

# Feature



## Costume Designer Shawna Trpcic *Kathe Gust\**

*One of the hottest costume designers in Hollywood, Shawna Trpcic spills the beans on what she does, how she does it, and why she'd rather buy than sew.*

Shawna Trpcic (pronounced *terp-sick* – it's a Croation name), got her start in the film industry in 1990, and went on to work as a wardrobe assistant on several films before becoming the main costume designer on Joss Whedon's shows, "Firefly", "Angel", "Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog", "Dollhouse" and the upcoming film, "The Cabin in the Woods".

Shawna was a recent Guest of Honor at SiliCon 2009.

Our local sci-fi convention was a different type of experience for her - very different in size from Comic-Con 2009, which she attended back in July. In the more intimate setting of SiliCon



*Photo by John O'Halloran*



it was possible for fans to talk one-on-one with Shawna. She not only allowed us to view the costume samples she brought, but let us hold and examine them as well.

For a gal who had originally planned to be an army mechanic, her output is nothing short of amazing. Among the several costumes she brought were: Illyria's bodysuit (Angel); two of Inara's dresses (Firefly), Capt. Hammer's T-shirt & Glove, A white stunt smock and Penny's blue print dress and sweater (Dr. Horrible...).

From the list of shows above, it is easy to see that she is well regarded by Joss Whedon, and is part of a team of recurring regulars who work on many of his projects. She seems to enjoy working

with him and the design creativity required for many of his shows is a challenge and a delight to her.

Her favorite jobs are those that exercise her ingenuity and she most enjoys opportunities to do an entire set of show designs herself from the beginning. She also does not restrict herself to using standard clothing fabrics and treatments for her designs.

We saw garments made of upholstery fabrics, vinyl, and real and pseudo leather. She hand paints garments to achieve the look she wants. Above is a section of Illyria's bodysuit, and below is a leg from the costume.



She also creates over the top trims by combining multiple other trims and also Here is one of Inara's trims.



Shawna told us that the stresses of working on a weekly television show require a very different response to costuming than that of designing a film. She needs to work at lightning speed and cannot actually make every single costume. She actually does more shopping than building for TV.

The three methods she uses most when working for television are:

- Stores, Vintage, and Thrift shops - buy clothing to alter or embellish. Capt. Hammer's shirt is just a regular T with an iron-on logo.



- Pull from existing wardrobe stock and combine, update or modify garments. A wedding gown she designed is hanging in stock at the wardrobe for others to use.
- Have her seamstress make costumes from her sketches - for particular costumes that MUST look exactly as designed such as the Illyria bodysuit.

As an example of how this works we can examine the current television show Dollhouse in an earlier season. The custom designed costumes for that season were: the fencing costumes, a few things for Dr. Saunders and Adelle, and one dress for Mellie.

Even doing those few required a lot of running around, since she needs to get approval of the drawing, the fabrics, or both prior to building the costume. Everything else was bought or pulled from stock.

The important factor is to have a sense of just who the character is. The clothing she chooses helps the actor create the character and displays their history and how they are changing over time. She does a lot of research before putting out her ideas and trying to sell her vision of the wardrobe to the director and sometimes the network too..

She says a designer needs to, “find the real balance between keeping things very real and recognizable” yet within a distinct style and the needed character arcs for the show.

A strong costuming sub-genre at this year's Silicon was Steampunk. In a prior interview and on her Twitter tweets Shawna has expressed her interest in this trend, and stated that it will probably show up as an influence in some upcoming designs.

We also got a chance to view and talk with her about her “demo reel”. This is a selection of costumes/scenes from many of the things she worked on. It gave us a chance to watch the sample items in motion and see first hand how lighting conditions can alter perceptions about colors and fabrics.

The demo reel further demonstrated the versatility of this designer, by showing everything from science fiction “costumes” to “regular” clothing.



For those who are not aware of it, many of the actual Firefly costumes from her private collection have been sold, including the one of the original browncoats,

Inara's ballgown from the episode Shindig, and several other Inara dresses.

That means some of the real costumes are out in the community and you might just run into one at a convention or other event.

## Q&A With Shawna Trpcic

Q: Where do you look for influences in your costuming design?

A: Aside from the obvious Civil War, Old West, and Asian influences Shawna likes tapping into cultures that are still "savage". She also uses the Fox research library to dig up old photos from around the world.



Another influence on "Firefly" is a designer from the 1960's named Thea Porter. You can see from photos of Porter's work, like the one at left, how similar the feeling of her exotic gowns is to some of the ones Inara wears.

Q: How is what you do different from fashion design?

A: Shawna said that she took fashion in school and worked for a fashion designer. She said that compared to what she does, fashion design is too steady and predictable, and that she doesn't think she'd have the

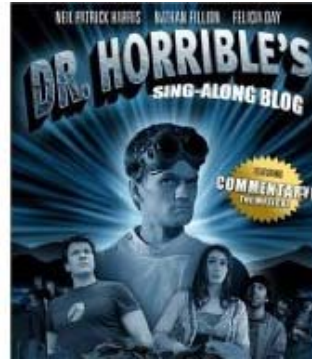
discipline to do it.

Q: Was Inara's ball dress in the Shinding episode really "upside down"?

A: Part of the bodice was. When it was converted to a corset style something went wrong. The actress was sewn into the corset top - turned upside down - on the set to make it fit. The neckline became the new waist.

Q: Dr. Horrible's lab coat looks familiar. Have we seen something like it before?

A: Firefly episode 10: Ariel. It also appeared in one of the Aliens movies. Those versions are practically identical to Dr. Horrible's white smock except for the pocket logos.



Q: How much different is what appears on screen compared to the original designs?

A: Shawna said that the designs do undergo changes, but that it's a collaborative effort during the production process. On "Firefly", she started by showing different ideas to Joss Whedon, and he would choose his favorites

Q: What happened to early wardrobe designs for the characters that didn't end up on screen?

A: Shawna has all the sketches and original photos from the fittings. The ones appearing on screen were those approved by Joss Whedon. We got a look at a few of her sketch designs, and you can see some of them on her web site.

Q: What is your reaction to fan costumers who copy your creations?

A: Shawna thinks fan costume recreations are "the coolest thing ever". It makes her feel "like a rock star" to see fans taking that much trouble to copy her designs.

She also loves the how to find it sites fans put up for props and accessories, so if she ever needs to locate those things again, she will be able to find them more easily. The originals were often dug out of assorted rental houses, and she can't always remember where she got them.

See more of Shawna Trpcic's designs on her official web site <http://ishawna.com/>. For those who use Twitter, Shawna Trpcic is tweeting @trpcic

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her web site: <http://celefinniel.webhop.net/>.