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A Deeper Look Into the World of Costuming

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By Laura Mae Franzini
Honors Thesis
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By

Laura Mae Franzini

Honors Thesis

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A Deeper Look Into Costuming

Table of Contents

INTRO

"Here is one of the few effective keys to the design problem – the ability of the designer to recognize as many of the constraints as possible – his willingness and enthusiasm for working within these constraints. Constraints of price, of size, of strength, of balance, of surface, of time and so forth."[i]

> *Charles Eames*
> Designer, Architect, Filmmaker

Every theatre production presents a set of constraints for the costume designer. These parameters help to guide the design process. The parameters are different for every show, and that is where the excitement of design lies. Some scripts call for a certain historical time period and this directly affects the design. If there has to be a change on stage, or a costume has to be able to morph in front of the audience, how does one go about doing that? There are many aspects to design that the average audience member doesn't think about, and if these aspects are not obvious to the audience, then the designer has been successful. The intent of the designer is not to have the audience come to a show and wonder how all of the technical elements occurred, but to make everything seem natural, as if it was happening without any effort.

"Each element has its own peculiar relation to the drama and plays its own part in the drama. And each element—the word, the actor, the costume—has the exact significance of a note in a symphony. Each separate costume we create for a play must be exactly suited both to the character it helps to express and to the occasion it graces."[ii]

> *Robert Edmond Jones*
> The Dramatic Imagination[iii]

Theatre design involves creating the various elements of the world in which the actors exist. The elements are arranged in such a way as to function in accordance with the script. Everyone approaches design differently, and each show requires a different type of attention. In some productions the director knows exactly what they want and it is the responsibility of the designer to work within those constraints and create a marriage of both designer and director ideas. In other instances, the designer has free reign and is able to exercise his/her creativity. For example, with some dance pieces the choreographer just wants a costume that will flow well, then the costume designer is able to stretch his/her creativity, there are no constraints.

AN OVERVIEW

There is a fairly standard design process for every show. However not all steps are necessary for each show. When a designer is given a script he/she reads it several times, gathering all of the information they can from the script, determining the who, what, where, when, and why for the show. Next the designer usually does a scene breakdown of the show. This helps determine the number of changes necessary for each character and how much time elapses over the course of the show. Then, the designer meets with the director to discuss his/her thoughts on the play. This enables the designer

to begin the research portion of the process, gathering all of the information that he/she can. Next he/she begins creating rough sketches for the characters. The designer presents these to the director and receives feedback. Finally, he/she takes the suggestions and reworks his/her roughs into final sketches. Once the final sketches have been approved, the build process can begin.

The designer's role during the build process is to select fabrics, trim, and buttons. The designer must first approve anything that goes onto a costume. He/she attends fittings to make sure that the garment is working with the look of the show. The designer makes sure that every costume works together to create the world of the show. As Shura Pollatsek says, "The design process does not end at the finished sketch."

As designer for *The Enchanted Attic*, a children's show, and *Blood Brothers*, a full length musical, I found that the requirements were vastly different for each project. In designing *The Enchanted Attic* I began by looking at what I knew: it was a children's show, I knew children would be the main audience. When I was designing *Blood Brothers* I knew that it was a musical, and the audience was probably going to be teenagers and older since there was a bit of violence and heavier subjects addressed. My approach with these shows varied greatly, but there were still many steps I had to go through for both productions.

The Enchanted Attic was a simpler show, logistically speaking. All of the action of the play occurred in the same place, on the same day, the three main children in the show never left stage. I knew from this information that I was not going to have to deal with quick changes or multiple costumes per character, I could have one costume per character and they would have plenty of time to get into their costume before the show began. Even though, logistically speaking, the show seemed easy there were challenges to overcome.

Blood Brothers was a much more complex show when it came to costume logistics. The show spanned 25 years, 1950- 1975, so fashions changed greatly. The audience also got to watch the character evolve, as they grew older. Another challenge was dealing with the director's vision for the ensemble of characters and the narrator.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

SCRIPT ANALYSIS

I begin my design process with reading the script. The first time I read it is for pleasure, to get the main story line, theme and overall feel of the show. The second time I read with an eye for logistics.

