

Feature



William Ware Theiss: Costuming Dangerously *Philip Gust**

Bill Theiss was (in)famous for his unorthodox approach to designing women's costumes in Star Trek TOS that skirted the censors and appeared less than they were.

William Ware Theiss was the costume designer for the pilots in 1964 and 1965, and all three seasons of the original *Star Trek* series from 1964-1969. He designed the look of *Star Trek*, from the Starfleet uniforms to the many alien costumes seen in the seventy-one episodes the series. However it was his elegant, daring and revealing wardrobe creations for the female guest stars of the original series (TOS) that is one of the most memorable and iconic aspect of his work.

Theiss attended Lowell High School in San Francisco, and the Art Center College of Design at Stanford University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts, minoring in sciences, biology and chemistry. After a four-year stint in the United States Navy. He eventually moved to Los Angeles. His first job in Hollywood was as personal secretary to Cary Grant. Theiss credits Grant's ex-

wife, actress Dyan Cannon, as having considerable influence on his career.

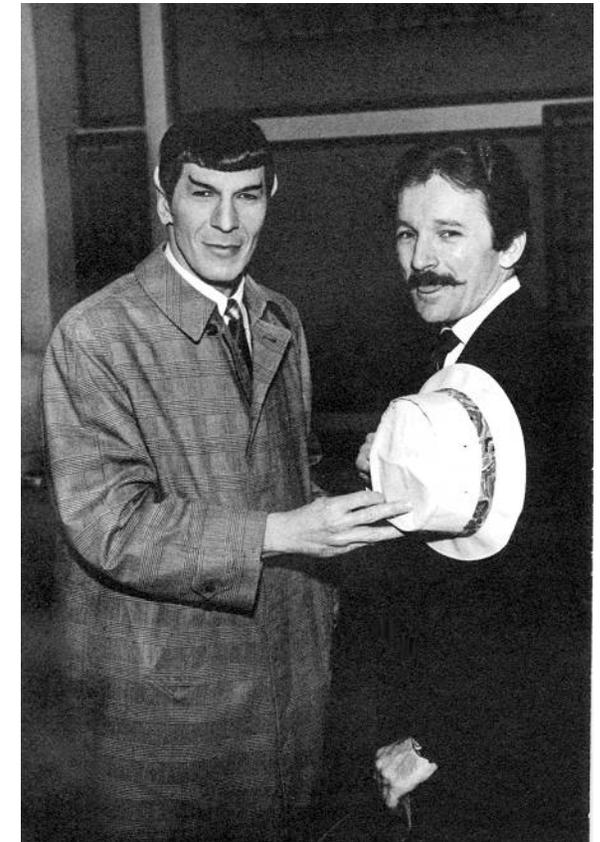
After six months at Revue/Universal Studios as an apprentice artist in the Advertising Art Department, Theiss landed a job at CBS in the Wardrobe Department on two televised soap operas. He also worked in films. *The Pink Panther* (1963) was his first as a designer (although he is credited as "wardrobe consultant"), but continued working as a wardrobe man for television shows including *Hollywood Palace*, *My Favorite Martian*, and *The Farmer's Daughter*.

However, it was his work as costume designer for a stage production of *The World of Ray Bradbury* that gave him his big break. His friend, Dorothy Fontana had been hired by Gene Roddenberry to work on a pilot for a show he was developing called *Star Trek*. Roddenberry was interviewing candidates for costume designer, but was not seeing the creative spark he was looking for. Fontana thought Theiss' work on the play was highly innovative, and introduced him to Roddenberry.

The two got along at a personal level and found they had a lot in common, so Roddenberry offered him the job of designing the costumes for his first pilot, "The Cage," and for the second pilot, "Where No Man Has Gone Before." He

further refined his designs once the network green-lighted the series.

