FLOWER DRUM SONG: COSTUME DESIGN AND PRODUCTION OF A CULTURAL MUSICAL

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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts
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by
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*Flower Drum Song*: Costume Design and Production of a Cultural Musical

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DEDICATION

This Project is lovingly dedicated to my husband, James L. Johnson and my family who have been my constant source of support. Without their love and support this project would not have been possible.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*Flower Drum Song:* Costume Design and Production of a Cultural Musical
by
Caroline Rousset-Johnson
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts with a Concentration in Design and Technical Theatre
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The purpose of this thesis is to highlight and showcase all aspects of the costume design process involved in the San Diego Asian American Repertory Theatre’s (SDAART) production of Henry D. Hwang’s 2002 revival of *Flower Drum Song* at the La Jolla Playhouse, Adele Shank Theater, San Diego, California in May of 2011. The original 1958 musical is a Rodgers and Hammerstein film and theatrical production based on the novel *the Flower Drum Song* written by C.Y. Lee.

Designing this project required detailed research of 1960’s Chinese-American culture and events in San Francisco, California, along with the Mainland Chinese experiences of this period. The project entailed close collaboration with director Peter Cirino and fellow designers, development of a visual concept and costume construction, and culminated in the production itself. This thesis features the problems encountered and the solutions I implemented in order to accomplish a successful outcome in communicating the essence of characters at a cultural crossroad that resulted in a well-received play.
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CHAPTER 1

STORY SYNOPSIS

The 2002 revival of *Flower Drum Song* tells the story of a young Chinese opera performer, Mei-Li, who flees Mao Zedong’s China and its Cultural Revolution after the brutal death of her father at the hands of Mao’s Red Guards. Mei-Li lands in San Francisco’s Chinatown at the home of her father’s old friend Mr. Wang Chi-Yang, the owner of the often-deserted Golden Pearl Theatre. At the theatre, Mei-Li meets and quickly becomes attracted to Ta, Wang’s son, who himself covets the attention of the beautiful and ambitious Chinese-American stripper, Linda Low. During the week, much to his chagrin, Ta performs Chinese opera with his father in exchange for the use of the venue one night a week where he is allowed to transform the theatre into a contemporary nightclub with Linda as the star. Soon the nightclub’s success catches the attention of the talent agent, Rita Liang, who pushes Wang to turn the theater into a fulltime nightclub under the new name, the Chop Suey Club. Meanwhile, Linda befriends Mei-Li who now works as a waitress for Mr. Wang. Linda, under Ta’s strong disapproval, encourages Mei-Li to welcome her new freedom from the oppression of Mao’s regime by assimilating into the American lifestyle. Mei-Li, heartbroken by Ta’s rejection and having trouble acculturating to her new lifestyle, leaves her waitress job at the club to reunite with Chao, a man she met on the journey from China. Back at the club, Wang and Rita Liang find common ground and fall in love. After being rejected by Linda, Ta discovers that his true love is for Mei-Li.
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE COSTUME DESIGN
AND PREPARATION FOR THE FLOWER DRUM SONG

When director Peter Cirino invited me to join his design team at the San Diego Asian American Repertory Theatre as costume designer for the upcoming spring 2011 stage musical production of the 2002 revival Flower Drum Song that was to perform at the La Jolla Playhouse’s Theodore and Adele Shank Theatre, I gladly accepted. This offer came at a most opportune time for I was hoping to have an Asian-American play as my thesis and was delighted I could propose this to my committee, as well as the Director of the School of Theatre, Television, and Film, Randy Reinholz.

