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Costuming The Three Sisters, one stitch at a time

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Costuming *The Three Sisters*, one stitch at a time

Student designers create clothing to fit some of modern theatre's most timeless characters.

With students building the set and actors rehearsing upstairs, theatre arts majors and minors met in the basement of McPherson Theatre to spend their time working towards one goal.

Just four weeks away, a production of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* would open on Nov. 16 and the task at hand was to make original costumes for the double-cast play.

The beat of the 1997 hit "Barbie Girl," which blasted over the low hum of sewing machines and lively chatter, set a rhythm to the group's cutting, sewing, and piecing together of garments created by head costume designer Jen Houghton. The previous year, Houghton, a senior theatre arts major from Ingleside, Ill., won first place in a national costume design competition for Illinois Wesleyan's production of *Our Country's Good*. This year, she was invited by the School of Theatre Arts to design the costumes for this production.



The final design rendering (shown at left) is transformed into Natasha's gown, worn by actress Brianna North '06, right. (Photos by Marc Featherly)



Jen Houghton '05 (above) displays materials used in the show before they are measured and cut. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Hunched over the "bible," theatre lingo for a binder containing all the show's design information, Houghton concentrated on how to add subtle contemporary touches to the costumes, for each had to be carefully crafted to project a continuity of time. Written in 1901, many critics consider *The Three Sisters* to be the best drama of the 20th century. "The play," said Houghton, "will be relevant to life a hundred years from now, just as it was a century ago. This timelessness gives me the creative license to do what I want with the designs."

Months before the show was cast, Houghton began the design process. Focusing on the "aura" of the character rather than on a specific historical style, she spent hours leafing through research books, magazines and Web site printouts in search of images that suggested the essence and silhouette of each character. She focused on the four lead roles, Irina, Masha, and Olga, three sisters from turn-of-the-century Russia trapped in a dream of a better life in Moscow, and Natasha, the scheming woman who marries into their family.

Before Houghton could formally present her ideas to the director, cast, and design team, she created a rendering featuring a color drawing of the costumed character. Mounted on a piece of foam core, this board presented the color and structure of the costume as well as her thoughts

behind each piece.

After becoming familiar with the character's silhouette, each student who worked with Houghton used a life-sized dress form on which to measure, pattern, and sew a dress out of fabric similar to what Houghton would

use for the final product. This prototype was fitted to each actress to decide changes during what is called a “muslin fitting.”

Stitch by stitch each dress quickly came together. After hours of teamwork between Houghton and the students, the actresses were finally ready to make their first appearance on stage in their custom-created outfits.

“No matter what,” said Houghton, “everything always comes together in the end.” — *Taylor Kuzniar '07*



Above, Megan Keach '05 works on the costume for Irina, the youngest of the three sisters in Chekhov's classic play. (Photo by Marc Featherly)