The Enchanted Attic was intended to be set in the 1920's. I knew from previous discussion with the director that she wanted it to be set in modern day. After reading the script I discovered that there was an element of magic in the show - there was a wishing window that would grant whatever the children in the show wanted. The window added a new element, and I realized that this show was not going to be completely realistic. Because of this, I was going to have some creative freedom. There were nine characters in the show. Five of them were magical, and the other four were realistic.

With *Blood Brothers* I had the good fortune of seeing a production on the West End while I was studying in Cambridge, so I was familiar with the flow of the show and the original vision for the production. For my first reading of the script, I tried to forget what I knew about it and read for pleasure, letting my imagination run wild. The musical

was much more complex to read than the children's show. The element of music adds to the challenge.   You must imagine when choreography would be used, and what that requires of the costumes. After reading the script twice, I created a scene breakdown. A scene breakdown is a flow chart that follows every character's progress throughout the show: when they enter and exit stage, when they are supposed to change costume, and for this show I also included when the major changes in time period occur. I didn't feel this was necessary with *The Enchanted Attic* because there were not as many entrances and exits and no one had to change costume. When I was designing *Blood Brothers* I would have been lost if I did not have my scene breakdown for reference. I charted all 17 characters and their progression. Here is an excerpt (see appendix 1 for full chart) from my chart for *Blood Brothers*:

	1	1..2	2..3	3..4	4..5	5	5..9	9..10
	1956		Marilyn Monroe	1st day @ work	Shoes upon the table	gyno/ twins	My Child	Birth
Mrs. Johnstone	work dress, overcoat	remove overcoat	nc	add preg-apron	nc	nc	nc	Remove preg/apron
Mrs. Lyons	look 1 w/ overcoat			look 1 w/ overocat			add preg pad	
Linda	overcoat/ chorus look	chorus						
Narrator	Narr		Milkman		Narr	Gyno	narr	nc
Mickey	End Cost.							
Edward	End Cost.							
Sammy	old chorus look	Chorus	Chorus					Kid

   After reading the script I also do a script analysis, this helps me to more fully understand the characters. I determine how the characters are related, their socio-economic status, their likes and dislikes and what their background is. In *The Enchanted Attic* the three kids were siblings, they had grown up together, therefore I knew that they would appear to be of the same class. In addition, if one child really enjoyed playing in the dirt or was a slob this would have been reflected in their costume.

In *Blood Brothers* there were two twin boys, born of the same mother. One had to be given away for financial reasons. These brothers lived very different lives. One enjoyed playing with worms and lying on the ground, while the other one was very clean. He had been taught to keep up his appearance. I showed that they lived very different lives through their costumes. The poor son, Mickey, wore hand-me-downs from his older brother. His clothes never fit him correctly and they were very worn because Mickey liked to play outside in the dirt. Edward, the wealthy twin, always wore very clean and starched clothing; he was a model child. Upon first seeing the twins the audience could tell that they had lived very different lives, it showed in their costume.

The script analysis helps the designer determine the socio-economic status of all of the characters, where they come from, and what they had to go through to arrive at the place they are at when the audience first views them on stage. This is one of my favorite parts of designing. I have always had an interest in cultural anthropology and I enjoy studying people and their decisions. This provides me with an opportunity to dig into the characters minds and come out with reasons for their clothing. The answers that come from the script are almost endless, but sometimes the director chooses to ignore some of the requests of the writer, and the designer discovers those when they have their initial design meeting.

In *Blood Brothers* Mrs. Johnstone is the poor mother. In the beginning of the show she is in a dress that isn't up to fashion and is very worn. This is because she has lived a hard life, and does not spend money on new garments for herself. She sacrifices everything to feed her hungry children. She has been wearing the same dress for years, and it shows. The audience does not need to consciously go through those thoughts in their head, but unconsciously they are gathering that information. It would look out of character if she suddenly appeared in a trendy, crisp, clean new gown for herself. The audience would notice that immediately.

In *The Enchanted Attic* the subject matter does not go as deep. It is a lighthearted play, with magical cats, puppets and pirates. The script analysis is a bit more simplistic. The script provides insight into the lives of the children, the type of relationships that they had with each other. They were very close, and seemed to depend upon each other

for their support while at the same time still having their fair share of arguments. Josie, the youngest at age eight, was afraid of the dark, and was very jumpy. Her older siblings Freida, age 11 and Lance, age 13, felt it was their duty to make Josie feel comfortable, even though they were not the most brave of children themselves.