Immediately after my phone call with the director, four important questions surfaced: What do I know about Chinese history and its culture of this period? What are the differences between traditional Mainland Chinese culture and Chinese-American culture of San Francisco, California of the 1960s? What was the experience of Asian nightclubs in San Francisco in the middle and late twentieth century? And would this revival play receive my school director’s, as well as my thesis committees’ stamps of approval? With these questions in mind, and before receiving my script from Peter, I decided to dive right into the San Diego State University\textsuperscript{1} Library and began my historical research of 1960s Mainland China and the 1950 to 1970 San Francisco Chinatown Silver Age Nightclubs. Luck was on my side for China’s Cultural Revolution and the history of the Asian American experience in California are rich and well recorded.

Toward the end of the 1950s, Mao’s China was in a transitional period from the failed economic program, the Great Leap Forward, to the social and political chaos of the Cultural Revolution (Figure 1). During this dark period, thousands of Chinese citizens fled China to

\textsuperscript{1} San Diego State University is hereafter referred to as “SDSU”.
escape political instability and repression to start new lives in the United States of America. Coincidently, the U.S.A. had opened its doors to immigrants with the new *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* implemented by Congress, also called the *Hart-Celler Act* (Starkweather). This new law offered to many skilled Mainland Chinese laborers a new home where they could freely exercise their skills. The law also allowed many Chinese immigrants to reunite with their family members who had immigrated to the U.S.A. earlier.

In contrast to China, the U.S.A. offered new cultural and economic freedoms. In America, these newly arrived Chinese immigrants were witness to many new radical movements that were free from the oppressive policies of their homeland. These American
cultural phenomena included the counterculture movement of the 1960’s, the African-American civil rights movement, the Hispanic and Chicano movement, the rise of second-wave feminism, the anti-war movement, and changing views on traditional authority. A new generation of Chinese Americans celebrated cultural assimilation and broke free of the traditional social constraints of the previous age by embracing a multitude of cultural movements. Examples of these revolutionary experiences included individual freedom, Tinseltown, and Rock & Roll.

The Chinese who grew up in America in the early twentieth century were as different from their traditional parents as hamburgers and Chop Suey. They spoke English without accents and used American slang; they listened to the radio, read comic books, and went to the movies, where they saw Anna May Wong playing leading roles. If Anna May Wong could be a glamorous star; reasoned some of the American-born Chinese girls, why couldn’t they? (Robbins 3)

With this new found liberation, San Francisco, along with New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, saw a surge of Chinese nightclubs where dancers such as Dorothy Toy and Paul Wing were billed as the Chinese Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers (Figure 2), and singers such as Larry Ching, Santey Toy (Figure 3), and Noel Toy were called the Chinese Frank Sinatra, the Asian Fred Astaire, and the Oriental Sally Rand respectively (Figure 4). A few days after my conversation with Peter Cirino I received a copy of the script from the stage manager, Tom Kaye. By then I had already amassed a considerable amount of research and collected a large amount of images and information on this period from books, articles, and film footage via the Internet. Armed with a solid understanding of the 1960’s historical context of China and the United States, along with the relationship between the cultures, I began my first reading of the script. This reading immediately took the form of pure enjoyment and glee. It soon became apparent that the script provided a lush cultural landscape to work from, full of diversity in characters, and with that, costumes ideas. The script analysis work only started at the second reading where I set in motion the division of each character’s traits, created a step-by step breakdown chart, along with a costume plot chart for a clear view of timelines and character appearances onstage. There were number of questions ranging from the director’s vision of the play to production schedule and the costume budget among others. Once the placement for each character had been determined and the timelines had been outlined, I delved deeper into my creative research. This research
included images, moods, and color temperature for inspirations (Figure 5). These steps in the preparation process were crucial in my creative process for they helped solidify my overall vision for *Flower Drum Song* and also allowed me to communicate my ideas to both the director and the design team.

