



5 QUESTIONS WITH.. WENDI R. ZEA



Wendi is Associate Professor and Resident Costume Designer at Southern Illinois University, where recent designs include *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and her 4th production of *The Jungle Book*. In 2018 she designed costumes for the national tour of a new holiday musical, *Noël*. She has designed for a number of theaters, but CRT remains her longest association, going back to 2001. Favorites are too numerous to mention but include *1776* and *several Agatha Christie mysteries*. Many thanks to Kerby and all the others over the years who have made creating theater at CRT a delight.

1. What first led you to pursue a career in costume design?

I always had an interest in costumes. I remember as a kid going to the library and looking at pictures in the encyclopedia of folk costumes from around the world and being absolutely fascinated. But I didn't know that costume design could be a career until I went to college and took my first costume design class. Suddenly everything I had long been interested in made sense, and from that point, there was no turning back.

2. Tell us about your schooling. In your opinion, how important is schooling to having a successful career in Costume Design? Also, now that you are a teacher, what is it like to teach in that same field?

I went to University of California, Davis, for my BA in Theater, and then worked professionally as a costume designer for several years before earning my graduate degree (MFA) at Kent State University.

For me, school offered opportunities to both refine existing skills and learn new techniques on everything from drawing renderings to costume construction and craft work and so much more. It was a time when I could just immerse myself in learning everything I could. But every young designer is different. While school is key for many, there are those who can find other ways to learn, such as internships. The real answer is to find a way to *learn*; costume design requires a wide variety of skills that can be hard to master without a mentor of some sort. And the best designers are those who continue to learn throughout their careers.

Teaching now is wonderful. I may be working with a student to help them understand a new idea or technique, and they will be struggling for a while. I'll try different ways of explaining until they get it, and that "lightbulb moment" is very satisfying.



The Unexpected Guest, 2013

3. What is your process when you are first hired to design a show?

I start by just reading the script and enjoying it as an audience might, to see what images pop in my head. I am a huge fan of Agatha Christie, and when first reading one of the Christie mysteries I designed at CRT (*The Unexpected Guest*) I was delightfully surprised at the ending. I hoped that we could help the audience feel that as well.

Then I read it a couple more times, making charts of the characters, what they might be wearing, when they change clothes, and other details such as the season, the time of day, and relationships between characters. Then, research: the clothing of the year and place the play is set, and aspects of the daily life of the people in the play. **What we choose to wear is a product of the lives we lead**, and the costume designer must learn all s/he can about that time. Another Christie mystery (*Appointment with Death*) led me to a vintage National Geographic magazine with an article about people travelling to Petra in the 1930s, just like the characters in the play. It was a wonderful tool to understand the characters, and the photographs influenced the costumes I designed.

While researching the show, I will talk with the director and discuss the vision for the show, the characters, and possible costume ideas. From



Appointment with Death, 2017

that point, there will be communication back and forth as I share research images, sketches, fabric swatches and renderings for feedback and possible changes. Always throughout this process I keep thinking back to the script, and the story being told. Do the choices I make with the costumes help support the story? That must be the highest priority.

4. In your first few seasons at CRT, you designed the entire season of 6 mainstage shows and one children's show. What memories do you have of that experience... good and bad?

Working on one show, I was having a fitting with an actor just before dress rehearsal. Admittedly, the dress was far from done, and the actor was very concerned about how it would look. Kerby gently but firmly told her that she could trust me, that when it was done it would look good. That show of confidence gave me the extra morale boost to push through the remaining work, and get the show done well.

That is just one moment of many that sticks with me, but really, my memories of those summers (all those years ago!) are a blur of creative, invigorating work, with people working together to make good theater. We felt like a family, and that is what has kept me coming back to CRT over and over again.

And while the bad did happen, it usually led to interesting solutions. When designing *The King and I* my first summer (at that point probably the largest show I had done) I had chosen a fabric a bit too heavy for Anna's first dress. At first dress rehearsal, I put that beautiful dress on her over the hoop skirt, and the weight collapsed the hoop structure! The solution ended up being a hula hoop – I sewed that inside the hoopskirt, and it had the strength needed to hold out the skirt. It was definitely a case of a very ordinary item helping to create a magical moment!



The King and I, 2001



1776, in 2015

5. Do you have a favorite design/show you have done? What makes it a favorite?

That's such a hard choice but if I have to choose, *1776* would be at the top of the list. It has long been a favorite musical of mine, and to finally be able to dive into the design of that was a thrill. With all but two of the characters being men, you are dealing with a time period with few major differences in the silhouette (shapes) of what they wear. All the distinctions for the characters have to come through color and texture in the choices of fabric – and those are my favorite things to explore. It was a delight to put my own spin on it.

Bonus Question! What advice would you give to someone interested in pursuing a career in Costume Design?

First, be a good observer. Look at things around you: the beauty of a sunset, the color of the fall leaves, the sunlight and shadows on the snow. Be aware of colors and textures you see; inspiration can come from unlikely places (I once based the colors of costumes on the fall leaves I saw while driving to visit family).

Second, read books. It doesn't matter what kind of stories you read – just read what you like and pay attention to the images that form in your mind's eye as you read. That will help you develop your imagination.

Third, try things. Learn new skills. A costume designer must be able to draw, paint, sew, pattern draft, dye, style hair, apply makeup, make jewelry, work with strange materials like foam and Wonderflex, and so much more. Find someone who can teach you. In this time of social distancing, that may mean relying on YouTube videos, until you can move into other learning opportunities. But try things, get your hands dirty, and don't be afraid to make mistakes. If something doesn't come out perfectly the first time, that's okay; anything worthwhile requires practice. And when the theaters open up again – and I know they will – then do what you can to get involved. Experience is the best teacher.

Thanks for your time and talents, Wendi!