Case Study: Costume Designer - Sean

What do you do?
I am a production designer, which means I design sets as well as costumes. I am in charge of creating the overall look for each set I work on. The areas I am involved in include stage, film and television.

What is your background?
I did an art foundation course, and then studied for a degree in theatre design. I have always been interested in theatre and I was involved in some amateur and professional productions while I was still at school.

Working as a costume designer has allowed me to combine my interest in drawing and design with my love of the theatre. Once I earned a good reputation in theatre, I was able to move into television and film. While my true passion is the stage, working in these other areas allows me to work with bigger production budgets, which can be very rewarding. I've been in costume design for 10 years.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?
Costume designers must be thorough, especially when it comes to research. The historical accuracy of costumes is often crucial to a production, and it is up to the designers to address this aspect.

They must also have a 'vision' for the final product, because this is what creates the success of the costume or set design.

Costume designers must be able to work well in a team - to go from their ideas to the final production, they need the support of the director, other designers and actors (among others).

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?
Costume designers can go into fashion management and production. They may also become involved as museum conservators due to their knowledge of historical clothing.

What changes will there be in the future?
Research will be quicker and more thorough thanks to resources such as the internet. This means that there will be an increased need for costume designers and other people in TV and film to be computer literate.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?
Just surviving as a theatre costume designer can be challenging, because the pay is fairly low and the work is demanding.

In television and film, while the pay is better, it can be difficult to maintain your artistic sense. Show business can be very overwhelming.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?
I don't think there are that many opportunities in costume design at the moment. You can get your foot in the door if you work hard and want it badly enough, but you'll definitely have to start off in an assistant position. Also, remember that making connections is essential in this business.

What do you like about your job?
The most wonderful thing about designing costumes is you get to work with a great variety of craftspeople and
artists. Also, you have really wonderful moments that happen when you fit an actor with their wig or their costume, and they just completely transform. Watching that transformation is something that's really very special.

What do you dislike about your job?

The negative aspects are really to do with practical concerns. You work all the time on your projects because you love them so much. But, at the same time, you find that the hours just go by and the days go by, and you just haven't had time to do anything else except think about work.

When you're not thinking about a particular project or a set of costume designs, you're thinking about finding a job. This takes up a lot of energy and creates a lot of anxiety about whether or not you'll actually be able to meet your expenses, and survive as a freelancer and an artist.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

The best thing you can do if you want to become a costume designer is to do some work related to the costume field and see if you like it. You could try sewing, costume painting, buying bits and pieces or working with a designer of some sort. You really just need to get 'in the thick of it' and see if that's what you like.

A day in the life

8:00 am - 9:00 am
Researching historical clothing for a play I am involved with. Looking at books and the internet for details on fabric, design, etc.

9:00 am - 9:30 am
Meeting with the director before rehearsal to discuss the costumes.

9:30 am - 11:00 am
Meeting with each actor. Fitting them with their costumes and marking where adjustments have to be made.

11:00 am - 12:00 pm
Meeting with the fabric cutters to discuss alterations and changes to costumes that have not yet been completed.

12:00 pm - 1:00 pm
Eating lunch.

1:00 pm - 4:00 pm
Shopping for fabric. Consulting my sketches and notes made during my meeting with the director.

4:00 pm - 5:30 pm
Watching the last bit of rehearsal and meeting with the director again for a follow-up discussion.