

# Feature

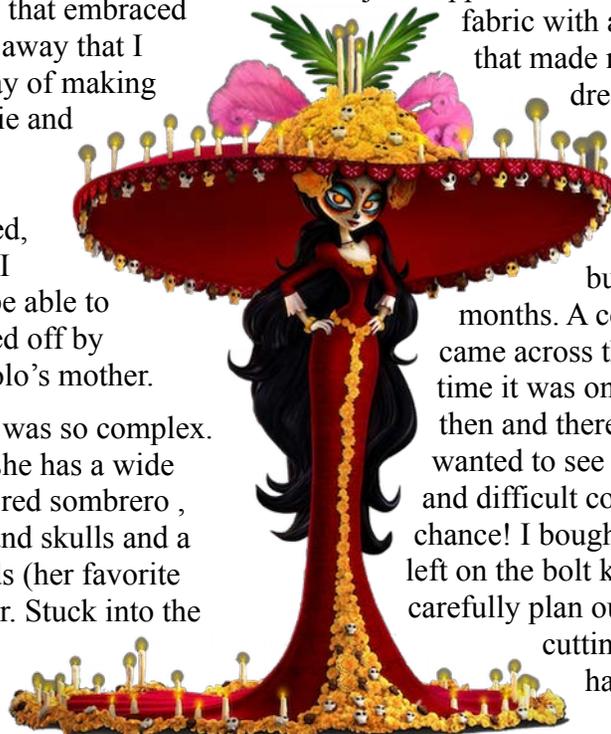


## Becoming La Muerte Rachael Kuddle\*

*This movie-inspired cosplay creation uses dozens of battery powered candles for a hauntingly beautiful costume special effect.*

When the animated feature *The Book of Life* came out in 2014 I instantly fell in love with the art design and bright vivid characters. Having grown up in Mexico I was drawn to the movie that embraced its culture. I knew right away that I would need to find a way of making a cosplay from the movie and though La Muerte, the Ruler and Queen of the Land of the Remembered, was an obvious choice, I thought I would never be able to achieve it and had started off by aiming to cosplay Manolo's mother.

La Muerte's outfit was so complex. On the top of her head she has a wide brimmed and sweeping red sombrero, trimmed with scallops and skulls and a large bunch of marigolds (her favorite flower) on the top center. Stuck into the flowers were candles, feathers and palm leaves. Around the



edge of the entire hat but still on the top side she has several candles.

La Muerte's sombrero wasn't the only show stopper, she also wore a very form fitted dress that flared out starting at knee length to the ground to be even wider than her sombrero, and it was also covered with candles and the edge of the hem and up the center front was more marigolds. There were so many more details each making the thought of cosplaying her feel unattainable.

One day while shopping at Joann's I just happened to find a bolt of beautiful red fabric with a very subtle design in it that made me think of La Muerte's dress. Still intimidated by how to achieve the difficult aspects of her outfit I decided to leave the fabric behind but it haunted me for months. A couple months later I came across the fabric again but this time it was on clearance. I decided then and there to take the plunge, I wanted to see if I could make a large and difficult cosplay, and this was my chance! I bought all the fabric that was left on the bolt knowing I would have to carefully plan out the pattern before cutting as I was sure to only have just enough.



Left: La Muerte from the 2014 animated feature *The Book of Life*, Reel FX Creative Studios. Above: Rachael Kuddle as La Muerte. Photo: Scott Johnson, Realtime Portrait Studio.

In February of 2016 I started to plan out the pattern for the dress. I used some inexpensive muslin to drape the dress onto my dress form. I wanted to make sure that it looked like it should before cutting the actual fabric. I studied images so I could try to get the fabric to lay as it should. It needed to be fairly form fitted.

My first challenge was the sleeves. They had a poof structure at the top but in the movie it looked like one piece with the sleeves so I did my best to make it in real life without having extra seams. Once I had figured out the sleeves I needed to then tackle the mermaid-like skirt. It needed to go from form fitted to wide and flat at the ground.

