

Feature



Mrs. Musgrove Debbie Roy

The trip of a lifetime to Costume-Con 31 turns into a journey through time as this long-time theatrical costumer becomes a character in a Jane Austen novel for the Historical Masquerade.

“Does anyone want to send me to Denver in May?”

I posted that question on Facebook as a joke after I read about Costume-Con 31. I hadn't even known there was such a thing as a convention all about costumes until that day in March. Four days of nothing but costumes and the people who loved them? That sounded like my kind of vacation.

It really was a joke question. I can't afford to travel, so you can imagine my surprise when a friend replied, “Maybe. Let's talk.” My friend, Stephany lives in Boulder and she offered to use her frequent flier miles to get me to and from Colorado. It still sounded like a far-fetched dream but, after several discussions with my family, it was decided that I shouldn't pass up this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

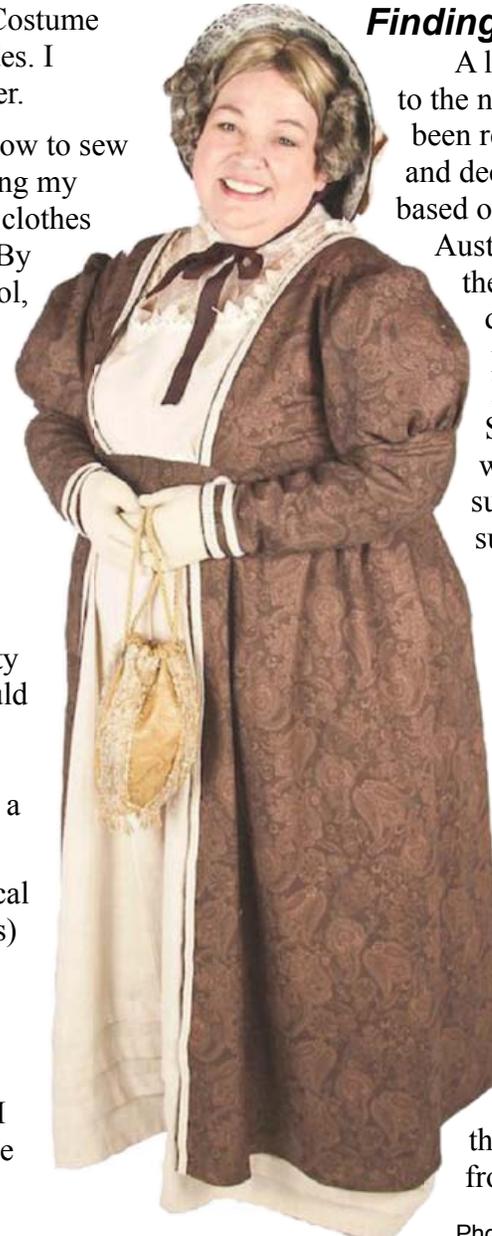
I was going!

What followed was several days of pouring over the Costume-Con 31 web site,

reading all about the Doll Costume Contest and the Masquerades. I couldn't resist. I had to enter.

My Mom taught me how to sew at nine, starting with dressing my Barbies and progressing to clothes for my family and myself. By the time I was in high school, I'd branched out into the costume crew of our drama club. I followed this with thirty some odd years (some of them very odd, indeed) of community theater. Designing for community theater usually means very little time and even less money. I got pretty good at using whatever could be scrounged up, turning it into something that had the right “look” and doing it in a hurry. It was fun.

In recent years, physical restrictions (darned arthritis) have kept me away from costuming anything larger than a Barbie but I was determined to enter the masquerades. Here is how I approached my entry for the Historical Masquerade.



Finding Mrs. Musgrove

A love for classic literature led me to the novels of Jane Austen. I had been rereading “Pride and Prejudice” and decided to make myself an outfit based on the Regency styles of the Austen books. I skimmed through the various stories until I found a description of one of the peripheral characters in *Persuasion* that stuck a chord. She was described as “. . . a woman of comfortable, substantial size.” Being of substantial size myself, I chose to costume Mrs. Musgrove.

I was somewhat familiar with the styles of the Regency period, primarily from my habit of watching every TV and film version of Austen's stories. I also did some research on line at the marvelous [FashionEra](#) website. They provide some terrific illustrations and simple explanations of a wide variety of historical styles and eras. I also found a site, [Museum of Costume](#), that had photos of actual gowns from the period.

Photo by Don Searle.

The Regency period refers to the years between 1800 and 1820, when George III was insane and his son, George IV, served as the Prince Regent. Fashionable gowns of the time featured a high waist and a narrow silhouette. The style was also called “Empire” after the First Empire in France. England had long been looking to France for their fashion trends but, with the advent of the war with Napoleon, the British styles began to follow their own path.

The high-waisted gown usually featured low, square-cut neckline and short, puffed sleeves. In England, ladies frequently showed a little more decorum by filling the low neckline with a “chemisette”, a light, side-opening sleeveless blouse, or by pinning in a piece of lace or embroidered chiffon. Material for the gowns tended to be muslin or silk, something light that would fall into that narrow silhouette. The Museum of Costume website shows a simple [printed cotton gown](#) (1810-1814) that is typical of the period. Gowns were paired with beige undergarments for a “natural” look, and the truly daring would actually dampen the skirts of their gowns so they would cling. How scandalous!