Whereas the men's costumes changed somewhat, it was the women's uniforms that underwent the biggest change. Reacting to the network's rejection of a unisex world where women and men wore similar clothing and played equal roles, Theiss come up with a more feminine design that



Leonard Nimoy with William Ware ("Bill") Theiss.

accentuated the differences. The design was controversial, as some claimed it objectified women. Roddenberry approved of Theiss' design. Roddenberry's vision was that people in the 22nd century would take pleasure in their differences, which he later incorporated into Vulcan IDIC philosophy.

In fact Grace Lee Whitney, who played Yeoman Janice Rand, suggested the design to Theiss after she had done pre-production publicity shots, wearing the second pilot style uniforms with pants. According to Whitney, "I was the one that made them do that. My concept of ladies in space were not to look like men. I read a lot of comic books as a kid, and I just saw the ladies as looking as we did. Actually it was shorts with the skirt flap over the front. Bill Theiss did that.



Grace Lee Whitney in second pilot uniform and series redesign she suggested.

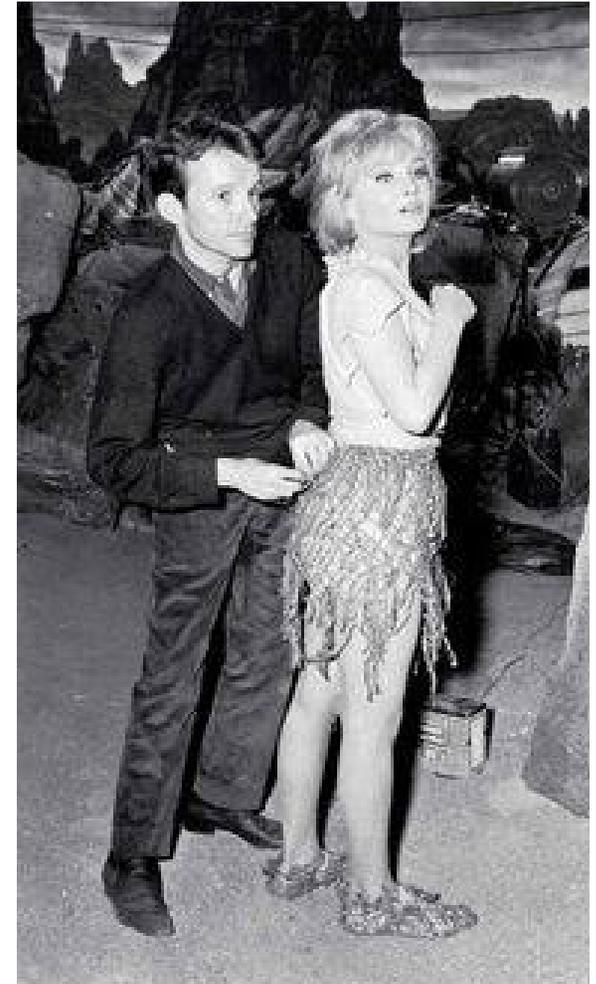
And the black stockings, the boots, and the legs. I thought it was just outstanding."

Theiss was also responsible for designing costumes for guest stars for each episode, and here his work was more controversial, especially in his design of women's costumes. Theiss had developed a unique approach to costume design and he applied it all the costumes he created for the series, including those for female guest stars. He was not concerned by the controversy either: "a lot of noise and some indignation" was how he referred to it at the time.

Costumer Andrea Weaver, a colleague for 2 years on TOS, noted that, "His designs for Star Trek were original rather than distilled from other sources, or redefinitions of previous work. This is what I appreciated about Bill Theiss. I thought he was a truly unique and rare costume creator."

According to Theiss, "There's no way of predicting clothes of the future, so I'm lying, basically, with my designs. As convincing, fun and stimulating a lie as I can tell, but still a lie.

