



Backstage Magic

The costumes which draw such rave reviews
in OU drama and dance productions
spring from the enchanted sketch pad
of the multi-talented Mike Buchwald.

By PAULA BAKER
Photos by Gil Jain

Continued



The costume sketch on Page 3 comes alive onstage in Mike Buchwald's non-traditional approach to an all-white ballet for the OU dance production of "Snow Maiden."

Treating magic backstage and below the stairs of the University of Oklahoma Fine Arts Center is nothing new for Mike Buchwald. For the past 20 years, the OU professor of drama has been laboring behind the scenes with his costumer's sketch pad to turn OU actors and dancers into everything from besieged peasants to elegant Edwardians.

Buchwald's costumes have earned so many accolades over the years that audiences are usually unaware that his talents span the scope of stagecraft. He has even been known to act in and costume the same production. Buchwald emerged from backstage in November 1987 to play the role of Herr Drosselmeyer in "The Nutcracker" ballet. In the role, Drosselmeyer's gift of a nutcracker to little Clara turned a peep at a Victorian Christmas party into a spectacle of elaborate fantasy that swept from the Land of Snow to the Land of Enchantment.

When Buchwald donned Drosselmeyer's mantle, he returned to his own first experience in the theater as an actor.

"I started working in the theater when I was very young," he recalls. "My church needed a kid who could

memorize long speeches for a Christmas play. I did it and enjoyed acting anywhere I could while growing up in Oklahoma City. I can't remember ever not wanting to do any of the tasks associated with the theater."

As an undergraduate at OU from 1962 to 1966, Buchwald worked with drama professor emeritus Helen Forrest Lauterer, now living in Santa Fe, whose work has been honored with the naming of the drama school's student costuming award. His graduate mentor was Nancy Gade, who later married OU president J. Herbert Hollomon. Her departure when Hollomon resigned in 1970 opened the faculty position that Buchwald still holds.

"Looking back, I learned as much about acting from Helen Lauterer as I did about design," Buchwald says of his comprehensive training at OU. "The late Turner Edge, who was a director, taught me as much about design as acting."

However, as a drama/English undergraduate, Buchwald had no time to specialize and not enough experience to realize that he did not want to be an actor all of his life. After teaching school in Nebraska for two years, Buchwald returned to the OU campus for graduate work. He studied both directing and design and won both the

Long hours and skillful shopping place magnificent costumes within reach for collegiate productions.

Rupel Jones Directing Award and the Lauterer Costume Award in 1969. Winning the A.L. Mortensen Award as the most promising technical theater graduate in 1970 forecast his future.

Buchwald was set to take another job when Gade left suddenly. He was asked to fill the costuming position "in the interim" by Fine Arts Dean Nat Eek, then director of the School of Drama. The University rarely selects permanent faculty members from those who have completed both undergraduate and graduate work at OU. Buchwald had to endure the tedium and suspense of an official search before being offered the permanent position. Since that time, he has been tucked away in the costume shop on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, turning out season after season of ingenious designs that regularly get reviewers' raves.

Patricia Cooper "Coopie" Mason has supervised costume construction for Buchwald since 1970. This separation of design and construction is dictated by custom at OU and serves as a preview of union requirements for those students who go into professional theater. Because the OU School of Drama is not a union shop, however, theatergoers routinely view a panorama of magnificent garments that would be beyond collegiate resources, were it not for Buchwald's fabric shopping skills and the long hours he, Coopie, seamster Gary Haney and the drama students devote to their quest for perfection in illusion.

Occasionally, Buchwald entertains himself by tallying the hours and expense involved in a particular garment or production. For example, the gold moire coat Antonio Salieri wore in the second act of "Amadeus" consumed some 200 hours of labor by the time it was covered with several kinds of braid and couched gold. Buchwald estimates the commercial value of the coat at \$13,000.

Costumes for musicologist Eugene Enrico's television production of Claudio Monteverdi's "Madrigals of Love and War" were valued at about \$26,000 at union shop wage scale when they were constructed in 1981. They were created for approximately \$5,000, counting fabric cost and slightly-less-than minimum wages for Buchwald and Coopie.

The costumer undertook the project for the OU Collegium Musicum during a spring break period for the challenge of "something different," designing Jacobean era costumes for singers who would be under the close scrutiny of the television camera. Graduate-level singers come in a greater variety of sizes and shapes than student actors. The women's gowns ranged from size 5 to 26, and the men's costumes ranged from 36 to 46. The back-laced garments Buchwald fashioned not only were authentic but also allowed for rib-cage expansion of two to three inches during performance.