At my first production meeting I was introduced to the fellow members of the design team, who consist of the director Peter Cirino, the scenic designer Dom Abbenante, the Lighting Designer Lila Lace Flores, the Stage Manager Tom Kaye, and the La Jolla Playhouse Theatre-in-Residence Program Coordinator, Andy Lowe. Peter laid out his vision for this play and stressed the importance of accuracy regarding the time period in which the prologue, as acting agent, would reveal to the audience. In addition to the prologue scene, Peter also underscored five musical scenes in which I, as costume designer, had to focus on. These scenes were: prologue: “A Hundred Million Miracles”; act 1, scene 2: Jazz Bit; act 1,
scene 5: “Grant Avenue”; act 1, scene 8: “Fan Tan Fannie” and “Gliding Through My Memories”; and act 2, scene 1: “Chop Suey”. As we concluded our meeting, we all agreed to meet with Andy Low for a tour of the Adele Shank Theatre the following week.

Our second meeting coincided with our theatre tour and a meeting of the San Diego Asian American Repertory Theatre board members at the Adele Shank Theatre. At this meeting, I was given a chance to observe the discussion on the budget, advertising, and public relations for Flower Drum Song. Although this meeting covered strictly the administrative side of the show, it was greatly instructive and informative for it permitted me to learn about a successful production development. During the week prior to our third production meeting, I continued my research on costumes and had begun to work on my preliminary sketches, swatching for fabrics, and the making of samples of various accessory pieces that would accompany the costumes.

Due to the high energy and fast moving pace of our production of the play, with limited scenic changes, much of the timeline of the story was to be established through
costume narrative. There were many dance costumes and fast changes required by the production. Special attention to details was necessary to achieve those, for example the addition of quick-rigged closures. With the costume budget always in mind, decisions had to be made on how many pieces would be built and what pieces would be bought or rented.

Before my next meeting with Peter and the design team, I showed my sketches to my adviser, Denitsa Bliznakova, seeking additional guidance and pointers. Denitsa and I discussed my choices for the looks, silhouettes, and styles of the costumes. She offered several design solutions to enhance their outcomes. I told Denitsa that one of my biggest challenges at this point was my limited budget for such a large show. She immediately gave me the good news; she had been able to secure items for costume and prop rentals with the
SDSU Costume Shop free of charge for me. Having the free rental access of the costumes and props freed up a large portion of the budget for the additional built pieces I had in mind. With fairly detailed preliminary sketches, fabric swatches, and color themes in hand, I met with Peter and my fellow design team members a few days later. At this meeting, I began to discuss my approach to *Flower Drum Song*. Using the silhouettes for each character, I gave a detailed explanation of my choices by emphasizing the historical context, the environmental events, and the fashions of the time period, as well as the practical styles for the dance numbers and the need for quick-change costumes. These drawings helped our design team to expand our individual ideas into a collective vision that we could unveil to the audience. During this meeting, Peter announced that he had decided *Flower Drum Song* would be staged loosely on the “play within a play” concept. Peter explained that he wanted to create a cabaret atmosphere that the audience would experience as they entered the theatre and themselves become characters in the play by having members of the audience sitting at dining tables within the set. Adding to this new development were two extra characters, a
cigarette girl and a coat check girl, who would circulate between the stage, the actors, and the audience.

The final sketches, that included additional designs for the new characters, were presented to the design team and received the director’s approval on the fourth design meeting. With the director’s consent, all the anticipation that had been slowly building since the first design meeting went into full-blown excitement. *Flower Drum Song* was about to come alive with its characters sauntering into our reality! With only one month and a half to the opening night there was much to be accomplished and time was of the essence. I sat down with my two assistants, Mayra Chavez and Sara Haye, with several itemized to-do lists and job descriptions. Sara is a talented seamstress with abundant knowledge of fabric manipulation and is skilled in fabric dyeing techniques. Therefore, she would be responsible for the construction, embellishment, and distressing of the costumes. Mayra is a resourceful SDSU School of Art, Design, and Art History undergraduate student who possesses strong organization skills. She would be in charge, but not limited to, the upkeep of the Shop Bible, shop and fitting schedule list, costume piece and costume budget lists, measurement lists, production fabric log, costume receipts and expenditure list, and many other administrative duties.

