

Costume Craftwork on a Budget: Clothing, 3D Makeup, Wigs, Millinery & Accessories by Tan Huaixiang; New York, Focal Press, 2007. 332 pp., b/w and color photographs. Paper, \$39.95.

Reviewed by Peggy Rosefeldt

There is a genre of technical theatre literature which I refer to as the "costume cookbook." This is the appetizer for aspiring techies which makes them want to pursue this line of work. It contains detailed written instructions, illustrations of the process of creation and luscious color photos of the finished product. It leaves the technician-wannabe drooling on the glass of the bakery case window and dying to get into the kitchen.

The old Theatre Crafts magazine, which appeared in 1967, The Mask of Reality by Irene Corey in 1968 and the 1979 Costumer's Handbook by Liz Covey and Rosemary Ingham were and still are the best of these publications. For the new millennium, Costume Craftwork on a Budget by Tan Huaixiang appears to be their worthy successor.

Tan, the author of Character Costume Figure Drawing, published by Focal Press in 2004, has a career which is remarkable for its sheer geographic diversity. Trained as an undergraduate at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, she did graduate work at Utah State University, with later design assignments at Cornell University, the University of Pittsburgh, Central Washington University and ultimately at the University of Central Florida, where she currently teaches. Along with earning what must be a staggering number of frequent flyer miles, she has also attained membership in United Scenic Artists Local 829, with her recent costume renderings bearing the coveted union stamp. A close examination of her work as pictured in the latest book shows her growth from a college student in the East to a professional designer in the West.

Neck up, neck down

The majority of the projects in the 332-page book are devoted to craft work from the neck up: makeup (100 pages), masks (30 pages), and hats and headdresses (100 pages). The remaining 100 pages cover projects from the neck down: animal costumes (50 pages), armor (20 pages), leather work, boots, jewelry and accessories (15 pages), and garment alterations and adaptations (15 pages). The final four pages of the book list supply sources and uses for various materials, as well as safety data. There is ample room in the garment modification category for yet another book, and additional information on supplies, sources and safety equipment and procedures would be most welcome.

Mercifully, as theatre technicians have become more safety conscious, some of the more lethal substances used by previous generations have disappeared from use. Celastic soaked in acetone is a thing of the past, now replaced by the newer and safer heat-activated thermoplastic supplies covered in this book. Materials and techniques described range from the space-age to the traditional. Uses for Fosshape, Varaform, and Wonderflex are illustrated, along with projects using buckram, felt, foam, papier-maché and even Elmer's glue. These relatively benign materials can be used by students in a variety of age groups, even those with modest levels of technical proficiency.

For the more adventurous, the intricate processes involved in creating prosthetic makeup will get students elbow-deep in plaster, clay, alginate, dental stone and casting latex. Hot foam, cold foam and gel foam, along with plaster bandages and yak hair are the intriguing ingredients in these makeup lessons. Topics from false teeth to full beards, goatees, hair extensions, and ventilating wigs are explained in full photographic detail.

The assumption that everything short of the kitchen sink goes into Tan's cookbook would be correct, given her affinity for using non-traditional materials. Automotive funnels, electrical conduit, clamp-light covers and dryer hose become wearables, along with laundry baskets, steamer baskets and even egg beaters. This is a woman whose flights of fancy must run wildly rampant in her neighborhood hardware store.

There is an energy about the book which is reflected most vividly in both her sketches and in the process drawings. The figures in Tan's renderings for Pippin fairly dance off the page, and her illustrations make a turban seem to wrap itself, as if it were animated. Besides the clear written and visual explanations of the costume craft processes, there is an astonishing attention to detail. A crocodile's skin sports three different textures, with explicit instructions on how to make and where to use each one.

In reading the book, I often had a small child's sense of wonder at seeing a simple flat material magically turn into a three-dimensional object. Printed fleece strips are twisted and knotted into serpentine dangling tree roots suspended from a performer's outstretched arms. And ordinary blue foam undergoes a fascinating transformation into delightful moles and squirrels perched on two young ladies' heads.

Strengths and recommendations

Besides the clear, understandable explanations and black and white process photos, the greatest strengths of the book are Tan's line drawings and color renderings. The greatest

disappointment, regrettably, is that many of the color production photos are out of focus, poorly lit, or too small to adequately display the finished costumes. A quick trip through Photoshop might help some of the simpler problems like red eye, but some judicious editing, or just letting Tan's exquisite artwork speak for itself would improve any future editions of the book. Another recommendation for later editions would be a stiffer cover for the book itself. The 8-1/2" by 11" horizontal paperback format makes the volume a bit unwieldy, and it tends to flop around and twist in your hands. A more rigid cover or, ideally, a format that could be propped up like a cookbook would prove more useful.

Besides showcasing the work and the thinking process of a phenomenally gifted artist, the chief value of this book may lie in its ability to attract a new generation of technicians to the field. The overwhelming impression that this book leaves is how much fun her students must have working with this uniquely talented teacher. And isn't that why so many of us wound up in this profession in the first place?

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