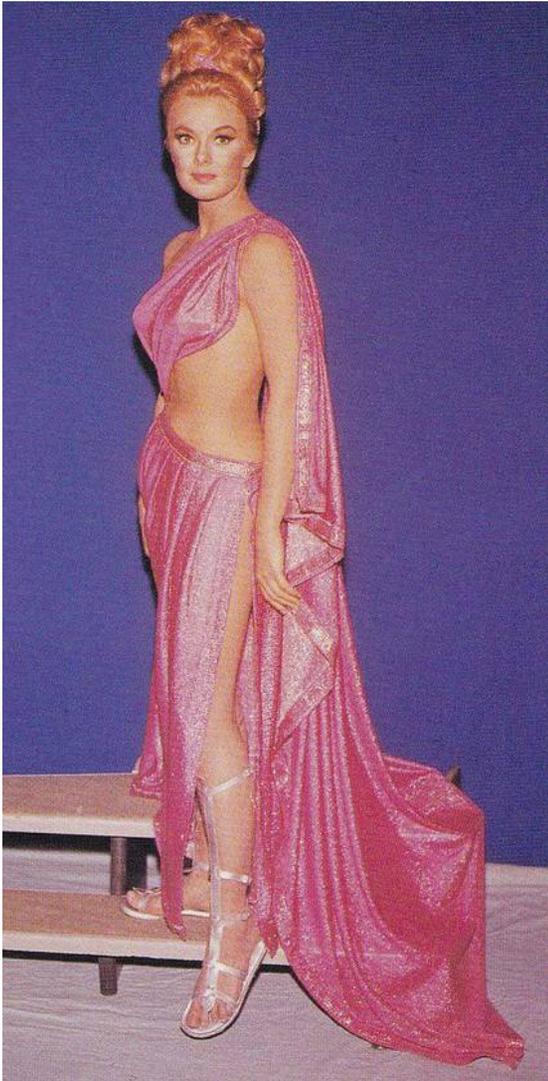
"As for where I get my ideas from . . . well, I don't get them from my dreams or anything. Mainly, I get them from fabric that I see that's available; I look for interesting patterns in the material itself."



Theiss adjusting skirt made of a mesh material for actress Susan Oliver between shots for the first Star Trek pilot, "The Cage."

Nowhere was his fabric-first approach more evident than with one of most iconic costumes of any Star Trek episode, a Grecian-inspired gown that Theiss created for the character of Lt. Carolyn Palamas in the season 2 second episode, "Who Mourns for Adonais?". Actress Leslie Parrish, who portrayed the character said, "I especially

loved Bill Theiss for that crazy gown. What happened is he threw a bolt of cloth over me -- this beautiful cloth -- and just pinned it at my waist and said, 'There, that's your costume.' The weight of it held it over my shoulder."



Leslie Parrish wearing Bill Theiss designed Grecian gown as executed. Costume test.

Theiss' technique, however, was not without difficulty, as anything simply draped over an actor's body will have a tendency to fall off. But according to Dorothy Fontana, "Bill made sure the outfit never did fall ... well, sort of. The weight of



Design for Grecian gown worn by Lt. Carolyn Palamas in, "Who Mourns for Adonais?" by Bill Theiss.

the cape over her one shoulder kind of held the front of the dress up -- so that was okay if she was just moving easily -- but when she had to be throwing herself on the ground, rolling around, she had to be glued into that thing."

Costumer Andrea Weaver said, "It's true. Leslie Parrish's costume was glued on to her. Now we use a material which has two-sided Scotch tape; very strong Scotch tape, but then we didn't have that; all we had was glue. So the clothes that needed to be attached were glued on. And after three or four days that can get hard on the skin."

Parrish remembers, "There was one little section, yes, they had to glue it to me every day. And it was a different piece of skin every day -- and every day they'd rip it off and there went my skin and, finally, I didn't have much skin to glue it to. It was really painful."

One scene involved the use of a strong wind machines to produce a storm on set. "That was a really, really violent scene -- it was hard to do," according to Parrish. "I mean, I was taking a pounding. It was hard to stay together -- that gown just didn't want to stay on. At that point, it was too much to ask of a gown like that."

The content of television programs was heavily censored, and Dorothy Fontana added, "Jean Messerschmidt, who was our Broadcast Standards person, would usually nearly have a heart attack every time she'd see a Bill Theiss gown, or a costume that almost made it at covering the girl."