While pastels or light colors were preferred for day wear, the prevailing fashion for the higher social strata was to wear gowns of embroidered white silk or light muslin for evening wear. This practice was reserved for high society for the very good reason that it was difficult to keep all that white clean and one needed a staff to

take care of it. Cold weather would bring out the woolen cloaks and Kashmir shawls.

During the day, whether making calls or promenading in the park, a light coat or [pelisse](#) was added to the outfit as well as gloves, a reticule, a hat and sometimes a parasol.



Colorized portrait of Jane Austen. Perry–Castañeda Library, University of Texas at Austin. Source: [Wikimedia](#).

The reticule made its debut in the late 1790s. Before that time, pockets were tied around the waist beneath a women’s gown and accessed by slits in the skirt. The narrow silhouette of the Regency style made this

impractical. By the early 1800’s reticules were an integral part of a ladies fashion statement, providing function and yet another chance to display one’s style. Some were made like a concertina, using steel hoops, others were shaped like a pocket with a metal clasp at the top, but the most prevalent style was a simple circular design pulled into a pouch with ribbon drawstrings. The individual style was provided by choice of materials and embellishments of ribbon, beading, lace or even feathers. The fashion for handbags persists to this day, you’ll seldom see a woman out and about without her purse.

A true lady of the time would not be seen in public without her hat. Hats evolved from the soft-crowned, narrow brimmed caps called “capote” of 1800, to a firmer crowned and wider brimmed bonnet by 1815 or so. Hats were also frequently trimmed with lace, ribbons, feathers, frills and sometimes, flowers. Fashionable hat makers, or milliners, were as sought after then as our elite shoe designers are today.

The Fashion Era website includes examples and descriptions of a number of [accessories](#) from the period.

Building Mrs. Musgrove

I approached the design for Mrs. Musgrove by first defining her social standing in her community. She was the wife of the local country squire and, consequently, fairly high in the hierarchy of the local gentry. However, her position in the “ton” (high society) of London was quite

low. Using this, and a quote from the book that said, “she was not at all elegant.” I chose to keep her gown, pelisse and bonnet fairly simple.

With a myriad of images running around in my head, both from the websites I had visited and the films I had watched, I made a quick sketch of how I wanted Mrs. Musgrove to look and made a list of the materials I would need.



Original sketch for Mrs. Musgrove with fabric swatches.

I found medium-weight muslin in a cream color that had a fine line of metallic gold running through it. That wasn't, perhaps, historically accurate but I approached it as if she were to be a character on stage and I liked the idea of the subtle shine the gold would provide under the light. Besides, the fabric was on clearance and I was on a budget.

A [swatch](#) I found on the History of Costumes site inspired my fabric choice for her pelisse. The photo showed a dark brown, printed fabric from the period. The cotton blend I chose was a light, cocoa brown, printed with a paisley pattern in darker brown. My research pointed out that the paisley pattern was very popular during the period.

While there are some lovely historical patterns out there, the only ones I could find in the style I needed were much too difficult to modify for large sizes, so I chose to use a favorite a-line dress pattern and made adjustments to get the look I needed while keeping it comfortable to wear. I measured and cut the pattern just below the bust line which allowed me to fit the bodice and then add the skirt to it, incorporating gathers to the back of the dress and pleats to the back of the pelisse. The pattern I used didn't include sleeves, so I had to create the two-



Pointed Battenburg-style lace trims the neckline of the gown. Photo by Don Searle.

part (puffed upper, fitted lower) sleeve from scratch, inspired by those on a [1817 gown](#) on the Museum of Costuming website.

For embellishments, I used pointed, Battenburg-style lace at the neckline of the gown and cream colored, braided trim on the edges of the pelisse. A long piece of cream lace was draped around the neck then tucked and pinned under the edge of the squared neckline of the bodice. I added in three pleats at the bottom of the gown.

This practice was not just for style. When the bottom edge of a skirt became worn or stained, the pleats could be let out and hemmed with the fresher fabric, extending the life of the gown. I was sure my Mrs. Musgrove would be a frugal soul.

I had planned to cut down an old straw hat to make a bonnet but instead, I found a marvelous brown felt bonnet on [Amazon](#) and took the easy way out. Since I hadn't started any of this until late March, I was looking for the occasional shortcut and this piece had just the profile I wanted.



I trimmed the bonnet using leftover fabric from previous projects and a couple of leather buttons from my grandmother's button box, and lined the inside with cream lace. Since I have some mobility issues, I do a lot of my shopping online and was happy to find a lovely pair of cream-colored gloves, with a covered button detail, on eBay. They had just the look I was hoping for and, if they were a bit tight, at least I could manage to stuff my hands into them.



Bonnet, cream-colored gloves, and beaded reticule.

