

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



(F10)

Outfitting the cast: Local theater groups keep lots of costumes on hand



CAMILLE MC COY

Margaret Remondino, longtime wardrobe mistress at the Birmingham Village Players, shows an ethnic dress from the theater's collection of more than 1,000 costumes.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

A SEQUINED FLAPPER dress with flirtatious fringe, a morning coat in a substantial size 52, a collapsible opera hat which nobody makes any longer and a not-so-ordinary straitjacket can be treasured finds to those in charge of costumes at local community theaters. People involved in theater have learned never to get rid of the musty clothes in grandma's attic without letting the chair of the costume department have first pick. "We never know what costumes we'll need next year, so we're pack rats and save everything," said Barb Gowans, wardrobe mistress for the last 11 years at St. Dunstan's Guild of Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills.

Any person in charge of costumes knows the frustration of trying to find clothes from another era in sizes to fit cast members, so community theaters try to make the job easier by amassing collections of clothes from other periods and costumes to outfit the cast for popular musicals they've produced.

Period clothes dating from the turn of the century up through the '30s and '40s dominate collections that are highlighted by a few quirky originals such as the "Gypsy" stripper costume that lights up in strategic places and the chicken suit from the play "Tribute."

MARGARET REMONDINO, who's been making and caring for costumes at the Birmingham Village Players for more than 15 years, estimates that the Players stores close to 1,000 costumes

in the theater's wardrobe room. Most of the clothes are donated.

"We used to cut off collecting clothes more recent than the 1920s, but now we go into the '40s," she said. "We don't keep suits, but we have tails, tuxes and morning suits that we get when somebody outgrows them or cleans out the attic."

What the Players can't use, she donates to charity. "Every month the Goodwill, the Blind and the Veterans call to see if I have anything from members' closet cleanings. I have a nice big bag for them about 50 percent of the time."

Most theater groups have a costume chairman who keeps track of where costumes are stored and which ones are currently being borrowed or rented. Because the wardrobe mistress is the person who knows best the costume inventory by time period and size, she works closely with directors and with the person in charge of costumes for individual productions.

Being able to improvise and cut corners on a tight budget is as prized in a costume chair as expertise with needle and thread. Mary Copenhagen, costume chairwoman at Avon Players, came up with a solution to the dilemma of finding shoes for the ragamuffin orphans in the 1920s musical "Annie."

"AMISH CRAFTSMEN make authentic high top boots," she said, "but they were beyond our budget at \$40 a pair. Instead, we bought pairs of used ice skates for 50 cents each and pulled off the blades."

Linda Brick, who has handled costumes for several Troy Players produc-

tions, said the theater group makes what it can't find and only stores those costumes which it wouldn't want to make or find again. Bridal and formal gowns, naval uniforms and even a straitjacket are among the costumes the Troy Players stores in its two storage areas, one in space loaned by the Warren Theatre and the other in a storage unit the group rents to keep costumes and props.

"Sewing costumes is usually our last line of defense," she said of the challenge of outfitting characters for a play. "First, we check out our own closets. Then we raid our mother's, grandmother's and Aunt Tilly's closets looking for clothes to fit characters."

If that fails to turn up what's needed, the players check with other theater groups, or goes scavenging at the Salvation Army and resale shops. "That's what we did when we were hunting for '50s clothes for 'Pajama Game.'"

Although the Troy Players prefers to beg and barter for costumes rather than sew them, there's always some sewing required to make costumes for difficult-to-fit players and as break-away clothes — those costumes that get ripped as part of the action on stage. Break-away clothes must be constructed with velcro at the seams so the clothes can be instantly ready to rip again at the next performance.

THE RIDGEDALE Players frequently makes all its own costumes, especially for the period play or musical it includes in every season. This year "Carnival" will set the costume people

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The "World's Largest Office Christmas Party" will be held from 4:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Friday, Dec. 21, at the Westin Hotel in Detroit's Renaissance Center.

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