On-set photos during day 6 shooting of Star Trek episode, "Who Mourns for Adonais?"



Theiss' technique for this as well as other costumes was more like assembly than construction. In fact, Theiss once said, "I don't even know how to sew. I intentionally never learned." Weaver recalls actors being sewn into costumes. because the clothes would not hold together any other way, and also because often they were not really "costumes", but scraps, ribbons, wires, squares, scarves and remnants.



Lt. Palamas dress offered at [auction](#) in 2016 for US\$ 6000.

A staff members of the Smithsonian Institution remembers walking through the Paramount storeroom with Theiss in preparation for the 1992 Star Trek exhibit, scouring the hangers and boxes for "costumes." She was surprised to find mostly scraps of cloth, each group neatly hanging together on one hanger, but nothing that resembled a garment.

The gown Theiss designed for Leslie Parrish employs a unique design approach he used frequently, especially when creating costumes for women guest stars. He referred to it as the "Theiss Titilation Theory." And although he named it, it has its roots in earlier science fiction and related genres, where fantastic and exotic civilizations make it seem plausible that these outfits could be everyday wear..

First mentioned in Stephen Whitfield's 1968 reference book *The Making of Star Trek*, p. 360 – , it states that, "the degree to which a costume is considered sexy is directly dependent upon how accident-prone it appears to be."

According to the *Art of Star Trek*, Theiss designed costumes that only appeared to risk slipping or coming off. He also used the censorship rules at the time to his advantage. Certain body parts could not be shown (the navel being the most well-known restriction). Instead, he was able to get surprising amounts of appeal from the carefully-arranged display of skin not generally considered erogenous, and the use

of sheer or skin-tone fabric that was strategically placed.

Herb Solow and Robert Justman, in their book *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story* also relate that, although Theiss applied the theory that bore his name, it was Roddenberry who pushed Theiss to employ it rather more aggressively than he normally would have in order to increase viewership and media attention.

Roddenberry later observed that, "How much skin [we were] permitted to show used to be almost a matter of geometry and measurement. I remember doing shows that showed the inside of a woman's leg. Those shows were turned down because, for some reason, the inside of the leg was considered vulgar."

Another costume that is almost as well known as Leslie Parrish's Grecian costume is one designed for Sherry Jackson for the Season 1 seventh episode, "What are Little Girls Made Of?" Jackson portrayed an android named Andrea. She was created by a character who nurse Christine Chapel believes to be her long-lost fiancée, but is actually an android that houses what is left of his being. Andrea is very beautiful and nurse Chapel is jealous, even after she learns that Andrea is an android.

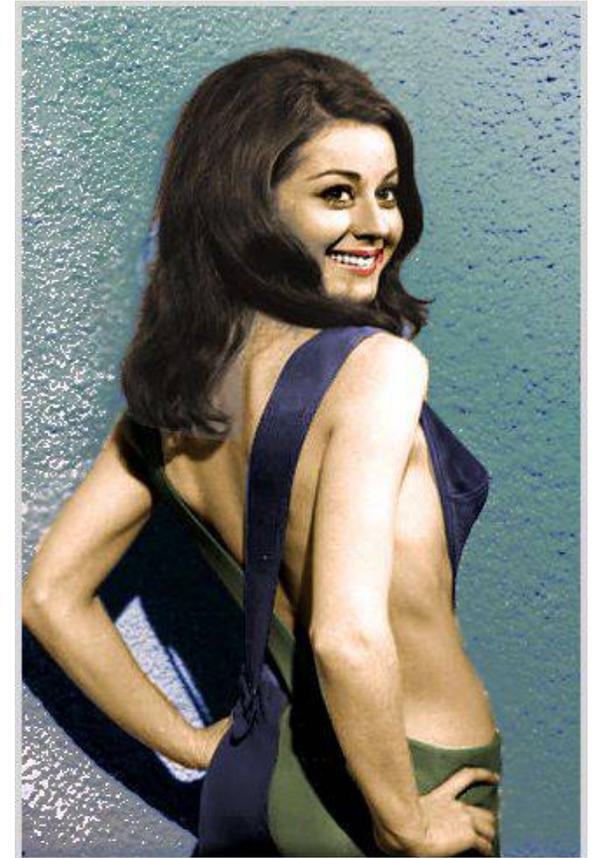
Sherry Jackson was a child star who appeared on a Danny Thomas sitcom as his older daughter in the mid-1950s, and successfully made the transition to an adult star. Her role as Andrea and her handling of the adult role contributed to her success.