Draping the pattern wasn't the only challenge. I also had to figure out how to make it maintain its circumference while moving around without becoming more like a dragged train. The hat was going to pose the same challenge. I looked around to see what other cosplayers had done



but didn't really find much. For the hat I saw a lot use insulation foam to keep them stiff but then it laid so flat and didn't have the same swoop as in the movie. I decided that using PVC hoops was probably the best plan for what I wanted to achieve. It would hold the fabric into a round shape and keep it taught, it would also provide the weight needed to keep the skirt of the dress down.

Once I was happy with the mockup of the dress I started preparing all the details. Along the hem and up the skirt along with the top of the hat, neckline and around the wrists La Muerte had marigolds of several shades and sizes. Since all the characters in the movie are supposed to look like dolls and her flowers didn't look like real marigolds I wanted to find a way to make them look similar. I decided to make them out of felt.

I used 3 colors of felt and cut hundreds and hundreds of circles, every time I thought I had enough throughout putting them on the costume I would find I needed more. I then layered the circles of different colors on top of each other in sets of three from



Marigolds made with three colors of felt.

biggest to smallest and folded them so that they kind of formed an "X" in the middle and stitched them so they looked like flowers that way. (below) Later on all those marigolds would be stitched on all over the dress and added to the top of the hat in a dome shape.

Though the entire outfit was challenging I think the greatest challenge was going to be figuring out the candles. There were going to be a lot of them and I somehow needed to figure out how I was going to get them to stand up in place on both the hat and skirt. I also really wanted to have them light somehow. I originally was thinking of making them out of PVC or foam and maybe making holes into the PVC for the skirt and hat to stick them into so they would stand up. I figured I could use some kind of LED lights to light them and thread it through the PVC and or foam but it didn't feel promising.

One day I decided to go to the Dollar Tree and just look around – you never know what you might find. I came across the battery powered candles while I was there (left) and realized what a great and inexpensive way they could be to have candles on the dress. They had 6 inch candles in sets of 2 and then taller 10 inch ones. I