Another important thing that must be considered when designing costumes is the time of year and season. If it is fall, as it was in *The Enchanted Attic*, the designer has to determine how that affects what the characters are wearing. I made sure that the children were wearing clothing that was appropriate for fall. Lance was given a sweater, Frieda a jacket, and Josie a hat and scarf. After seeing the actress's portrayal of Josie, I felt that she was the type of child who would always try to dress herself, and I showed that in her costume.

Another design challenge is when seasons change, as they did in *Blood Brothers*. One part of *Blood Brothers* is referred to as Christmas break. This told me that it was going to be cold, so I had the actors wearing winter coats to keep warm. It would have appeared very inconsistent if they didn't have warm clothing on when speaking of Christmas-time.

"When I am working on a problem I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong."[iv]

Buckminster Fuller
Designer, Architect, Poet

INITIAL DESIGN MEETING

In the initial design meeting, the director discusses his/her thoughts for the show, what direction he/she is planning on going, whether or not it is going to be realistic, or stylized and so on. When I met with Jamie Sullivan, the director of *The Enchanted Attic,* I discovered a few very important things. The script calls for a cat to become the size of a human, and they were intending to use a real cat on stage for the "cat-sized" cat. This meant that I had to create a costume for the human size cat that made the actor look like the actual cat. Lucky for me it was a black cat. I didn't have too much trouble finding the fabric to match the fur. Jamie told me that she was not too concerned with the cat looking very realistic and was okay with it being stylized. This opened up a variety of options for me. I felt that a more stylized cat would work better with the needed mobility of the actor. I chose to put the actor in all stretch fabric, instead of fake fur. That way, she was able to do any movement required. The human-sized cat had to crawl through windows and around set pieces. We also discussed the season, the children's motivation to be in an attic, where they were before they went to the attic, as well as a brief character breakdown for everyone in the show. We discussed how we were going to create a magical feel on-stage, the plan was to use lighting to indicate when a magical event occurred. Anytime a wish was granted the lights went wild. When it came to the costumes I made them a little larger than life, but there was no defining element that made them "magical."

The initial design meeting for *Blood Brothers* was a bit more involved since the show is more involved. Dr. David Young was the director and we discussed his vision of the chorus and how we would use them. In the script, the narrator lurked in the shadows

and seemed to be the embodiment of fate. However the director had a different vision for the show. *Blood Brothers* was a story about common people, and he wanted it to seem as if common people were telling it. The director wanted the ensemble to act as a Greek chorus, with the narrator being the head chorus member. Thus, the chorus and narrator together were telling the story. This meant that the chorus was on stage quite a bit more than the script originally called for and they had to be able to blend into the background as a neutral force. The chorus also had to be able to morph quickly into a variety of characters, from children to teenagers, to guests at a wedding, to neighbors. Because of the director's vision, the chorus was on-stage a lot, and there were not as many opportunities for offstage costume changes. Everything they did had to happen very rapidly. In order to keep everything manageable, I realized that I would have to keep their costumes rather simple; the chorus wouldn't be able to change costumes as time progressed. I decided that the chorus would wear a variety of silhouettes from different time periods and that I would use color and pattern to unify them. I figured color would be the best way to make them feel like a group, while at the same time unifying them with the lower class characters in the show, to show that everyday people were telling this story.

I put all of the lower class characters in cool colors that were a bit faded and worn. I also used low contrast patterns for some of the characters to provide visual depth when looking at a large group. I did not want the patterns to be of high contrast because I felt that would draw focus from the action of the play. It was hard to know whether or not things were working together until I saw it all together on stage under the lights. Then I could make adjustments as needed.

In our meeting, we also discussed the timeline and how it was traceable through the life of Marilyn Monroe. There was a reoccurring song about Marilyn and her progress through life. We were going to create a character that resembled Marilyn, while still blending in with the chorus. This was achieved by keeping the same line as Marilyn's iconic white dress, but instead of white, I dyed the dress a pale grey blue, so that it blended in with the ensemble colors. *Blood Brothers* was definitely a story of class differences and Dr. Young wanted that to be very evident to the audience.