Authenticity and detail are essential for television close-ups. Buchwald and his assistants trimmed each costume individually, using piles of fake jewels and festoons of lace, braid and chains purchased from supply shops in New York City. His annual trip as co-leader for the OU Theater Guild's New York City outing doubles as a scouting expedition for bargain-priced trims and fabrics from the garment district.

Hot colors of red, yellow and pumpkin added to the passionate themes expressed vocally in the "Madrigals of Love and War." Dyed China silk — some 17 shades of red alone — supplemented the good buys already stockpiled.

Costuming for another one of Enrico's EMTV (Early Music Television) productions, "Handel's Messiah: A Commemoration" was enriched with one of Buchwald's favorite New York trophies — the remaining half of a 35-yard piece of cultivated and wild silk that first debuted as a concert gown for the opera star Risë Stevens. The Handel costumes featured intricate hand embroidery on the gowns and waistcoats — and enlisted both the Buchwald home's 18th-century style living room as a set and the proprietor himself in a supporting role.

Although an occasional commission for another medium or at another university adds frills to the costumer's life, most of the variety he cherishes in educational theater comes from the OU School of Drama itself.

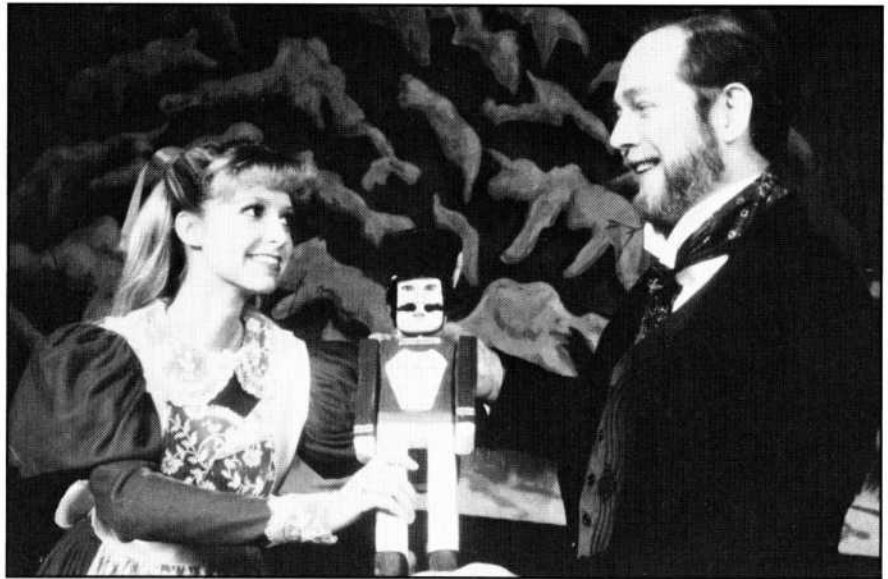
Buchwald participates in selection of a season schedule from the beginning of the process, as do all drama faculty members. They suggest the plays they would like to direct, design or see as part of the school's educational cycle.

"Balancing the season" is more than just a matter of providing the students and audiences with an opportunity to experience comedy, drama and musicals from different periods. Large casts must be alternated with small casts, and shows with high royalty

classics are apt to be given a fresh look. For example, OU's version of Shakespeare's "As You Like It" was set in the crown colony of Virginia in the 1760s, using a mountain or hillbilly dialect closer to Elizabethan speech than modern British English. Real buckskin was used for some of the costumes, with simple prints creating the mountain-style imitations of the fashions worn by tidewater Virginians.

"One of the glories of educational theater is that even if we did the same show twice, a different director and a different cast would make it a whole new experience," Buchwald says.

Color schemes are also a matter of consultation with the director and set and lighting designer, following a decision on concept. Lighting plays tricks



Buchwald, right, both designed the costumes for "The Nutcracker" and appeared as Drosselmeyer, here presenting a gift to little Clara, played by Lexy Brewer.

costs and elaborate sets and costumes must be alternated with those with lower financial and technical requirements. OU School of Drama productions must be self-supporting, unlike those at most other higher education institutions with top-ranked drama departments. The only "subsidy" comes from the use of student actors, educational facilities and faculty members as directors, designers and occasional guest artists.

