movie. Debbie got to see up close the layers of the dresses and the torn and old-



*Haunted Mansion* costume designer Mona May (right).

looking fabric. She found a prom dress at Salvation Army. It had a corset-effect front and had three layers for the skirt. The top two layers had quite a bit done to them so that the transparent under slip would show. We tried many things and layered them on top of each other. We cut, frayed, burned, spray painted with gold/bronze color, and used squiggle paint, all to create the illusion of the dress being old and tattered and perhaps a bit ghostly. Debbie found a scarf that was already a gross color and tore that some more. She teased and back-combed her long hair into a frenzied mess and added a decrepit vintage hat with torn veiling in a similar color to her hair.

Ironically, although it had been one of the iconic bits from the ride, the glowing heart was not to be. Although we tried many different types of lighting under the dress to re-create the beating heart effect, nothing



Debbie's wedding dress detail, corset-effect front with distressing, scarf, vintage hat, and theatrical makeup.

turned out to have the right glow without making the dress look strange – and there simply wasn't enough dedication to carve out part of the bride's chest to make it work – so the glowing heart was abandoned.



Early test with hat.

And then there was the problem of removing Justin's head.

We've all experienced bad headless characters. They fall into several categories of failure. Torso is just unnaturally long. Arms don't move quite right for where the shoulders should be. Shoulders that are droopy off the real head, like a sagging tent. And then there's that easily spotted fabric screen where the person inside can look out through the chest that just never looks "seamless". We approached these problems one at a time.

As mentioned, we did have the advantage of using a boy who was very leggy. That evened out the visual discord between torso and legs. Thrift shops surrendered an extra-long coat that with some simple tailoring would drape down past the actual waist, looking slightly short but not unnatural. Debbie sewed white shirt cuffs to the sleeves of the suit, so they would be long enough.

Shoulders were one of the most involved parts of the costume, but straightforward in their attack. On a hot afternoon Justin stripped off his shirt in the back yard and Ric applied paper maché to the tops of his shoulders, like form-fitting football shoulder-pads. Once dry, it came off in one piece, and additional paper maché was used to close the area where his neck had been. This was dented upwards slightly, to make a bit of a skull-cap to rest on his head. There was a little additional re-enforcing stapled in as we went, but that was basically it.

Like the dress, the groom's costume was "tortured" and it was there that we (with some limitations) solved the problem of the eye-slits. Vertical tears just under the collar and down past the button placket were



Close to final, needs more distressing and finishing touches.

opened slightly and afforded Justin some limited view.

Unfortunately we discovered later that to get the best “headless” effect Justin actually had to arch backwards a little when he stood, which left him looking up, and likely to trip, but we’ll get to that in a bit.

There was some additional adjustment, adding fabric where the neck was missing (resisting the idea of making that bloody), and more darts and tucks. But the groom was basically complete.

BayCon’s masquerade suggests people record their music and voice overs ahead of time so the announcer just announces and there isn’t a problem with the costumers themselves having to be heard. We had decided our spooks would be silent, no soliloquies, just a short introductory speech for the toastmaster. But we did want music.



Justin peeks out an eye hole in the shredded shirt.

In searching out a soundtrack from the ride, Ric happened upon the French version of the Haunted Mansion “[Grim Grinning Ghosts](#)” theme by Disney composer Norman “Buddy” Baker, and the whole show shifted!

The title was changed to “On Loan from the Haunted Mansion” and the ghosts had names: “Mademoiselle Phantomé” and “Monsieur Mort.” Two ghosts on loan to BayCon from the Disneyland France Haunted Mansion. The music would be recognizable, yet strange, again playing to an unexpected turn for the audience.

During BayCon the previous year, there were several panels on how to present at a Masquerade. Debbie attended all of them. Because of that, we knew to keep the presentation to 60-90 seconds. We knew we wanted to walk slowly and not rush anything. Even with the eye hole, Justin could not see anything once we entered the masquerade room. The convention changes how the contest is set-up every year. This year we entered from the back of the audience, and had no stage –which was a very good thing!

We tried to make it look like Justin was a gentle ghost, guiding Debbie with his hand outstretched in a courtly manner. In reality,



Justin and Debbie’s stately entrance to the “Grim Grinning Ghosts” theme during their BayCon 2004 masquerade performance.

Debbie was using Justin’s hand like a rudder handle, guiding the blind ghost in a slow circle around the stage. A well-practiced bow and curtsy would end the bit, with the two of them walking straight at the judges!

(We later learned that approaching the judge’s table that way scared the judges!)



Justin and Debbie during their BayCon 2004 masquerade performance.

Of course it wouldn't be an good story without a last minute change in the green room. Ric noticed that Debbie, once a professional cosmetologist, was applying makeup sparingly, almost subtly. Ric had been in several theatre productions in high school and college and had always done his own makeup. He explained that because of distance and lighting stage makeup needed to be a bit more drastic, just a little over the top, especially for a ghost. Deeper hollows for Debbie's eyes, cheeks, temples, and shoulders were added and the effect was striking, and would be even in the low light of the BayCon ballroom.

From there, all went very well. We were especially blessed having an MC who "got" the whole thing and vamped with the dialogue we had given her. Nobody tripped, nothing ripped, and the two ghosts exited as elegantly as they arrived.

Which is why it was so emotional watching the judges award almost every other contestant and we still sat at our table, sad not to have been noticed, right up until the end, nearing midnight. You see, the two novice class ghosts were awarded Best In Show, which is typically awarded last. So it was with tears mixed with both unnecessary anguish and unexpected joy that Debbie

dashed up onto the stage to accept that year's honors.

*Debbie Bretschneider enjoys creating clothing for fantasy, science fiction, and historical periods. She has been on both sides of a masquerade, as contestant and judge, and finds both to be nerve-wracking. Writing about costuming is a new hobby.*

*Ric Bretschneider is a technologist, trouble maker, and problem solver whose interests outstretch his available time by a significant magnitude. You can learn more about his creative, rebellious, and social sides by visiting his web site at [ricbret.com](http://ricbret.com).*

## Making *Haunted Mansion* Movie Ghosts Glow

Filmmaker Rob Minkoff wanted his ghosts to look distinctly different from apparitions in countless films over the years, and costume designer Mona May played a crucial role in developing that look. One way that helped make her ghost costumes unique was their shimmering, iridescent quality.

To achieve it, May painted on reflective glass beads, the kind used in freeway signs. A light on the camera at lens level caused reflections to bounce back at the lens. The twinkling, supernatural glow of the ghost costumes was done totally without high-tech special effects.

This "glass wear" technique was just one of the ways that May's costume design skills contributed to the distinctive look Minkoff and his team desired.



*Haunted Mansion* movie costume on exhibit at a Disneyland event.