My reticule was planned to be a lot simpler until I remembered some vintage beadwork that a friend had given me. The fabric that held the beads was slowly disintegrating and I was pleased to find a use for the lovely beadwork. I chose a piece of

golden yellow brocade and attached the strips of beaded chiffon to it with fabric glue. I made a simple, drawstring bag that showcased the beadwork and I justified its sparkle by giving my Mrs. Musgrove character a weakness for beaded reticules. Doesn't everyone have that one weakness when it comes to fashion?

Thankfully, the fashion of the time in shoes was a flat, somewhat "ballet slipper" look so finding a simple pair of brown flats to compliment the look took only a quick trip to the department store.

As the final accessory to my Mrs. Musgrove makeover, I repurposed a wig that I had used in a previous production. The wig started out long and straight with bangs. I had seen several illustrations of hairstyles with the hair parted in the center and pulled back into a bun at the back of the neck but with little clusters of curls bobbing at the temples.

I wound the long wig into a bun and pinned the bangs to the inside of the wig cap. My favorite part was getting those curls for the sides. In the course of my doll costuming, I had discovered that the best way to curl synthetic hair was to wind it onto straws and then dip the head in boiling water for 12-15



Bonnet with leather buttons and ribbon (above), beaded reticule (below)





Restyled wig with clip-on hair pieces.

seconds. (Yes, I boil the heads of my Barbies) I had two small clip-on hairpieces that very nearly matched my wig and used the same technique on them. I removed the clips, wound the hair into ringlets on extra thick straws, pinned them to my foam wig head and boiled them. It worked! All I had to do was put on the wig and then pin the two little clusters of curls into place.

There was only one more piece to my presentation of Mrs. Musgrove: the music. I am lucky to have and extremely talented musician as one of my best friends. Jeff created original music for both of my masquerade entries, incorporating a quote from the text of “Persuasion” for Mrs. Musgrove’s entrance.

Overlay photo (far right) by Don Searle.

Mrs. Musgrove Shows Up

As May approached and the dates of the convention closed in, life got in the way. A health scare with my Mom, who was living with me at the time, and the subsequent scramble to get her into a care facility, looked as if it might derail my plans. Thankfully, we managed to get everything straightened out . . . on the Monday of the week I was to leave. Since I hadn’t been certain that I’d be going at all, I ended up having to rush through some of the finishing of my costumes but I got it all done.

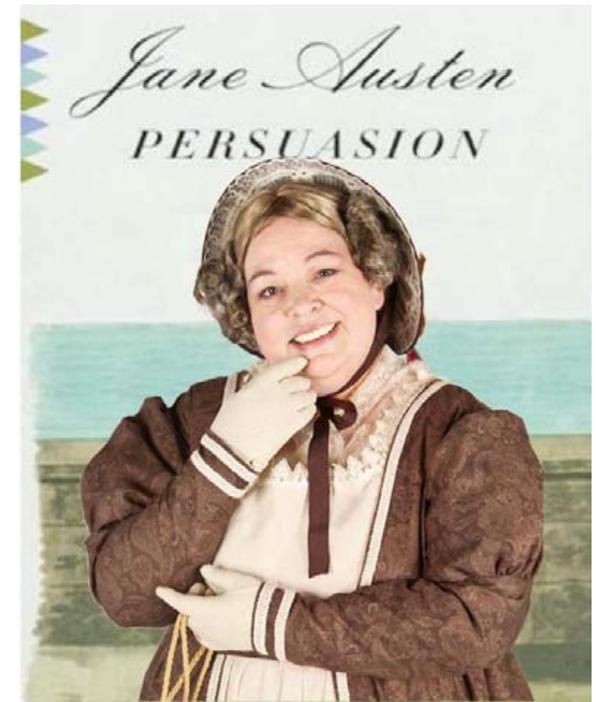
Flying out to Denver was exciting and a bit terrifying. It was only the fourth time I’ve flown and, since I have to use a walker, there were a few anxious moments. But when I stepped out of the terminal and saw the mountains in the distance, I was thrilled.

The entire convention was an experience I will never forget. To be surrounded by creative people who understand the need to bring their visions to life . . . and then parade around in the result, was an indescribable feeling. Being brand new to the entire process, I found myself frequently overwhelmed, particularly during the masquerades themselves. But my turn came and I let Mrs. Musgrove have her little walk in the spotlight.

I had no idea what to expect at the convention and, being a little on the shy side, could easily have retreated into myself and tried to become part of the woodwork. But the people I met wouldn’t let me. I am profoundly grateful to all the talented artists

who took the time to share themselves with me while I soaked up inspiration and wallowed in awe.

Oh yes, and Mrs. Musgrove had a lovely time too.



Debbie Roy has contributed to more than 200 productions over thirty plus years. She was a founding member of “Patchwork Theater,” a children’s theater group. She has received local awards for acting, costuming and make-up design. Her play “The Jumping Mouse” has been published by Bakers Plays. Although no longer active in theater, she feeds her artistic side by creating one-of-a-kind character dolls. Visit her [Etsy](#) store to see some of her creations.