Once a play is scheduled, Buchwald begins a series of meetings with the director and set and lighting designers to discuss the show's concept. Theater

on different colors and fabrics. A sunrise to sunset scenario for "Kismet" was dictated by the libretto and filled with glorious reds and golds in the midday bazaar scene and blue and silver shades as night fell and the musical ended. Juliet's red wedding gown showed her defiance and the costumer's knowledge that white wedding gowns were not fashionable until the Victorian era.

The subtleties of some other schemes might have been lost on all but those involved in the production. For example, coyote colors of ochers, grays and creams set the scheme for



A production in process at the drama school results in scenes like this in the costume shop on the lower level of the Fine Arts Center, where Buchwald's designs for "Kismet" are being constructed by Patricia Cooper, Gary Haney and the students.

"Terra Nova," a play about Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in the winter of 1911-1912. A canine specter ran throughout the play as Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen and his crew, who used their sled dogs for food, taunted the idealistic English who pulled their own sleds and perished. Because of the importance of dogs in the play, their commercial fur cousins, the coyotes, came immediately to Buchwald's mind when he began to envision Antarctic clothing. The only fur garment manufacturers in Oklahoma, Mountain Treasurers, specialize in coyote fur and donated fur and workmanship to the play.

Donations play an important role in getting the show on the boards. The late OU voice professor Joseph Benton (internationally known as opera star Giuseppe Bentonelli) gave his costumes, wigs and boots to the drama school. Old clothes, hats and shoes frequently are donated and may be used "as adapted" or placed in Buchwald's collection so students may see how the

garments were constructed or trimmed.

"I rarely begin designing until a show is cast," Buchwald explains. "Designing for what a playwright wrote is only a tiny proportion of what there is in a play. Regardless of how important the words are, a performance is still the magic that an individual creates onstage."

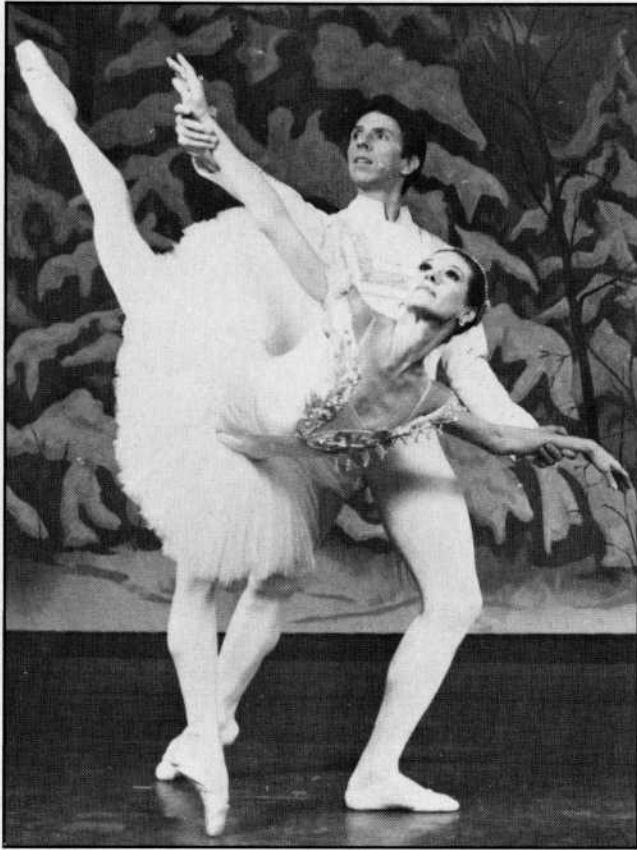
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"I know most of the students and have seen them do different things so I know what they will bring to a role," he says. "I measure each student and set up charts based on height, weight, hair color and the space they will take up. Their mass must be balanced against the look of the period."

"Sometimes the human form must be altered to suggest a period or a character," Buchwald continues. "For example, in the era of 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' ladies wore 'fainting corsets' that rearranged all their organs and changed their posture. Women of that era sometimes had their ribs removed to make the process easier. Our women students went into corsets by the second week of rehearsal to realign their bodies and create the proper Edwardian stance. By performance time, they were layered into Edwardian underwear as well — camisoles, drawers, petticoats and corset covers.

A spoiled heiress in "Holiday" had a crystal-beaded entrance cloak with a fishtail train and a high collar that turned a pleasant-looking actress of 5' 6" into a 9-foot stinker. An oversized cape suggested the vanity and emptiness of Edward I in "Calais," a world premiere of a play suggested by Rodin's sculpture of the besieged burghers of Calais.