Theiss took advantage of Jackson's young figure to create a provocative costume with hip-hugger pants, and a top that consisted of nothing more than cross-over straps that fastened to the pants in the front and back.

Once again, Theiss treated the actress as a collaborator, involving her in the design



Sherry Jackson as the android Andrea in "What are Little Girls Made Of." Design by Bill Theiss.



Publicity photo shows how straps buckle in back.

and giving her creative input. As a result, Jackson enthusiastically embraced what appeared to be a very dangerous looking design, which left little to the imagination and looked like it might slip at any time, while satisfying the censors as well.

According to Jackson, "Bill Theiss was just wonderful. Bill and Gene Roddenberry and myself... all three of us were designing that outfit. It was like some mechanical engineering job to make it work. I can tell you a couple of stories about the outfit."

The hip-hugging pants she wore were very form-fitting, and showed off Jackson's figure to good advantage. Jackson is very proud of her contribution to their design.

"I invented the slit up the front of the leg on it. I'm only 5-foot-4 [163cm] and I wanted to look taller. That made me look taller. The outfit just became magical. Also, hip-huggers weren't around at that time, but apparently after that episode, hip-huggers came into fashion. I'm sure it was because of Star Trek."

Jackson also remembers the dangerous-looking cross-over straps that were the only thing covering her top, and the problems with wearing them.

"Bill Theiss is a fantastic costumer. He came up with this concept of doing a criss-cross deal, which meant that I could not wear a bra because it would show in the back. At that time, you were allowed to have cleavage in the front but no cleavage on the side. We had a censorship person on the set every day to make sure there was no side cleavage. And they put toupee tape on the side of the costume, so nothing showed on the side. I knew that it was going to be a very sexy outfit."

Looking back on the role, Sherry is grateful to Star Trek for helping her make the transition from child to adult actor. She is also grateful to Theiss for designing the costume that enabled her to do that. "Me trying to make the transition from child to adult woman, I didn't mind the fact that they were showing me as a sexual, sensual



Andrea costume designed by Bill Theiss from "What Are Little Girls Made Of?" sold at auction in 2013.

woman. That, I felt was good for my career. The acting was the real issue: overcoming my costume was my real challenge."