In the following chapters I will further elaborate on my role as costume designer for the *Flower Drum Song* production and the processes that influenced my design decisions. In Chapter 3, I will describe my research methods and the importance of accuracy in depicting the characters in their proper context. I will discuss the collaborative effort with the director and design team and how this effected character development in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 focuses on the logistics and implementation of the design plan. In Chapter 6, I will detail the building progression of the costumes for the Chinese opera scenes, while Chapter 7 will concentrate on the decisions and methods used to create the cabaret scene costumes for the “Fan Tan Fannie” and “Chop Suey” numbers. I will address the dressing of the large ensemble cast in Chapter 8 and finish my descriptions with a discussion of the costumes for the wedding parade in Chapter 9. I conclude this discourse in Chapter 10 with the general results of the design process and overall interpretation of my experience.
CHAPTER 3

COSTUMES RESEARCH FOR FLOWER DRUM SONG

With the advent of the digital age, the twenty first century has realized extraordinary progress in the use of technology in gathering and distributing information. With these new tools at our fingertips, sophisticated theatre and moviegoers are now more than ever acutely aware of fashion and historical accuracy, thus challenging costume designers to reach a higher level of vigilance in their research. Clothing for theatre is no longer a mere spectacle and inadequate research invites a barrage of negative criticisms. The fine art of costuming a play demands in-depth understanding of the director’s vision, accurate interpretation of the playwright’s intent, and the understanding of a script’s dramatic composition; as well as a solid comprehension of the history, locations, cultural background, and of course the character traits of each actors in the play. While Boucher stated that the role of the costume designer is to showcase the costume narrative through: “... a religious belief, magic, aesthetics, personal status, a wish to be distinguished from or to emulate” (Boucher and Deslandres 9). However, my view is that the costume designer must also reveal all nuances of the personality attributes of the characters.

The costuming process for Flower Drum Song was divided into several steps in which my first course of action, as discussed in Chapter 1, was to investigate the events that transpired during the 1960s in China and in the U.S.A. A trip to the Malcolm A. Love Library at SDSU, with its extensive period specific books and journal collections, gave a good jump-start to my research. To help me visualize the general mood and personalize looks for each of the characters of the play, following my periodical literary research and my first reading of the script, I watched many documentary films of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the evolution of Chinese American performers in the U.S.A. Using many diverse sources, such as YouTube, Internet Archive.org, The Guardian, and the BBC News Magazine, I was able to get an extremely accurate depiction of the cultural attire of these groups.
By the mid-twentieth century, new image recording technologies with affordable film development costs, propelled photo cameras and the resulting documented images into many households around the globe. These technologies were previously limited only to print mass media outlets, such as magazine and newspaper publishers, and to well-to-do families. The direct result of this access to affordable image creating technology permits us extraordinary eyewitness accounts of past lifestyles from everyday clothing to fashion trends and cultural influences. Periodical photographs and fashion magazines were indispensable to my designs for they delineated the garment styles, body forms, and silhouettes of different groups based on ages, times, economic status, locations, climate, environments, and culture. Once this general overall research was completed, I began to narrow the focus of my research to the specific group of Western style entertainers within the San Francisco Chinese American community. This subculture of Chinese Americans represented American-born individuals, who related more to the American way of life then the traditional Chinese lifestyle of their parents.