Dance costumes created for the de-



Jory Hancock and Mary Margaret Holt perform in ballet costumes which present a special design challenge for Buchwald's crew.



The placement of body mikes on the women's costumes for the OU musical "Kismet" required considerable design ingenuity.



Quilting enthusiasts from central Oklahoma turned the Fine Arts Center into a gigantic patchwork "bee" for "Quilters."



Buchwald, right, ties a ribbon on Catherine Hill's costume for one of the OU Collegium Musicum's television productions.



The authenticity and detail essential for television requires the individual trimming of each costume.



Buchwald's idea of a break is taking on a new costuming challenge, such as this television production of Handel's "Messiah" at Tulsa's Philbrook Art Center.

partment of dance in the School of Drama are a special challenge. Tutus, tights and leotards must look like gossamer, wear like iron and move like second skins. They not only must last through numerous performances on the Jones Theater stage but also through revivals and the touring engagements of the Oklahoma Festival Ballet and Modern Dance Theater.

"Sometimes the greatest freedom exists when limits are set," Buchwald says philosophically of designing for dance. "All kinds of things fall away that might be possibilities. You become very focused, rather like a pianist who is told he can work with only an octave and a half. My first full-length ballet, 'Don Quixote' in 1976, is a particularly warm memory."

Another Spanish-flavored ballet, 1987's "Paquita," is an example of the variations possible even when the ballet corps is dressed in seemingly identical short red tutus with black sequined trim. Different necklines and trim patterns individualized the corps members who were spotlighted in duet and trio variations.

OU choreographer Miguel Terekhov's "Snow Maiden" in 1982 created a new holiday ballet for family viewing and challenged Buchwald to create a different look in "ballets

blancs" — a form of all-white ballet costuming that has been a tradition since the 19th century.

Nine different kinds of net and gauze and 26 varieties of glitter gave a shimmering, ethereal effect. The ballet is a romantic fairy tale about a creature born of rushing winds and swirling snow who arrives in a Russian village and takes human form when she falls in love with a peasant boy. The icy nature of Snow Maiden Mary Margaret Holt is emphasized by her pale blue costume, painted in "frozen pond" patterns.

Beaded iridescent Milliskin unitards garbed the Snowflakes, who were coifed with white net headpieces ornamented with glitter, pearls, sapphires and silver Lurex threads. The Snowflakes swirled across the stage in gauze and net capes with beaded collars. The corps of Winds wore ombred grey with autumn leaves caught in their drapings, while the headpieces were adorned with strips of plexiglass mirror, heated to produce undulating lines.

Imaginatively individualized headgear is essential in confines of dance costuming. However, memorable headgear has capped many of Buchwald's other costuming achievements. Many theater patrons still remember the

whimsical hats in "High Button Shoes." The townswomen were "birds of a feather" right up to their topknots, which were crowned with an ornithological parade of hats that even included a hen and chickens! Lady Bracknell in "The Importance of Being Earnest" had a succession of imposing hats, and Buchwald can be eloquent on the protective value of the 8-inch hatpins used to keep Edwardian hats — and not-so-gentlemanly gentlemen — in their places.

After Buchwald sketches the garments, Mason creates the patterns, working with graduate assistants. This arrangement parallels the world of commercial theater in which the designer touches neither fabric nor performer. Mason, seamster Haney and drama students construct the costumes. All theater majors are required to complete a course in costume construction — annually astounding Buchwald and Mason with the number of young people who not only have never touched a sewing machine but have never touched an iron. (Buchwald's mother Loraine insisted that he learn both sewing and ironing. These boyhood skills, along with his interest in architecture and a hobby of drawing undoubtedly contributed to a career that "just grew.")

Members of the OU Theater Guild, a volunteer support group, occasionally lend a needle as well. They contributed so much to the labor-intensive elegance of "Amadeus" that they were rewarded with souvenir buttons like those used on Salieri's golden coat. Quilting enthusiasts from across the campus and throughout central Oklahoma turned the Fine Arts Center into a patchwork "bee" when they pitched in for "Quilters." This musical evocation of pioneer life from the distaff view required some 30 different over-sized quilt blocks as well as a gigantic completed quilt for the finale.

