

# Feature



## An Edwardian Quick-Change *Sheryl Nance-Durst*

*A vintage cartoon inspired the author to create the costume for her her Best in Class Journeyman presentation for the Costume-Con 34 historical masquerade.*

In the variety music hall programs of the Edwardian era there was a demand for "lightning-change artists," men and women who stepped from one character into another in the twinkling of an eye, clothes and all. In our time these same types of actors are now appearing in "The 39 Steps" and other comedies with only 3 or 4 actors carrying all the parts in a show.

When I ran across a cartoon (far right) from a 1904 issue of *Punch Magazine* on Ebay one day, it sparked my creativity.



Film of quick-change artist Fatima Miris, on [YouTube](#).

Until that point, I hadn't realized that "quick-change" artists had such a long history. In fact, I found that 'practices such as ... quick-change made up part of an extensive performance culture emphasizing transformation, a culture that existed alongside the cinema into the second decade of the twentieth century.'

There were many well-known female quick-change artists during the Edwardian era in both the US and Europe, such as Miss Marion Munson, Miss Lucile Elmore and Mademoiselle Fregolia, who took her stage name from a famous male performer of the previous generation named Leopoldo Fregoli. He was able to change to any of up to 60 different characters in his repertoire during a three second dash offstage.

This type of act is usually performed under cover of an object: like standing in a hoop of fabric, passing behind an umbrella or a small screen, waving a large feather fan, or being covered by a waft of stage smoke or a heavy shower of glitter. I consulted resources for modern "how-to" information, and chose to use a screen since I didn't have any assistants to help with distraction or my actual transformation.

A period film of one of the best, quick-change artists Fatima Miris, doing a similar act behind a screen onstage. can be viewed on [YouTube](#). (left)

In my research I discovered that in the usual modern quick-change act, two articles of clothing are worn simultaneously, one on top of the other. The bodice of the first outfit is held together with snaps or Velcro at the shoulders and sides. The skirt of the second dress is folded around the torso and hidden inside the snapped bodice. When the bodice



Cartoon from 1904 issue of *Punch Magazine* was the inspiration for author's quick-change costume.

is unfastened, it folds down flat around the hips. The skirt of the second dress is then released, weights making the hem fall to floor quickly, covering the first dress. This is the process I decided to use since there would be only one change.

I chose to use Edwardian era fashion for the presentation and made up a story to go with the transformation.

My script calls for Mary Lewis, a young woman who has procrastinated changing for an evening event, being scolded for making the family late as she walks across the stage in her white afternoon dress. For five seconds Mary passes behind a screen and emerges out the far side wearing her emerald and black evening gown without seeming to pause in her walk, and while continually being scolded by her sister for being sooo slow to get ready for the event.

Later, while the judges deliberated, the contestants came back out on stage, two by two, for fan photos.



The author in her dress before and after transformation.  
Costume-Con 34 photos: Scott Johnson. [Realtime Portrait Studio](#).

This time I changed right in full view of the audience instead of behind the screen. I spent the next hour switching back and forth in various venues so that people could see how it was done!

I looked at this costume as if I were a lower-to-middle class stage performer of the period creating the costume for an act. Fine

hand sewing and detail work would not be necessary, as the costumes would not be seen up close. Stage performers would also put a premium on quick creation and the right general look, instead of fine finishing of internal seams that would not show. Were this costume to represent a "real" dress, I would have flat-lined the bodice area,

reinforced the seams with boning to prevent wrinkles and added horsehair to the hem to give it more flare, but these things would add extra layers to the torso that are not wanted with so many layers of fabric folded into that area already. As a stage costume, the audience was not close enough to see any resulting eccentricities.

My first dress was a variation of the "lingerie dress" of white cotton and lace. These dresses were extremely popular for summer wear. The outer lace layer of a

lingerie dress would have normally been hand-pieced together with strips of lace and fabric (a technique called insertion lace), but I was luckily able to find a lace fabric that mimicked the look of insertion lace without the need to make it from scratch.

I used Truly Victorian pattern TVE41: 1903 plain blousewaist as a starting pattern, though I had to make alterations for the quick change to work. I omitted the sleeves and went with a large, fluttery collar that would hang down my arms far enough to simulate elbow-length sleeves on stage so the bodice would appear similar to period lingerie dresses. The pattern's peplum was altered into a waistband with the characteristic "dip" in the front. The skirt was draped directly on my dress form without a pattern. The direction of the lace overlay was cut and seamed to match similar period dresses.



Finished first dress.



Extant period examples that served as inspiration for my first dress.

For the second dress, the one revealed in the quick-change act, I chose to create a gown with an empire waistline. By having the waistline higher than that of the first dress, it cut down on the bulk at the waist, making the styles appear more natural when worn on top of each other. The loose, skimming quality of the empire style makes it easier to hide the bulk of the first dress bodice, which is hanging below the emerald skirt after the switch has been made.

Empire styled gowns were very popular for Edwardian evening wear. They usually consisted of a princess-seamed inner gown with a looser sheer or lace overlay. Black lace/net over a colored underdress was a very popular combination. I found a particularly beautiful 1907 example in green with black net and sequins (also called spangles or paillettes) on [AntiqueDress.com](http://AntiqueDress.com) that inspired my color scheme.



Green Silk Satin and Black Beaded Net Evening Gown, c. 1907 McGrath, San Francisco. Source: [AntiqueDress.com](http://AntiqueDress.com) (presented for research/study).



De Gracieuse, 12/18/1908.