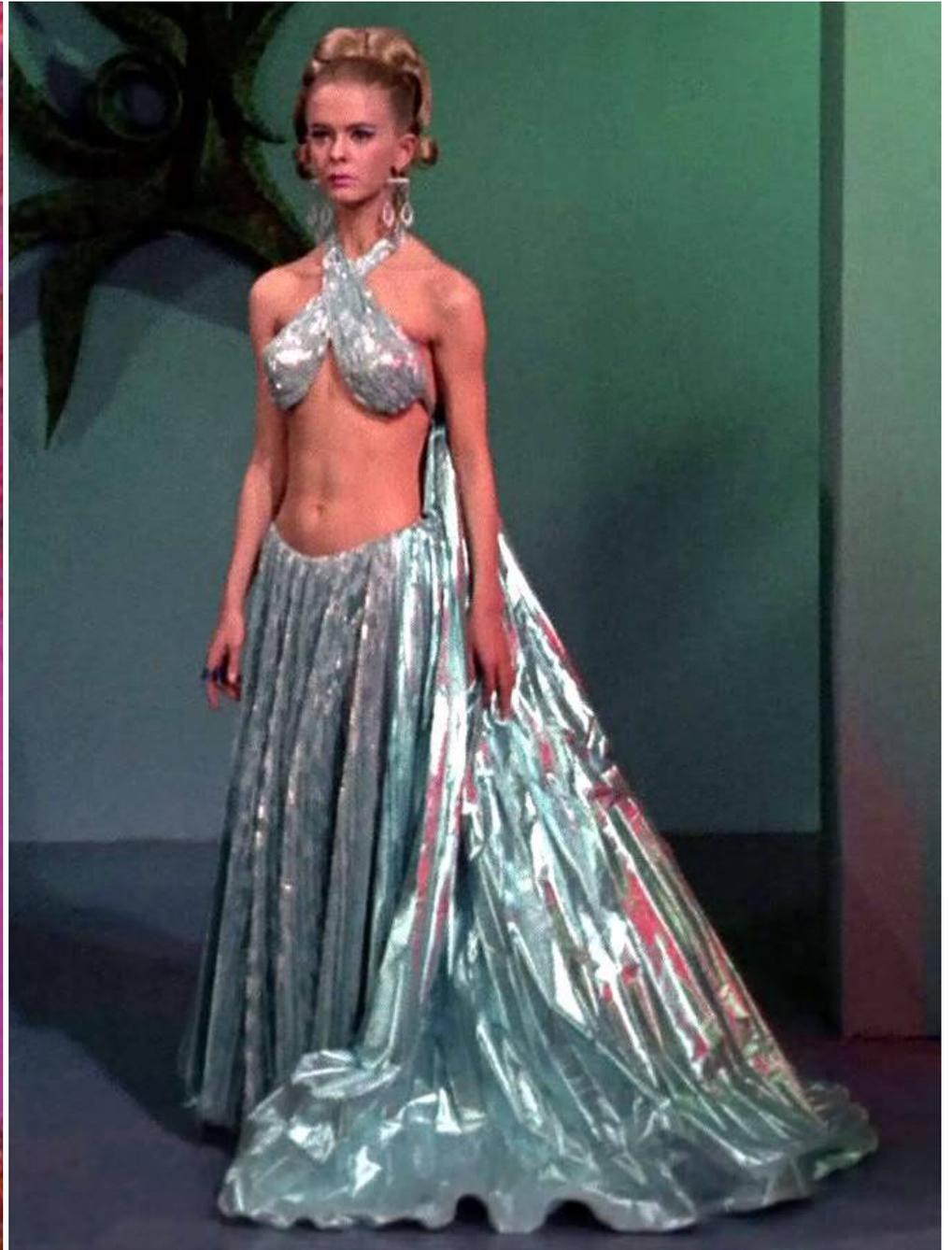
While many actresses were interested in working with Theiss, not all female guest stars fully appreciated Theiss's approach. He recalled one occasion: "When I first met Jill Ireland, she was a little uneasy about me, and I didn't find out until later it was because she had seen Sherry Jackson's costume, and she was afraid I was going to do [something] as revealing on her."

Several other Theiss designs are also worth exploring because they illustrate techniques for displaying parts of the body in a way that appears to be dangerous or revealing, while staying clear of censors.

A memorable costume in Season 3 is worn by Droxine, played by Dianna Ewing in episode 21, "The Cloud Minders." Theiss used a similar technique to that employed for Lt. Palamas' costume in "Who Mourns for Adonais?"

The dress has a long train that extends backward from the neck and helps secure a front that has very little other means of support. In the case of Droxine's dress, the pleated train attaches in the back to a pair of crossed strips of fabric that form the cups of the bra. There are thin straps that extend from the sides of the cups and fasten in the back behind the train.

A notable feature is that the actress' navel is exposed, something that was not previously permitted by the censors.