OU's blend of commercial and non-commercial costume training covers both OU and commercial stages with glory. Numerous design graduates are employed in the professional theater world. Bruce Snyder is working in London as Carl Tom's assistant at the BBC. Lynne Baccus is one of the drapers with Barbara Matera Ltd., considered the "haute couture" of American costume houses with "La Cage Aux Folles," "A Chorus Line" and the American Ballet Theater "Don Quixote" to its credit. Lee Danser and Janet Lewis are with Parson's Mirrors, builders of "Starlight Express." Other students are designers for the Pennsylvania and Dallas ballets or are freelancers.

"Mike's success in teaching the intricate process of costuming is evident in the placement of his students in the professional world," says Gregory D. Kunesh, director of the School of Drama. "His contributions to our productions are outstanding and obvious to all who attend our performances. Anyone who has seen one of his costume demonstrations is impressed by the layered way he builds his costumes and the thought, commitment and love he has for his field. However, few realize how much he contributes to the way the actors feel about themselves and their work. His technical expertise helps them in their acting. I know of no one who spends more time and gives more of himself in this endeavor."

Although Buchwald teaches some classes, a vast portion of his teaching is on a one-to-one basis, working with the graduate assistants in an apprenticeship situation. He earned a Regents' Award for Superior Teaching in

1976 and the students' own award to the faculty member who taught them the most in 1988.

"I have worked through five different drama curricula and was deeply involved in creating the most recent one," Buchwald said. "Although the graduate students must design some shows, I am involved with all the shows in some way."

His "involvement" tallies more than 200 productions in Rupel Jones, OU's Studio Theater and summer stock seasons. No wonder that he is hard put to name a "favorite" or even "favorites" among the shows.

"Some of my favorites have not been the flashiest designs but ones where all the elements jelled and the performances were realized fully," Buchwald says. "'Amadeus' was a great favorite because we were able to realize an elaborate production so well. 'Baby' was a special memory because I liked the show so much."

Few realize how much Mike contributes to the way the actors feel about themselves and their work.

"Baby" also was the show in which body microphones had to be worked into costuming for the first time. Adding the latest in musical equipment was no great problem for "Baby's" collegiate outfits but challenged Buchwald considerably for the exotic "Kismet," an Arabian Nights fantasy in which even the men's costumes had plunging necklines!

"'Equus' was one of the most fun because it was fascinating to create the horse hooves and heads," Buchwald continues. "Donn Mason (Coopie's husband) welded the hooves. We used plexiglass tubing for the heads because I wanted something more alive than the wicker used in the Broadway production. Light moved through the tubings as if one were following the boys' thoughts."

Animal costumes are occasionally part of the production requirements. Buchwald is quick to credit graduate assistant Janet Lewis and her expertise gained in an Albuquerque cos-

tume shop for assistance with the fierce three-headed rat and the enchanting oriental mice in "The Nutcracker." However, the lion and the lamb in "Candide" were his own.

Creating masks and wigs fall within a costumer's duties, as does designing the make-up that may be required to produce a monster, or sicken or age a character. Some medical and historical knowledge is required in these circumstances. For example, the burghers of Calais showed the effects of starvation as their seige wore on. Mozartean soprano Katherina Cavaleri grew more buxom through strategic rouging and was increasingly covered with the beauty spots that were used to cover the sores of syphilis in the 18th century.

"So few people get a chance to have any variety in a commercial costume shop," Buchwald says. "I know I would be terribly bored in professional theater. One of the things that has kept me intrigued about designing is that there is a great deal of intuition involved. I am dealing constantly with both intangibles and tangibles — from the concept of the show to the tangible items of clothing.

"This business as a whole is very much like the Mass," he says. "After all, theater began for religious purposes. Theater is a celebration of being alive in which every practitioner from the high priest to the acolyte has part of the fun.

"It's been interesting and exciting to be at OU," he concludes. "There have been some things I have had to do, but it has been rare to have a show in which I have to search desperately for excitement. If I do, I go out and buy new art supplies and try painting or sketching in a different medium. Overall, it has been an interesting and exciting experience, and I'm fortunate here at OU to have been able to have had so much variety. Not only do I get to act occasionally but I also have directed seven shows."

Ironically, the latest show Buchwald directed was noted as much for its lack of costumes as for its pacing and humor. Characters in "Doubles," a comedy about male bonding, wore locker room attire of shorts and towels. Viewers even had to be cautioned there would also be a brief flash of nothing at all!