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Honors Capstone

April 3, 2012

Interview with Debra Sivigny

On March 22nd, 2012, I conducted an interview with professional costume designer Debra "Deb" Sivigny. A DC-based designer, Deb and I talked about her career. She initially didn't want to be a costume designer during her undergraduate career at Middlebury College. During her first two years in college, she was a Classics major. Then during her sophomore year she had a work study job at the school costume shop. She got the job because she's been sewing since she was eleven years old. After working at the costume shop, she fell into costume design. She worked on the mainstage productions by constructing clothes for period pieces. By her senior year she switched her major into Theatre Design. She got her costume design MFA from the University of Maryland. After completing her masters, she began to work in the DC theatre community. Her clients have included the Rorschach Theatre Company, Studio Theatre and the Colorado Shakespare Festival. She now teaches costume design as Georgetown University.

I asked Deb what her masters program was like, if it focused more on networking in the DC area. Deb explained that her MFA was a mixture of networking as well as synthesizing aesthetic ideas in a design. Each master student had to costume design one of the University of Maryland main stage productions. Deb said she learned a lot about timing, organization and technique from Helen Huang, her mentor there. Once she graduated, she sent

her portfolio to theatres all over the country. When she graduated from her masters, putting a costume design portfolio on the internet wasn't common. She laments the days of having to carry around a bulky portfolio to different clients to show her work to them. She says all clients want to see nowadays is an online portfolio. She noted how pictures of the actual production—with set, lighting, the actors—are very useful to show the eventual look of the show.

Next, I asked her what the design process is like, from the very beginning. Once she knows what play she's working on, she then reads it and learns about the time period. She will research anything and everything—the internet, books, museums. She says she typically is dogmatic in her research, but sometimes inspiration will strike her walking down the street or talking to someone. Next, before making final designs, she goes through a “thumbnail” process. This thumbnail process is when she makes small, rough pictures of initial costume ideas. Many characters will fit on one page. She'll put similar groups, such as Nuns or soldiers, all on one page to see if the costumes are harmonious in style or color palette. She said this step is vital because it's more frustrating to recreate the final designs. After this is done, she quickly works on her costume designs—typically her materials are watercolor and watercolor paper. Sometimes she doesn't even do costume designs at all. I asked her what circumstances led to going straight into dressing the actors. She explained that sometimes if she knows the director well enough, having worked with them several times, they can simply discuss concepts and Deb can bring in clothes. However, if Deb doesn't know the director that well, she will bring in designs to show them her own ideas.

I asked if a director had ever completely dismissed all of her final watercolor drawings. She said it had happened before, but it was all a part of the business. It is very time consuming and frustrating to go back to square one and redraw several costumes, but she said sometimes that happens. A lot of times, Deb noted, directors think they know what they want—but when shown “what they want” in tangible designs, they suddenly don’t want it anymore. She likes best the directors that are very specific and communicative towards the play’s vision.

Deb began to laugh as she told me her experiences with dressing actors. She said that while she primarily designs, she still has a hand in most construction and fittings. She said costume fittings open the door to learning about every actor’s insecurities. While an outfit may look fine, she noted, the actor may suddenly tell her that they can’t wear high collars because they have a huge neck or will feel suffocated. She tries to lend an open ear, but knows that the director will have the final say. Also, many things can interfere with how the costume fits. For example, actors can gain or lose weight. In one version of *Macbeth* she designed (at this point, Deb started showing me pictures off of her laptop), every character had to wear a white muslin, military-styled tunic. One actor, a large man, gained a substantial amount of weight so that his tunic no longer fit him. He denied that he was gaining weight, until the tunic began to rip during one of the dress rehearsals. At this point Deb had to open up the seams of this tunic and add more fabric for the embarrassed actor. Deb says costume fittings aren’t the worst part of her job; they just gives a lot of insight into how to deal with all different types of people.

I asked Deb how she solved practical problems, transition from her initial designs into tangible costumes. She told me one story of *The Winter's Tale* production she designed at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. She noted how one can meet different people with different skills anywhere. She wanted Hermione, once a statue, to wear a large crown of metal tree branches and thorns. Although Deb is an accomplished seamstress, she isn't skilled at metalworking and didn't know how to achieve this. However, working in the props department were several skilled blacksmiths and metalworkers. She explained to them what she wanted and they successfully made beautiful metal crowns. Deb couldn't believe her luck! She explained they problem-solving is a big part of the costume designer job, and it's important to always ask around for help. As demonstrated in this anecdote, people come from various backstories with various skill sets.

Looking through Deb's portfolio, several questions came to my mind. I asked what she thought her aesthetic was, if she had one. She said she could describe herself as having skills in fantastical, surreal costumes and animal costumes. I saw her costume designs for Imagination Stage's *Lyle the Crocodile* and asked her design concepts. She brought up how if there was one costume choice she detested, it was when designers dress human actors in mascot-style animal costumes. In *Lyle*, for example, she wanted the actor to still bear a resemblance to a human but with alligator elements. Therefore, he walked upright. Also, his outfit was a combination of a green bodysuit with an alligator with a baseball cap tailored to look like a crocodile head. The bodysuit was also tailored to look like a funky, patterned men's suit. She said this mix of humanlike and animalistic elements in *Lyle's* design was more appealing to her. Since *Lyle* is a children's show, she explained, children instantly

humanize the animals they see and love. Therefore, turning Lyle into a cartoony mascot would distance him from the heartwarming message of the show. She wanted Lyle to be a closer representation of how children see animals. She says she's known in this community of humanizing fantastical shows through her costumes—such as the *Lyle* example.

I finally asked Deb what her career goals are, and if she had any advice. She said she was starting to grow a bit bored and restless with costume design. She wants to take more art classes and perhaps branch out into fashion design. Her advice was, of course, to gain knowledge in clothes construction. She said that most costume designers she knows are excellent seamstresses and drapers. However, many costume design schools only teach from a conceptual point-of-view, not in actual clothes construction. She said, then, that many post-grad costume designers know little about actually making clothes. She noted that it was a detriment to those starting out in the field. She reasoned any starting position in theatre costumes will be doing the grunt work, which is stitching. She also said networking is important, because while working on one job one must be focused in securing the next one. I told her I still wasn't sure if I was truly passionate about design, and she said not to worry. She said that getting a few costume gigs after college would help me see if this is a viable career choice.