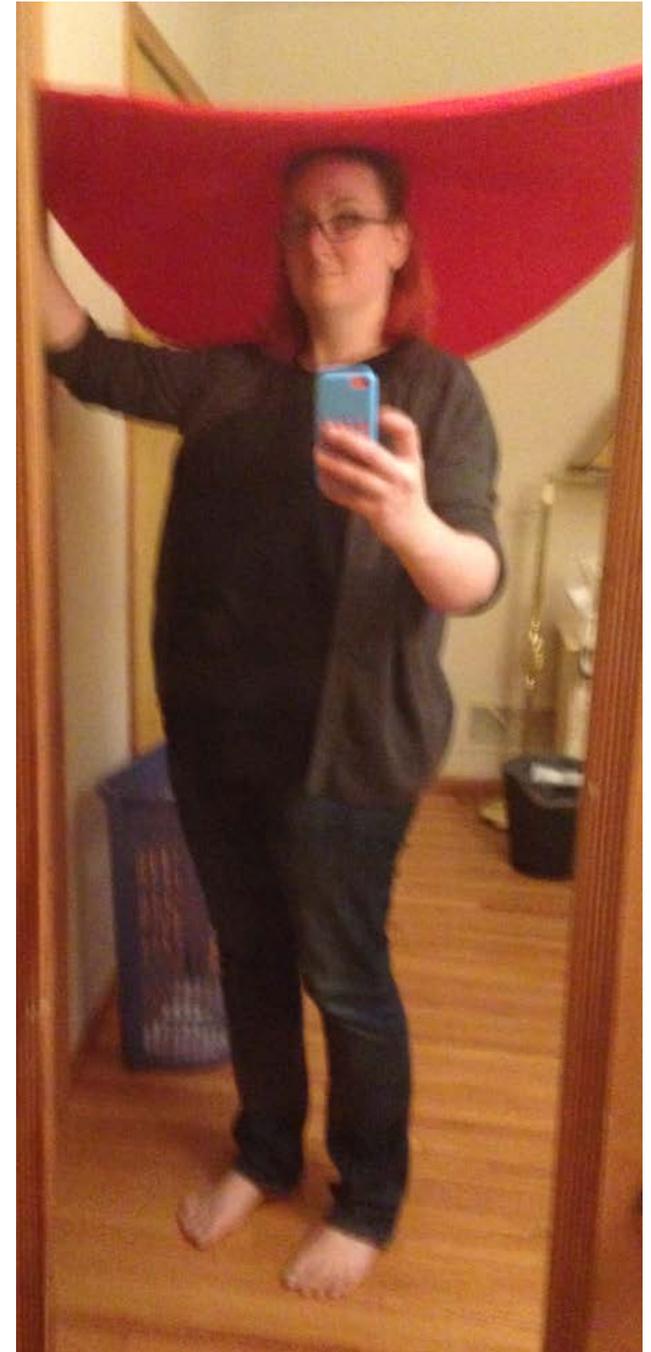


decided to pick up a 2 pack of the 6 inch ones and see if I could figure out if they would work for my dress. When I opened the package I found that the candles came with a “stand”, it was basically a little round platform with a cup that the candle could sit into to stand on its own.

It suddenly struck me that I could use the base for the candles to secure them to the fabric and if the fabric was pulled tight enough they would stay in place and hopefully stand. I tested them out by sandwiching fabric between the candle and base and pulling it taught and it worked! I had my solution to having lit candles on my costume. I ended up going back to the Dollar Tree and buying a couple dozen 6 inch candles and three of the 10 inch ones for the top of the hat.

I finally decided to cut and sew together the fabric for the dress. I made sure to add a firmer fabric into the waist of the dress for structure so it would keep its shape and I sewed the hem of the dress with enough room to slide a PVC pipe into it for the hoop. I was lucky and had just enough fabric for the dress which was huge relief. I went to the hardware store to find some PVC piping that would work for both the skirt and hat. I took pieces of several widths and played around until I found one that was both light but also strong enough to hold its shape. I ended up coming home with a 3/4 inch roll of piping and couplings so the hoops could be made whole but also collapsed for easy traveling.

Once the dress was constructed and I was happy with it I began to figure out the hat. It needed to be almost as big around as the bottom of the dress which was going to be quite a significant size to balance and maneuver. I decided I should find the fabric first so I didn't accidentally plan the hoop to be wider than the fabric was. I found red cotton that matched the hue of the dress fabric. In order for the hat to be able to conceal both the hoop and the candle bases I decided to make the brim of it as two layers with an opening so I could slide the hoop in and slide in the candle bases so that I could then attach them and the bases wouldn't be visible.



Trying on hat form.



The hat has a large mound of marigolds on the top center of it. I decided to construct a hollow dome out of flexible cutting boards and cover it with matching red fabric. I then covered the dome with marigolds and also had them scatter onto the brim a bit as if they were spilling down. The dome was stitched down to the brim. I cut three holes into the top of the dome for the longer candles to sit in and then some smaller holes for the feather and palm leaves. I cut a long length of scallops out the same red cotton as the brim and painted on a design and hand stitched it onto the edge of the brim.

For the hanging skulls on the brim I cut thick craft foam and painted the skulls several colors and then stitched them dangling from the brim and onto the flower dome and the hem of the dress.



Makeup test.

My costume was now nearly complete. I just needed to figure out how to make my exposed skin look white. I decided to use face paint for my upper chest, neck and face but for my arms I decided to use gloves. I made gloves and decorated them with gold accents with fabric paint and also attached felt marigolds around the wrists. It was exciting to have the final details of the costume done.



Detail of fabric texture, felt marigolds and makeup.

My first attempt to wear the costume had its flaws centered around the face paint and hat but after a few tweaks it was all worked out and I managed to create my first large and complicated cosplay. It is a fun outfit to wear and I am glad I took up the challenge even though it was much harder than I had anticipated.

*Rachael Kuddle has been sewing since she was 9 but just recently started to make costumes for her family and herself. 2016 is her first year competing in contests but she hopes to continue doing it for quite some time. She worked in the costume shop at Coe College in Cedar Rapids Iowa while she was in College and had also worked with leather at a motorcycle apparel store for 3 years. She is always looking to improve her skills and loves what she does.*

*[Rachel Kuddle received a Silicon Web Costumers' Guild Dreamcatcher award at Costume-Con 34 in 2016 for her solutions to difficult mechanical engineering problems and her use of lighting for "La Muerte." - Ed]*



Final try-on of the completed costume with candles lit.