RESEARCH

The next step in the design process is to gather research. Depending on the type of show, the designer may or may not need to do extensive research. With *The Enchanted Attic* I did what some might view as unconventional research. I needed to find out what modern day children were wearing so I went to places that I knew children would be: Wal-Mart, the public library, and I observed what real kids were wearing. One mistake that is easy to make is using research that depicts what is "in fashion" at the time. If you look at what is on the runway right now, and look at what people actually wear, they are drastically different. Depending on the show, a costume designer is usually interested in what everyday people are wearing. For *The Enchanted Attic* I also had to do additional research on pirates and their henchmen in order to have enough images to draw from for the magical characters.

Blood Brothers required a much more extensive research process. I had a larger span of time to cover and I had to gather research from each time period. For Mrs. Johnstone, I was interested in what the lower class, everyday working woman would be wearing. Mrs. Lyons, the wealthy mother, was much more interested in fashion. Since she had the money, I used her to show what the cutting edge fashions of the time were. Dior's "New Look" inspired her second look.

v

vi

When I research I gather as many images as I can and I decide what I like about certain images and what I dislike about others. This helps to establish the direction that I want to take the show. When I was looking at my research for the 1950's, I did not like the full circle skirt with crinoline. I was drawn to the shirtwaist dresses, a more practical look. Sometimes when I am stumped about a design I will look at my research and pick out what elements I like. Usually I am able to combine enough items that I can come up with a design.

When doing research for the chorus, I had to decide how I was going to approach their frequent changing of costume. I decided to use simplified costume pieces to indicate a new character. I had to gather enough information about each type of character being portraying so that I could decide the defining characteristic. I looked at multiple images of teenagers and found what I identified to be the significant attribute for teenagers in school, a school sweater. When the chorus was portraying teenagers in school, I had the chorus wear matching sweaters in order to show the audience that at that moment they were teenagers.

After exhausting all of my book and Internet resources, I studied actual garments to find out how garments in that period were actually constructed, and what fabrics were used. I was able to visit the Kentucky Museum and look at their collection of garments. I was also able to look at the Theatre Department's costume storage, where we have a nice collection of vintage items. This type of research helps costumes to appear authentic because you are able to see all of the detail that went into each one, and what was actually used in that time period to construct these garments. Being able to look inside a garment can reveal many secrets to a designer.

A designer decides how historically accurate they would like the costumes to be. In *Blood Brothers* I knew that I could not have the chorus change costumes as time passed, so I put the chorus in a mixture of time periods. The line of the costume varied, but they were unified through color. I did remain historically accurate with the principal characters so that the audience would have a sense of what time period it was.

ROUGH SKETCHES

After I had gathered my research and I was familiar with the script and the director's wishes, I was ready to begin sketching. Even when I did not have a clear idea for a character, it helped to begin sketching and ideas would then come to me. I would realize that I should include a necklace or other item. For the chorus in *Blood Brothers,* I realized that we couldn't build every item for the show so I began to pull costumes from storage to see what might possibly work. I had a clear idea of what shape I wanted and also what colors. I was able to gather sufficient costumes that I felt worked well together, and maintained my ideal color palette. Instead of sketching the chorus I used my research to provide examples of what I wanted for the costumes. I would highlight certain pieces from my research, and then compile it all together to create a look for a character.

With *The Enchanted Attic* I wanted to capture and express the individual characteristics of each character through their costume. I watched a few of the rehearsals and was able to observe personality traits that the actors had been developing. I was able to talk with the actors and discover their feelings about their characters. Andrea Graves played Josie, the youngest. She felt that even though she was the youngest she was very adventuresome, and a bit headstrong. We discussed whether she would have been able to dress herself, and we decided that she definitely did. This meant that her costume had a bit more flair than the older children, who probably still wore what their parents picked out for them. Being able to collaborate with the actors is always an enjoyable experience because they have been working on developing their character and are able to provide insight into the habits of the character or a bit of history that they have created with the director.

SECOND MEETING WITH THE DIRECTOR

After developing my rough ideas I met with the directors and listened to their thoughts about the costumes. I also had to take into account any new blocking, or movement that might impact the costumes. After that, it's back to the drawing board to refine and alter, or completely change the initial costume. I was rather lucky in that I

didn't have many alterations to make, and could move along with the design process and begin building, or altering the costumes.

BUILD PROCESS

I had very different experiences with my two shows when it came to the build process. The build process is the actual construction of the costumes. Since *The Enchanted Attic* was a children's show, I had minimal support from the costume shop. With *Blood Brothers* I had the full support of the shop staff. The labor force behind a show directly determines how much can be built for a show, and how much must be pulled from existing costumes, purchased, or rented. I was fortunate enough to receive a grant from the Honors program to assist in funding *The Enchanted Attic.* Children's shows are not normally well funded, and this allowed me to have more creative freedom because I was able to look outside of our existing stock for costumes, and I was able to purchase some items for the show.

