

A Most Designing Woman

costumes that appear on the Sooner stage are the creations of Helen Forrest Lauterer

By CONNIE RUGGLES

Photos by Frank Garner



Mrs. Lauterer works on the individual tailoring of a costume for December's "Happy Time."

Atop the 54 steps to the third floor of the Drama Building is another world—a world that is the Orient, the Gay Nineties, the Elizabethan court, Siam, Rome, all rolled into one. This world is contained in a series of rooms packed with theatrical costumes which are all the creations of one woman, Helen Forrest Lauterer, professor of drama, who has been designing the costumes for O.U. stage productions for the past 20 years.

A nationally known authority on costuming, Mrs. Lauterer has coupled her acting experience with a natural talent for design to consistently produce theatrical costumes which are a perfect fit for each play, each character, each actor. Even when the performance itself has failed to draw rave notices, the review nearly always contains praise for the costumes.

Designing the costumes, however, is only one of many steps involved in costuming a play. "First I read the script," Mrs. Lauterer says, "maybe five or six times and then then outline a costume plot based on the play's circumstances, characters and so forth. Working closely with the director, I determine the general style of the play, analyzing its principals, outlining material needs. I try to 'soak' myself in the time period of the play."

After conferences with the director and the scene designer have established the color scheme, Mrs. Lauterer can begin the process of buying, draping, cutting, fitting and altering.

Buying the material is one of the most important steps in costuming a play. "Comedies generally call for brilliance of color, tragedies for low-key tones," she explains. "Certain colors and fabrics are correct for some historical periods and wrong for others."

Mrs. Lauterer feels that a costume designer must have a sound knowledge of the history of costumes matched by a good knowledge of textiles and the best possible color sense. Only then can the designer depart from the basic patterns and create something really wild and original.

She buys materials mostly on the local level, Norman and Oklahoma City. "I just start at the top of the store," she explains, "and go clear down to the basement, wherever I can find yard goods and accessories."

On these buying trips Mrs. Lauterer gets material samples and then reviews her plans. "With a handful of samples," she says, "I reread the script over coffee and a sandwich. If I can't obtain material of the right color, I often have to dye it."

Of course, as in every other field, cos-



Above—After the designing, purchasing and cutting are over, Mrs. Lauterer and her crew begin stitching the garments. Each costume must be sewn like iron to withstand future alterations.

At left—Some of the basic ideas for costume style and design come from stacks of clippings Mrs. Lauterer has collected over the years.

At right—The final product of Mrs. Lauterer's work is a well-made garment complete with lace, frills and bows, such as this dress for last spring's production of the "Imaginary Invalid."



tuning must be done with an eye toward the budget. The University Playhouse box office supports the expenses involved in producing the plays, but the budget is limited, and Mrs. Lauterer cannot afford to spend a lot of money on trimming for the costumes.

"We must depend on color for effect," she says. "Besides, trimming often produces too kaleidoscopic an effect, ruining both the costumes and the scene designs." Each costume costs from \$15 to \$18. If one garment requires more expensive material that pushes the costs higher, then another costume, for a smaller part, will have to be a remake of an existing one.

Mrs. Lauterer usually makes new costumes for the principal characters and remakes older costumes for the lesser roles. After 20 years with the University, she is still using costumes that she made when she first joined the faculty. Costumes she made during her first four years at O.U. were destroyed in a fire on the North Campus, but her other costumes are still in use.

"We try to make solid costumes that will last," she says. "Each one is lined and sewn like iron because every costume is reworked and reused time after time, especially for

the Studio Theatre productions (the student-produced drama school shows)."

Mrs. Lauterer's costumes have lasted through the years because she employs a minimum of total remaking. Taking a costume completely apart requires too much time when the garments can usually be restyled simply by making accessory and trimming changes. Minor fittings can be accomplished without taking the garment apart by taking tucks or letting out darts where the alterations will not show.

Nearly all the costumes for O.U. productions are made in the drama school. Rental is an expensive proposition with no future value for the school. "You pay money," Mrs. Lauterer says, "and after the play is over, you have nothing—no wardrobe for the next production. We try to build up our wardrobe for every period and rent only occasionally, such things as uniforms, shoes, boots and arms." These items are rented from a large costume firm in California which also supplies the movie studios.

