

# Teacher Guide: Cut- Stage Vs Screen



What are the similarities/differences in costume design for stage vs screen?

As a media educator I know that costumes created for the stage are meant to be **seen by an audience** sitting in the theatre, whereas costumes made for motion pictures are **made primarily for the camera**. That's a huge difference. The motion picture camera is what captures the action; that action will eventually be edited into the final movie that we see on the big screen (in a movie theatre) or a smaller screen (such as an iPad.) A film director can call for a cinematographer to zoom in (for a close-up) to a particular part of a costume to reveal something he wants the audience to see; the same cannot be said of the costume on the stage. You see only what you can— seated from your vantage point.

I asked a number of experts (online) about the differences and here is what they said:

“People ask: what's the difference is designing for theatre and designing for film and television.

Well, the difference is that in theatre, no one controls where you're looking, where the audience is looking. So the audience gets to look at the whole frame the whole time. The second thing is you're looking at these actors, you're looking at these characters, looking at those people, from the bottom of their feet to the top of their head—the entire scene. And in

film and television, it's the director who is choosing what's important for you to see: what's important for you to look at." Deborah Nadoolman Landis, UCLA (from SKYPE session with Richland One educators August 11, 2016)

Stage costumes are meant to be viewed from afar, while film costumes may have to stand up to a close-up view. Minute details would matter more for film. In stage, you don't worry about flaws that can't be detected from the second row. Film costumes generally are used for a day or two, however long it takes to get a good "take", while stage costumes may have to stand up to months or years of use. Both have to support the story line, the themes, the setting and era, the plots and the characters. Both can have appearance manipulated by lighting and movement. Film costumes, like film acting, can be enhanced in editing with digital enhancements. With stage costumes, what you see is what you get. A costume reveal on stage, such as a transformation (the witch in "Into The Woods") becomes beautiful; the beast (in "Beauty and the Beast") turns back into a prince, must happen in real time with audience watching. With film, the director and editors can do multiple takes and editing techniques (can be employed) to make the "magic" happen. Source: Harry CS Wingfield, MFA, former assistance professor of Theatre at UAB

Rob Barltett wrote: Screen costumes might have close-ups, so detail is extra important – possibly even the stitching. Theatre is usually not so close-up, so costume elements are often stylized or exaggerated so those at the back can get the idea – bigger skirts, puffier sleeves, bigger pattern, higher contrast, etc. Theatre lighting amplifies certain things like slight variations in color – like a blue-black suit jacket with green-black slacks. Up-close you may not notice the difference, but under certain lights you see it clearly.

[Débora Araújo](#) wrote: Mostly, the biggest difference is in the

number of people. Movies usually require many extras and, as much as you want to get people from the street and you can request extras to come dressed in a specific way, if you're filming anything that is not the exact year you are in, you will most likely have to provide all those people with costumes for the day.

With theater the process of building and buying costumes is also much more intimate as the designer needs to be in contact with the actors throughout the time of production of the play, and then gone (only called for intense performance issues).

The other main difference is budget, usually movies (at least decent ones) have much bigger budgets as theaters don't. Although, the salary is around the same, based off of the "celebrity" status of the designer.

The differences are not as big as you'd think, but they do make a difference on how designers face the job.

Other information found online:

"Movies tell a story using [cinematic language](#). This language includes camera angle, camera motion, framing of shots, editing, music, and special effects. Instead of seeing each actor from head to toe, the audience sees only what the director wants them to see and what the camera allows. After filming is finished, the director will make further artistic decisions in the editing room about which scenes to keep and which scenes to cut.

On a stage, the audience sees actors from the top of their head to the bottom of their feet. Theatrical costumes and makeup use bold colors and large design elements so they can be recognized from the last row of the balcony. Costume designers and makeup artists in the theatre work closely with their directors, set designers and lighting designers to formulate a consistent look for every play, ballet, or opera." ([Source](#))

What follows are excerpts from sources that describe the similarities and differences between costuming for the stage vs the screen.