Looking at the many pictures of Asian American female performers on stage during the Silver ages of Chinese nightclubs in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York Chinatowns, I noticed many of their exotic costumes were combinations of vibrant colors, brilliant sequins, massive ostrich feathers, and revealing attire was the norm (Figure 6). These costume displays seemed to express a desire for assimilation into western cultural forms and a clear rejection of all identifying links with traditional Chinese artistic and cultural forms. Testimonies and various anecdotes from periodical articles as well as other sources supported my observations. Charlie Low, owner of the Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco, explained: “I wanted to present the modern version of the Chinese girl, not the old fashioned way, all bundled up with four or five pairs of trousers…. Chinese have limbs just as pretty as anyone else” (Chun 66). This sentiment was also prevalent in the acts of the Chinese male entertainers who often wore tuxedo suits or single-breasted jackets over dark straight-cut trousers. However both genders were confronted by audience expectations for exotic Asian costumes and sometimes this resulted in cartoonish portrayals of the “Chinaman” and the “Dragon Lady,” with the women wearing the sexed-up Cheongsam or
Qipao gown, while the men would don the gaudy Changshan with a Gua Pi Mao cap,\(^2\) as a strategic financial move to sell their acts (Figure 7).

Historic film footage helped me to capture the visceral sensibility and general mood of the period and revealed people’s attitudes, reactions and emotions. This consequently enriched the outcome of my costumes. For example, when watching events from the Chinese Cultural Revolution on film, I could not help but feel the struggle and desperation in one group, while witnessing the aggression and anger of the opposing group, yet overall I could still recognize the common thread of suffering and poverty that they both shared. In addition to the commonly shared hardships, the Chinese people were pressured into exorcising Mao’s Four Olds\(^3\) by condemning all spiritual corruption as an expression of a bourgeois past and

\(^2\) A six sections hat common during the Qing dynasty of China.  
\(^3\) Stands for: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits (Lu 61).
implementing new ideas judged to be in line with communist ideology. These images influenced my costume designs for these two opposing groups, resulting in designs that included dressing the proletariat in patched garments. Emerging from this chaotic political landscape is the gentle and sweet young woman, Mei-Li, who in my view is emblematic of the old China. I decided to dress Mei-Li for most of the play in a loose-fitting burgundy Qipao dress (Figure 8), that had a high neck and slits on both sides, over black straight slacks to depict the last fragment of a millennium of traditional culture that was about to vanish in this new China.

For my research the lack of nuance in many still photographs underscored the necessity of watching documentary films. The movement of a film’s subjects through their natural landscapes often reveals subtle characteristics missed in a still photograph. As I

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4 A Chinese traditional dress that originated from China's Manchu Nationality. Also known as Cheongsam.
watched numerous recordings of Chinese nightclubs in America on YouTube and the award winning documentary film Forbidden City, U.S.A., it became clear to me that beyond the mesmerizing all-American extravagance on stage, Asian American performers were fighting against painful cultural barriers and the inherent racism present in the entertainment industry for their civil rights amid their love of American song and dance. In their search for acceptance and recognition in the Western Hemisphere, these pioneers took center stage in the battle of defending their new identity as Americans while at the same time breaking from the cultural impositions of their parents. These sentiments are embodied in the characters of the exotic dancer, Linda Low, and her fellow female dancers, the businesswoman Rita Liang, and the young Ta. Throughout the play, Linda Low and the other female dancers wore several revealing outfits, which I will discuss in detail in the following chapters.
To showcase the wittiness and the successful business-like demeanor of Rita Liang, I envisioned an up-to-date fashionable woman, who was confident in her ability to convince anyone into new business ventures or to seal any deal she judged profitable. Using sources from various magazines of the period, such as Vogue, Life, Harper’s Bazaar, the Getty Images, Sears’s catalogue, and the Internet, I was able to conceptualize Rita’s look. The 1960s encompassed a wide range of fashions and styles varied from the simple geometric elegance of Jackie Kennedy early in the decade, to the wildly colorful and free form self-expression of the hippie counterculture towards the decade’s end. Although vintage fashion magazines provided me with ample information about the styles and the silhouettes of the time, the task of finding image resources for Asian American women in the 1960s was more difficult than I anticipated. Dressing Rita depended mostly on everyday Asian American pictures found on the Internet and as it turned out, within the circle of my own family and friends. Photos of my mother and her many friends were a great source of information as they were the true testimony of the Asian American businesswomen’s experience. Rita’s fashion style consisted of an A-line silhouette varying from a conservatively styled skimmer dress and coat ensemble with plain neckline (Figure 9) to an A-line skirt with cardigan sweater over silk shirt.

