

# Virtual Soapbox



## My First Masquerade Kathie Gust\*

*A veteran costumer and masquerade participant remembers her first masquerade and offers some tips to first-timers.*

The first masquerade that my husband Phil and I ever participated in was at BayCon 2003, a regional convention. It was also the first sci-fi/fantasy convention that we had ever attended. Some friends we met through *Lord of the Rings* were going and suggested that we might enjoy seeing what one was like. They had both watched and participated in masquerades and were planning to be in this one.

We were told that it was easy to do. All we needed was two homemade costumes and we could sign up. I had made “King Theoden” and “Eowyn” costumes that we wore to one of The OneRing.net Oscar parties, so we decided to try it. Then, as they say, the trouble began.

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We rushed to create “hall costumes” to avoid showing our masquerade costumes ahead of time: Obi-Wan Kenobi and Jocasta Nu.

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Our friends said that people wear costumes at the convention. What they did not mention was you can’t usually wear your masquerade costume until after the masquerade is over. Rush to create two more costumes – Obi-Wan Kenobi and



Jocasta Nu from the Star Wars series. I still have no idea who Jocasta Nu is or what she does in the abysmal second trilogy, but it must be memorable since fanboys keep coming up and raving at me about it. I chose her simply because her hairdo and color matched my own. We should have just worn jeans and t-shirts.

We thought we were ready to roll at this point. We really were not, but luckily we met a very experienced costumer, the late Kayta Barrow, who was willing to

coach us a bit. We made a date for breakfast the next day. This is the best thing that novices can have happen to them. Try to get an introduction to an experienced competitor, a den mom/dad, or a former masquerade director. They can tell you things you need to know that will make a great deal of difference in your first presentation.

Kayta talked us through the process. She didn’t want to know about our costumes or characters, but told us that supplying your own background sound track is a great idea and if you can work a story or joke into your presentation it will go over much better than a simple stand and figure-eight walk. She also warned us to practice on a space the size of the stage so you know how much room and time to use based on your sound track. All those are things we would not have known to do otherwise.

Since we met with her our first day, we were actually able to make two short sound tracks, one for each of us, and to practice. We were also advised to consider entering for the workmanship competition. One thing we did not know and no one told us, was that we could have presented together as a team instead of singly.

We were lucky! That year at BayCon was definitely a LOTR year, so we chose well for our first time out. The [press release](#)

on The One Ring.net website reported, “Best Fantasy Novice was a tie between two entries. Philip Gust as 'Theoden,' who performed the famous 'Arise, riders of Theoden!' speech. In a separate entry, Kathe Gust as 'Eowyn' dramatized the moment when 'Eowyn' first resolves to go into battle.” Phil’s costume also received Best Workmanship, novice class and I received a “Rising Star” award from a local costuming group, the Greater Bay Area Costumers' Guild.

Suddenly we were Journeymen at the local level and we had still never even seen a masquerade from the audience. In fact neither of us *ever* saw one until 2006 when I took a year off and watched Phil compete solo when he portrayed Lon Chaney as “Red Death” from the 1925 movie, *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Here are some tips I would give to novices, in addition to the ones that Kayta gave us.

Choose a character or costume that you are enthusiastic about. Remember it really isn't just about winning (true!), it's about thrilling the audience. That's easier to do if you love the character.

Consider entering at a local or regional event first. It's easier to get comfortable with the stage and the process at a smaller convention than starting out at Costume-Con, or San Diego Comic Con. A win at the regional level also usually does not prevent you entering a similar presentation at a larger convention, but check the masquerade

rules each time, just in case, to preserve your reputation. Costumers often “try out” a new costume first at a small local or regional event before entering it in a larger one.

Sometimes you have more fun entering with friends, so consider a group entry, but let any novice friends know that it could result in a bump to a higher judging level if you win, depending on masquerade rules.

Take time off now and then to refresh your ideas and your enthusiasm. The audience experience is different from appearing on stage and seeing both sides of the event can make you a better performer.

Finally, don't be afraid to get a coach. They see things that you may have overlooked in costume construction, they can advise on stage business to improve the performance and can also tell you that the “joke” just isn't working.

*Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genres. Visit her [website](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.*

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Here we are after our very first masquerade, still a little shocked, but happy to have made it through: Eowyn and King Theoden.

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