In recent years Mrs. Lauterer has given up making preliminary sketches of her designs, doing all this work in her head. Her patterns are made by draping paper or muslin on dress forms. Occasionally she will use a commercial pattern if the play calls for contemporary styles.

"What most people fail to realize," she says, "is that the basic garment is only part of the overall costume. Usually each outfit has a headdress and undergarments and shoes, and the shoes may have bows. All this takes time.

"**I**N designing a costume you must suit the mood and qualities of the play," she explains. "You must suit the character and also the actor. These are the three big problems in design. You are dealing in a sculptural effect viewed from all sides."

Mrs. Lauterer is a firm believer that a costume designer must have acting experience. The designer must know enough about acting to know how a costume will move. She feels she must identify with the character wearing the costume.

For "Kismet," this year's first Playhouse production, there were 85 costumes. The play required elaborate headdresses and a large amount of braiding on the harem outfits. Also, each costume had to be solidly made so that the men did not need to worry about their turbans coming unwrapped on stage. Instead of wrapping the turbans, Mrs. Lauterer stitched each one on a wig block so it could be put on and taken off like

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a hat. She worked with her costume crew on "Kismet" every available minute from September 20 to curtain time on opening night November 1.

Even after the costumes are completed, the work is not over. Mrs. Lauterer has a construction crew to assist her in the actual making of the costumes, and a running crew working backstage to help the actors make changes. Both crews are made up of student volunteers.

Mrs. Lauterer's workroom is a giant, high-ceilinged room with every wall taken up by racks of costumes, closets, sewing machines, glass cases full of accessories and stacks of boxes containing hats, shoes and prop items. Another room, which was originally a laboratory when the Drama Build-

ing housed the chemistry department, has three long tables used for cutting material.

Besides the costumes in these rooms there are two large storage rooms on the fourth floor of the building filled with costumes from every time period plus clothes that have been donated to the school or bought at rummage sales.

Although the University established a school of fine arts at the turn of the century, promoting it to college status in 1924, its physical facilities have not progressed with the years. Despite Mrs. Lauterer's costume genius, she is handicapped in the final staging by the inadequacies of Holmberg Hall. With no dressing rooms backstage, characters with a number of quick changes are often forced to change costumes in the hallway, since there is no time to run upstairs to a classroom. In recent years, too, actresses with elaborate floor length gowns have had to make precarious stage entrances across the foot pedals of the Holmberg Hall organ.

Mrs. Lauterer has worked doggedly to build up the present wardrobe array. Her first few years at O.U. were the worst. With absolutely no costumes to work with, she had to make all new ones for each play. But Mrs. Lauterer came to the University with a vast amount of experience in this field.

At Carnegie Institute of Technology, where she was graduated in 1922, she worked her way through school as the student director of costume design. She spent two years acting on Broadway and three years as actress and costume designer for the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. From 1927 to 1931 she worked at the Cleveland Playhouse doing 20 major productions a year. At that time she was still acting as well as designing, but the production pace forced her to choose between the two. For economic reasons she elected to be a designer. The biggest costume job of her career came in 1952 when she did 130 costumes in 19 days for the annual summer production of "The Horn of the West" in Boone, North Carolina.

Until 1956 Mrs. Lauterer continued



Racks upon racks of Mrs. Lauterer's costumes pack the wardrobe room in the Drama Building.



For "Kismet" Helen Lauterer made 85 elaborate costumes including these detailed harem outfits.

working the summer theatre circuit around the country, leaving her only a month's rest before returning to her work at the University. But the pace finally proved too much, so she gave up her summer work to rest and travel. Last summer she went to Japan and Hong Kong to see the Oriental theatre, having already visited the European theatre several times. Travel has become an important part of Mrs. Lauterer's career. "As a designer," she says, "I feel it is up to me to go and to look—to see as much as I can to broaden my outlook."

Making full use of her acting experience as well as her knowledge of design, Mrs. Lauterer also teaches a full schedule—a course in beginning acting, one in intermediate acting, one in costume design and one in costume history.

"This whole business is such fun—if you don't have too much pressure," she says. "The pressure wears you down, but the job is never dull. Every new play is a new problem."

But the audience never sees the problems behind the costumes in a play. All they see is the result of an idea which began in the imagination of Helen Forrest Lauterer, an incredibly designing woman.