Dressing Ta required applying the nuance of his conventional attributes with the rebellious characteristics that would display his individual traits as well as his inner conflict. Like many young Asian Americans of his generation, Ta viewed himself as American-born Chinese fully integrated “into a homogeneous part of the majority society’s core culture” (Chun 79). However, the acceptance of this self-identification proved to be a constant clash with his father’s devotion to Chinese traditions. Young Americans of the early 1960s were a concern for conventional society because they projected a rejection of previous generations’ traditions, social, and culture norms. Rebuffing old conformities, they embraced individual freedom that was often manifested through rebellious attitudes and fashion statements. Despite this shifting movement for most of the decade, young men largely adopted casual conservative styles reminiscent of the clean-cut middle class from the 1950s with minimal variations. The popularity of straight-cut dungarees, corduroys, and khaki pants was still prominent with the younger group of this time period. The exception to these fashion carryovers from the previous decade was white T-shirts, often coupled with sweatshirt
jackets or knitted cardigans, now replaced the short-sleeved cotton button-downs. Using rock 'n' roll icon Elvis Presley and movies such as Rebel Without a Cause, Blue Denim, Grease, and the TV sitcom Happy Days as references, I visualized Ta sporting blue jeans, T-shirts, and cardigans during the day and dark two-piece dress suits (Figure 10) as the nightclub’s emcee at night. My research for Ta also influenced my costume design for the ensemble that represented the Chinese American group of Flower Drum Song. Taking references directly from Grease and Happy Days, my aim was to utilize the ensemble to strengthen the 1960s California warm weather looks. Male ensemble costumes consisted of casual clothes in solid colors, plaids, and striped button-down shirts over denim jeans, flat front slacks, corduroys or khaki pants. A few characters wore narrow neckties with knitted cardigans or striped windbreaker jackets, while others wore open collars. All wore sneakers. Female ensemble
costumes consisted of crop top striped shirts over shorts. Due to many overlapping scenes, which included dance numbers, for practicality and timesaving, I decided to dress the female ensemble in character dance shoes throughout the play (Figure 11).

The commonality of costume I found during my research for Wang and Chi, who represented an older generation of Chinese in China and in America, was the popular suit referred to as the Tangzhuang. The Tangzhuang was a Chinese long-sleeve jacket with short upright collar that originated at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Tangzhuang evolved from Manchu’s Ma Gua. 1960s older Chinese men on both continents still favored the same suits originated at the end of the Qing Dynasty. They were comprised of a silk-embroidered jacket.

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5 The Qing Dynasty was the last imperial dynasty of China, ruling from 1644 to 1912 with a brief, abortive restoration in 1917.
with Mandarin collar and Chinese Button knots often in gold, red, dark brown, green, or navy and loose fitting pants of the same material. Wang had a lime green Tangzhuang suit while Chi had a navy one (Figure 12).

Finally, my research focused on Ta and Mei-Li’s wedding scene that is also the final scene. After conducting extensive research on Chinese wedding customs, I discovered that traditional Chinese wedding costumes differed from region to region. In Northern China, the official bridal dress is red with elaborate silver and gold brocade called Qipao, also known as Cheongsam, which is a one-piece frock with high collar, closely fitted with slits on the sides that originated from the Manchu ethnic minority. Southern Chinese brides could opt for the Qipao or the elaborate bridal brocaded two-piece costume made of silk called Kwa. Despite these style differences, these dresses all shared some common characteristic features, such as the vibrant red silk fabrics and intricate embroidered motifs of golden or silver threads. Another common article to all brides was the red veil (Figure 13).
The traditional Chinese groom wore a black, gold, or red silk jacket or vest Ma Gua, over black or red typical Manchu costume called Changshan or Dàguà, often of the same fabric as his bride’s attire. To the Chinese, red is the color of prosperity, good luck, and auspiciousness. Hence, traditional lucky blood red is the primary color for all Chinese weddings (Figure 14).