With *The Enchanted Attic,* I was able to purchase most of the items since it was set in modern day. This sounds much simpler than it actually is. In trying to make college students look like children I had to be careful not to just put them in clothes that resemble children's clothing, because modern day children wear basically what college students do. The difference is in the fit of the clothing, where it breaks up the body, and in color choices. I did lots of experimenting on the actors in order to achieve the desired look.

In fittings with Lance, the oldest child, I put him in jeans, a button up shirt and a sweater, boots and glasses. The jeans fit a bit closer than he would have worn on a normal day as a college student, they were also a bit stiffer, as if his mother had starched them. The sweater was plain and was loosely fitted, I had him wear boots that seamed a bit heavy on the feet, and this gave the affect that his feet were growing faster than his body. His glasses were a bit large for his face, as if his mother had bought them that way so he would grow into them.
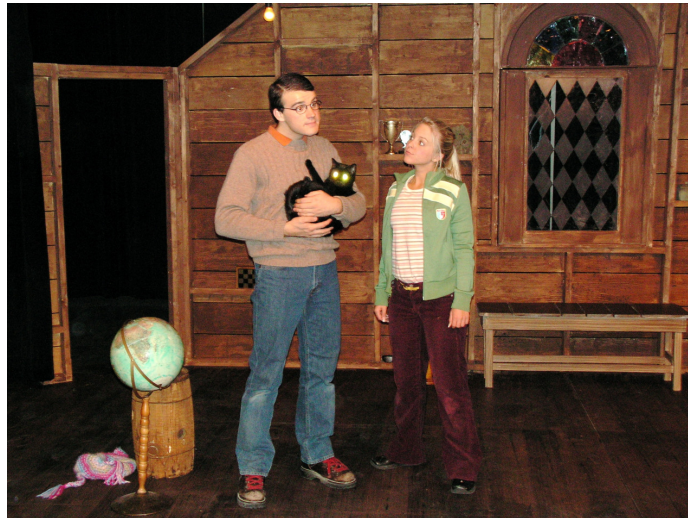
I had to create a costume for a puppet, and also the costume for the actor when the puppet became life-size. When choosing her fabric, I chose very stiff fabric because I

noticed that doll clothes in general were stiff. The fabric had an oversized plaid on it as if it was once small when she was puppet-sized and it was enlarged when she was enlarged. I also had her put wire in her braids to imitate doll hair and how stiff it usually is.

I had to design a catlike costume. It did not have to be realistic, and so I chose what I viewed as the defining features of a cat and emphasized those on the costumes. I altered a unitard by adding a hooded mask as well as a boa for a tail, and I also made sure to add ears and whiskers. My main goal with the cat was for the actor to be able to move like a cat and for the audience to be able to observe the movement. That required the use of stretch fabric.

I looked into renting the pirate costume and right before I ordered it I found something that was usable in storage and I was able to rework it, including changing the decoration on the coat. I ended up putting Blackbeard, the head pirate, in an 18th century red velvet jacket, with detailed ornamentation, and fall front breeches. For Blackbeard's cronies I created a very dirty, tattered look, as if they had been at sea for many years. The female crony wore multiple patterned skirts that were torn, and a top. The male crony wore shredded knickers and a distressed peasant top. I added to their look by blackening out some of their teeth and smearing dirt makeup on their faces.

Everything that I did for *The Enchanted Attic* I did on my own time schedule, and it probably could have been done in a more orderly manner, however I believe that the end result was satisfactory and fit all of the requirements of the show. With *The Enchanted Attic* I was responsible for every aspect of the costumes, I did not have a

support staff, and did not have to communicate my ideas to anyone. With *Blood Brothers* I worked with the entire costume shop staff, I had to convey my designs to them, both verbally and through research and sketches. Communication is very important when the designer cannot be present during the entire build process to answer questions. Detailed sketches can provide many answers during the build process.