The Illustrated London News, 3/10/1906.

For this gown I began with BurdaStyle pattern 6777, which I chose for its multi-gore, princess line. It is a stitched-pleat pattern with an empire waist that I easily modified into the period design that I was copying. The pieces were modified based on a pattern diagram from The Edwardian Modiste.

I took some fullness out of the hem to match period examples, and combined the bodice and skirt pieces to form a princess dress without a seamed waistline. Dress weights were often inserted into dress hems during the Edwardian period, but I was especially liberal with the weights in this emerald gown to make the skirt fall quickly during the quick change effect. I avoided putting trains on either dress as it would have made the act more difficult.



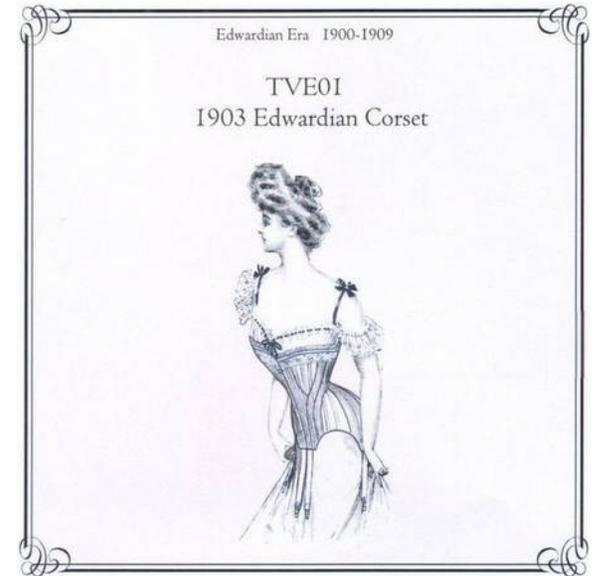
Second gown finished

I also wear a set of Edwardian underwear beneath the gowns. I made an Edwardian corset using Truly Victorian pattern TVE01. (right) The inner structural layer is made of white corset coutil with a tan, embroidered outer layer because I found many example of beige and tan corsets in the period. I chose to make the corset without garters as I did find numerous examples of corsets for sale without them.

The rest of the undergarments consist of a corset cover, used in this case as an under-the-corset chemise top, a petticoat and



Corset of the period from the Metropolitan Museum, exhibiting similar color to mine, with no garters.



Corset ad of period showing similar lace decoration style.as my corset.



My finished corset. I chose to make the corset without garters as I did find numerous examples of corsets for sale without them.

a set of split-crotch bloomers. The bloomers were made with Simplicity pattern 9769. (right) The chemise top and petticoat were made without a pattern.

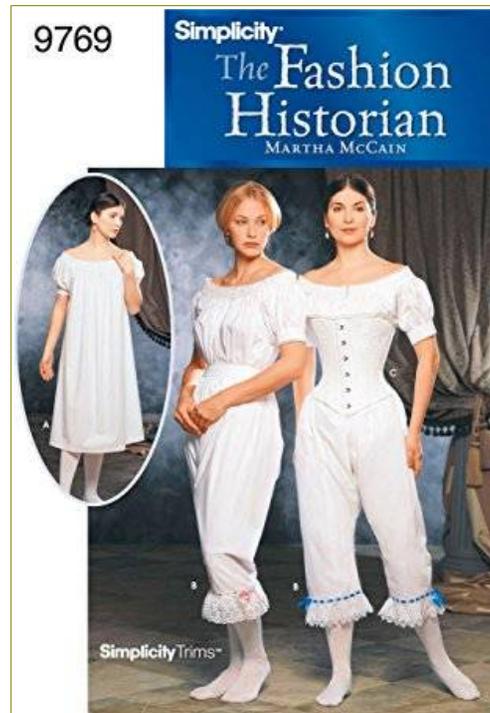
I made and carried a simple, draw-string bag made to match the costumes. The bag is reversible to match either outfit, and is the one item the audience can actually see me manipulating during the act as I turn it inside out to match the new gown color.

As for other items, I wore silk knitted stockings from American Duchess, and my shoes are ivory "Savoy" Edwardian reproductions, also from American Duchess.

## Books

*American Garment Cutter Introduction and Diagram Book*. New York: American Fashion Company, 1905. As reprinted in: Grimble, Frances. *The Edwardian Modiste : 85 Authentic Patterns with Instructions, Fashion Plates, and Period Sewing Techniques*. San Francisco: Lavolta, 1997. Print

Solomon, Matthew. "Twenty-five Heads under One Hat: Quick-change in the 1890s." *Meta-morphing : Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-change*. Ed. Vivian Carol Sobchack. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2000. 3-17. Print.



Arnold, Janet. *Patterns of Fashion 2: Englishwomen's Dresses and Their Construct, C.1860-1940*. Hollywood, CA: Quite Specific Media Group, 2000. Print.

## Videos

The Art of Costume Changing. Perf. Yasuda. Royal Magic, n.d. DVD. The Greater Magic Video Library Volume 59

*Instant Magic: Costume Changes*. Perf. Monica Monroe. Monica Monroe, n.d. DVD

## Websites

[Quick Change Artistry](#). N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

Films of Fregoli transforming into several characters on this [Italian website](#).

A film of one of the best, Fatima Miris, on [Vimeo](#).

*Sheryl Nance-Durst has always loved any kind of body adornment - costumes, jewelry, henna, face and body painting, etc. She's a librarian by day, a henna artist and face painter by night and a costumer always in her heart.*