(Julie) Weiss (costume designer for *American Beauty*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Hitchcock*, *Blades of Glory*, *Frida*, *Twelve Monkeys*) answered eager students' questions about how creating costumes for a stage performance is different than designing for the screen. The most significant challenge, she said, stems from the fact that movies are shot out of sequence. When an actor is available to film, his costumes must be ready, regardless of whether his character appears in the first scene or the last. This makes it difficult to "design between the words," as Ms. Weiss likes to do.

Stage productions, on the other hand, progress in a more orderly fashion, with a set schedule for dress rehearsals for the entire cast. And yes, costumes for the stage are somewhat "bigger" than those for film as they are designed with audience members in the balcony in mind. [Source](#)

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Unlike designing costumes for film—in which the cast may wear pieces for only one day or a week of shooting—stage actors rely on their costumes for eight shows per week for several months. This presents a particularly difficult challenge for the costume designer. Garments are constructed in several layers with thick lining to prevent damage from sweat or tearing during a quick change. Consideration much be given to not only the aesthetic quality, but also the sturdiness of the design. ([Source](#))

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#### Defining Character & The Process

"I try to come to the first meeting knowing just the written word," William Ivey Long said. "Hopefully there's not a previous production or a movie, a previously owned vehicle, as I say, because I don't need to know that someone was wearing the red dress. Until the director shows me what way we're going, I don't need to start thinking, which is one of the hardest things, because how can you not start seeing the

production as you're reading it? At the second meeting I can bring ideas, start my thumbnails and collages. By the third meeting the designs are almost ready, and I have a give-and-take with the actors." ([Source](#))

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Costume designer William Ivey Long (for the Broadway musical "Bullets Over Broadway") describes his costume design process:

**1. Get a copy of the script**

**2. Meet with the director and ask lots of questions:**

-What is the approach? What is the concept?

-Who are these people?

-What time of day is it? What is the season?

-What's the arc of their character development?

**3. Gather potential images of the characters via historical research** (online, books, photographs, magazines)

**4. The director indicates which images he/she likes better than others and those images which identify specific characters**

**5. Those images then become the designer's sketches.** The designer adds the color palette then works with the tailors who make the suits, the dressmakers that make the dresses, the milliners who make the hats, and the wigmakers and shoemakers.

**6. A very important role of the costume designer: TO MAKE A LIST OF OBSTACLES.**

-How many seconds do I have for this change? Quick change=under a minute. A REALLY quick change= 4 seconds.

Costumes are designed based on the costume change time—what can be over-dressed (worn over a costume) or under-dressed (worn under a costume), or placed on the back of a piece of scenery to be put on as the actor is moving, such as a hat or coat, to be a different costume.

He states, "Everything's challenging because you know, nothing works until it...WORKS."

Ain't that the truth! Stressful tech week and dress rehearsals sound familiar to anyone? Surely I am not the only one who has seen a costume redesigned in the days leading up to opening night, simply because it didn't work once the costume or accessory was on the actor, on the stage.

"It's still very low-tech, what we do. I make clothes. For people. Who wear them. 8 shows a week." ([Source](#))

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The design process is also described in the book ["The Costume Designer's Handbook"](#):

The costume design process involves many steps and though they differ from genre to genre a basic method is commonly used.

1.) **Analysis**: The first step is an analysis of the script, musical composition, choreography, etc. Parameters must be established

2.) **Design Collaboration**: An important phase in the process is meeting with the director and fellow designers. There must be a clear understanding

3.) **Costume Research**: Once guidelines are established, the next step is to gather research.

4.) **Preliminary Sketching and Color Layout**: Once enough information is obtained to begin drawing, a preliminary sketch must be performed. Successful preliminary sketching conveys an accurate depiction

5.) **Final Sketches**: The final costume sketch can be completed in any medium

([Source](#))