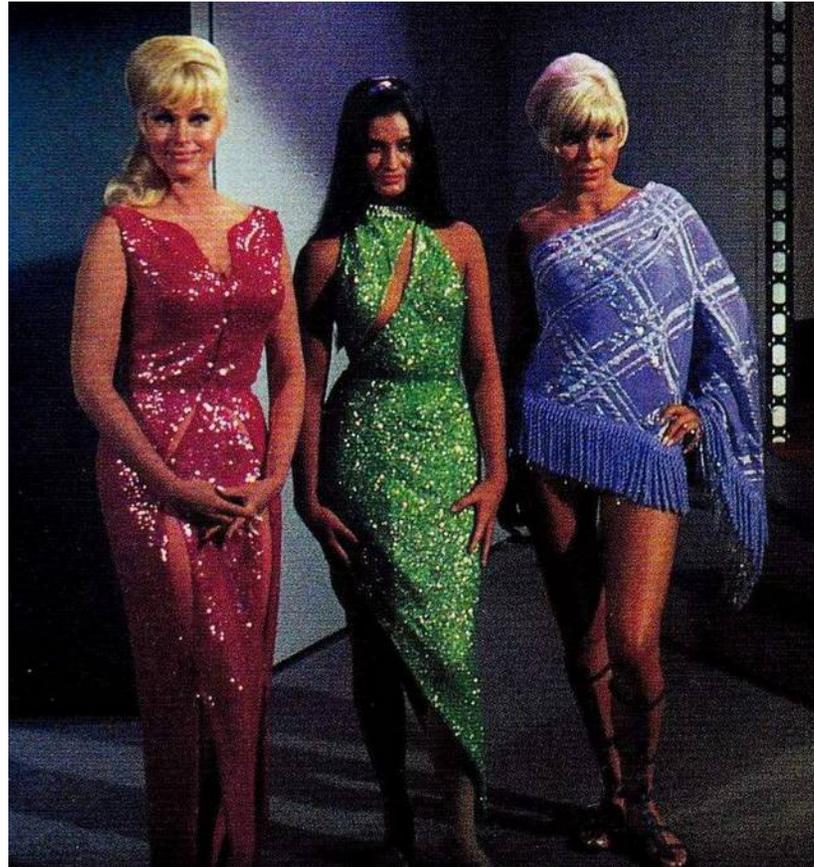
Costume for Droxine from "The Cloud Minders" uses the train attached to the two strips of fabric at the neck as a counter-weight to secure the bra.

These final costumes are for three women being transported by space pirate Harry Harcourt Mudd, in the Season 1 episode six, “Mudd’s Women.” These women are destined to marry men on remote colonies. When Mudd and his party are rescued by the Enterprise and come aboard, the women convey a dangerous sensuality that leaves men speechless. The cause is an illegal drug Mudd supplies that highly boosts their appeal. Without it they appear plain.

This time, Theiss used form-fitting costumes to accentuate their sensuality, and relied on the actresses’ acting skills and the reactions of the male crew to make it believable. Eve’s and Ruth’s floor-length dresses are of bright, sparkly fabric that clings, and have slashes and cutouts that reveal skin in unusual places. Magda’s short, fringed, one-shoulder wrap accents her long legs and the woven fabric conveys a sense of the primitive.

These are techniques that Theiss employs several other times, but this is the purest form and is the easiest to identify and study. For some reason, the costume sketches are marked “Space Hooker,” which is not really true to the narrative of the story. It is unclear why, but they are labeled in Theiss’ handwriting

After production of TOS closed at the end of the third season, Theiss



Mudd’s Women: Eve McHuran (Karen Steele), Ruith Bonaventure (Maggie Thrett), and Magda Kovacs (Susan Dernberg). Costumes use body shape, bare limbs and shoulders, cut-outs, textures to convey dangerous sensuality.



worked on movies and television shows. A decade later, Roddenberry asked Theiss to work on a new *Star Trek: Phase II* series, which never launched.

A decade after that, came *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) which had a very successful run. Theiss designed the costumes, including the iconic TNG uniforms, and a number of memorable women’s costumes based on his “Theiss Titilation Theory.”

Theiss continued for the first two seasons but became too ill to work and passed away on Dec. 15, 1992 at age 62, but not before receiving an Emmy in 1988 and a Emmy nomination in 1989 for costume design on TNG.

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.



Bill Theiss receives Emmy for his TNG work.