In contrast, western wedding gowns of the 1960s offered brides a wide range of styles often reflecting the fashion trends of the time, as well as the political and social mood. References for most of this decade depict an easy blend between conservative, traditional, and freestyle wedding dresses, in evidence from the middle class to the elite, and can be found pictured in great quantity in broadcast and print media. This smorgasbord of style offered an
impressive collection of dresses that included the empire waistline, A-line, fitted sleeveless sheath with bare neckline, and mini skirt silhouettes. Although the spectrum of style was wide, I noticed that wedding convention for bride-wear remained unwavering when it came to color and textile: white and lace.

Using contemporary sources, such as YouTube, movies, and periodicals, I was able to visualized Ta and Mei-Li’s wedding as a message of cultural emergence where tradition and modernity blend effortlessly. Preserving the red as the wedding color theme, Ta had a long red Dàguà with black label and red silk pants while Mei-Li wore a red satin mermaid skirt with a red brocade halter. The wedding party all had Western style attire in red and black (Figure 15).
Figure 15. Left: Preliminary sketch for Mei-Li’s wedding gown by author. Right: Ta played by David Amstrong and Mei-Li played by Mindy Chu. Source: (right) Zuniga-Williams, Adriana. Flower Drum Song Production Photographs. San Diego, CA: Adriana Zuniga Photography, 2011. CD-ROM.
CHAPTER 4

COLLABORATION AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The Flower Drum Song design team consisted principally of five members that included the director, Peter James Cirino, the choreographer, Gina Ma, the scenic and projection designer, Dominic Abbenante, the lighting designer, Lila Lace Flores, and myself. I had the pleasure of working with Peter in past productions and from that experience I felt a true connection had been established. Dominic and I had been classmates at SDSU and we had collaborated on several school projects with successful final results. I met Lila at our first production meeting and Gina a few weeks later when the rehearsals had began.

As costume designer, my job is to illustrate the character traits of the actors through the costumes. My role allows me to offer input on how I perceive the characters, thus determining what costumes would best portray these character attributes. It is also my job to present designs that support the message of the play, the director’s vision, as well as enhancing the stage overall presentation. My contribution to the play depends on my ability to present compelling ideas through inspirational images and sketches, and to communicate a clear visual concept. But at the end of the day, the final decision always rests in the hands of the director. In the case of Flower Drum Song, I was pleased to have Peter’s strong support and trust on my side and the knowledge that my contribution aligned fully with his vision.

Having worked with Peter before, I knew I should expect a well laid out concept with strong visual ideas. During our first production meeting, Peter discussed his points of view about Flower Drum Song and outlined the direction in which he would like the play to be presented. Peter told us that we should “stick” close to Henry D. Wang’s message and that historical accuracy is not only essential, but also crucial to the production value. He explained that the challenges faced by immigrants during this time period are still relevant to the audience and nostalgia was a key point to the intended audience. Before the meeting adjourned, Peter told us that he wanted to recreate the intimate ambiance and style of a 1960’s cabaret for the set and that as designers we all should focus on the five musical scenes discussed in Chapter 2.
After a week of research and sketching out my preliminary characters, I was more than ready to present my costume design concept to the rest of the team and excited to begin the collaboration process as well as to see what my team had come up with theirs. This is one of my favorite design production moments for it is the time in which I get to find out if I was on the right track and that collectively we were all on the same path. The good news was, we were! Don took the lead by showing us an image of Mao Tse-tung (Figure 16), which gave us a good starting point. We all agreed that the projection of this iconic image accompanying the introduction of the ensemble dressed in a combination of the Red Guard uniforms and patched garments would be perfect for our prologue.