When it came to *Blood Brothers,* I determined how many pieces I thought that we would have to build for the show and checked with Cassandra Beaver, the Costume Shop Manager, and Shura Pollatsek, my Costume Design Professor to see if that was a reasonable number of items, and luckily it was. Before we could begin building any costumes I had to select fabric. It is very important to find the appropriate fabric for a garment, especially if it must move a certain way, or has to be tailored. Some of the fabric that I found wasn't exactly what I was looking for. I planned on over dying them to achieve the desired look, this occurred mainly with Mrs. Johnstone. I didn't want her patterns to have too high of a contrast because this would draw too much attention to the activity going on in her dress, when I want the focus to be on her face.

As well as being the costume designer of *Blood Brothers* I was also a draper. I draped Mrs. Lyons pleated skirt and altered a vintage pattern to create her tailored jacket. I created a mock up of the jacket in order to get the fit correct. In the first fitting, I was able to adjust the size of the collar and where the peaks on the lapel hit. I referred to my research in order to achieve the desired look. When I create clothes for an individual, I have to take into account their body shape and size. What looks good on a model may not translate well on a larger figure. In the first fitting, if I wanted the character to appear attractive, I looked at how the garment broke up their body. In the case of the jacket and skirt look, I had to lengthen the peplum on the jacket so that it hit the actor's body at an appealing point. Hem length depends on time period as well as body type. I did not want to chop the body at an odd point.   I adjusted the hems to an appealing length.

  In the fitting the designer is able to see how the character is coming together, what is working, and what seems to be out of place. Sometimes a costume seems perfect until it is on the actor and then it may not fit properly or just not convey the right look for the character.

  After the first fitting I took the alterations that I had made on the mock up and transferred them to the pattern. I then created the garment out of the fashion fabric that I had chosen. In the second fitting I had to make sure that the garment still fit well, I also marked button placement and hem lengths. After the fitting I had to do the finishing before the garment was ready for stage.

  Once a garment is ready for the stage, the actors still have to get used to performing in them. Actors go through technical rehearsals to get used to the set, lights, sound and costumes. Costume designers always want to see what the costumes will look like under the stage lights, and make sure that the intended colors are not skewed. Being able to see the actors in the context of the show allows the designer to see if the costumes work well together, and work with the characters.

  With *Blood Brothers* the technical rehearsals were when I got to see if the ensemble would successfully blend together. It became very clear that one of the dresses drew too much focus under the lights, and I had to find an alternative dress. The dress was blue with pink flowers on it. Under the lights the fabric was a very intense blue, while the rest of the dresses appeared very washed out. This concentration of color pulled focus from the other actors. I also realized we had to put elastic shoelaces in the children's shoes so that they could slip them on fast enough, a minor, but necessary note.

During technical rehearsals I distressed all of the costumes in *Blood Brothers* so that they looked worn. The greatest effect was given to the clothes of the kids who played outside all day. There are a variety of ways to distress costumes, I mainly used paint to create the look of dirt, and I would actually wear the costumes down with sand paper. The distressing of the costumes made the show seem more real, because not everyone wears perfectly clean clothes all the time, especially if the clothes are older and very lived in. On stage, depending on the lights, certain colors pop more than one might expect, distressing the costumes solved the problem of having any costumes stand out too much, because they were all dulled.

CONCLUSION

Designing costumes for *The Enchanted Attic* and *Blood Brothers* were very different experiences, there were different things to consider. For *The Enchanted Attic* I had to account for the fact that it was a children's show and it should have a sense of magic to it. You want to create the illusion for the children, transporting them to another time, another place. While *Blood Brothers* was more realistic, even though unrealistic events occurred, there was no magical element. It dealt with real people and their problems. The constraints given to me helped to shape my ideas, guiding me to a successful design.

These were two of the most memorable shows that I have designed during my time at Western Kentucky University. I felt that *The Enchanted Attic* had an amazing design team, and the actors were great. It was an outstanding example of children's theatre. *Blood Brothers* helped me to grow as a designer. I was able to work with an actual shop staff and realize the responsibility necessary of a designer. The research that I gathered for these shows will stay with me throughout my years of designing. I will always be able to look back upon the knowledge that I gained through these productions.

When I am given a project to design it consumes me, I can hardly think of anything else. I feel that everything that I see is a possible material, shape, or color that I could use in my design. From the time that I get a new show to the time that I start building it, everything I see is a source of inspiration. I want to solve every problem, understand every character and gain a better understanding of this new world that I will

assist in creating. I feel that I will never stop designing, how could I with so much inspiration surrounding me?

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