We proceeded to discuss my costume design and character development, which received overall approval with one small tweak to the costume of the character Chin. Peter wanted to portray Chin as a gentle and understanding uncle image with a hint of effeminacy. We came to the conclusion that Chin would represent the mother figure in the Wang’s household, which meant I would have to redesign a new set of costumes to redefine his character traits (Figure 17). Before closing the meeting, Peter produced an eleven-inch tall
and five-inch square at the base metal sculpture of the Eiffel Tower and requested that I incorporate it into Chin’s second costume. To alter my vision for Chin’s new looks was not a difficult process and within two days I was able to show sketches to Peter and my design team. The new looks met with strong support from Peter, as well as my fellow team members (Figure 18).

From the first production meeting to the opening night, the exchange of ideas and suggestions continued to flow while our collaboration proceeded flawlessly. I met with the lighting designer, Lila, several times before tech week to collaborate and experiment on the lighting effects on the costumes; consequently, this gave us an advantage ahead of the beginning of tech. My collaboration with the choreographer, Gina Ma, did not begin until
rehearsals were well underway. There were many small adjustments and changes to the costumes to facilitate the dancers’ movements, as well as to accommodate the fast changes between the dance performance numbers. My one disappointment came with the elimination of the Manchu headdresses due to Gina’s incorporation of several cartwheels performed by the dancers during “Fan Tan Fannie” (Figure 19).

Working with Peter has been exciting and a true learning experience. His clear vision of the play inspired the design team. He allowed artistic freedom and readily accepted my visions and designs during the production process.
CHAPTER 5

GETTING FLOWER DRUM SONG TOGETHER

The approval of the final designs also marked the most challenging part of bringing
the costume design ideas to life. First cast members were called for measurements. This was
followed by numerous trips that included swatching for fabrics, buying garments from
department stores, vintage clothing boutiques and thrift stores. The search for the right
costume pieces continued with a visit to the SDSU Theatre Department costumes stock (for
borrowed costumes) and a visit to friends and family in the Asian community of Santa Ana,
CA where possible donations could be found.

Before embarking on the shopping field trips, I sat down for a long meeting with my
two assistants, Mayra Chavez and Sara Hayes, to put forward a comprehensive and carefully
organized plan that included the development of costume construction activities schedule,
fitting schedules, and the logistics for the buying of costume pieces and materials in an
attempt to minimize possible mistakes and maximize our production time. During this
meeting, I also introduced my final sketches with detailed explanations of each design. I
delegated to Mayra most of the administrative jobs of updating the Shop Bible and keeping
track of expenditures, classifying source files, filing of receipts, measurement lists, build list,
pull/rent/borrow list, and contact list, which I would frequently review throughout each
week. Next, I laid out a costume building timeline with Sara and her responsibilities covered
garment construction, fabric and garment dyeing, decorations and embellishments on the
garments, and last but not least, drafting patterns.

With Mayra’s help, we began to pull costumes, shoes, accessories, and props from
Peter’s personal stock as well as SDSU’s costume stock. Much of the borrowed costumes
were not available for rehearsal use, therefore we had to quickly build mock-up costumes,
such as Mei-Li and Ta’s opera gowns, for the actors to practice with during the rehearsal
stage. The 1960s have proved a popular decade in the public imagination due in part to its
social changes, but also due to its relative proximity to present time, so finding Western style
clothing for men and women were relatively easy tasks. All of the Western costumes came
from either the SDSU’s costume stock or directly from the actors.
One of my concerns was finding Oriental costumes for both male and female actors, but as it turned out many thrift shops in San Diego, Santa Ana, and Los Angeles carried a wide range of Kimonos and an assortment of Chinese robes that included Qipaos, Changshan, and Tangzhuangs. All of the costumes for the ensemble were bought at different second hand stores with Mei-Li’s skirt and Linda’s red dress for the wedding that I found in Burbank, CA being the most expensive purchases. The purchase of Mei-Li’s skirt was at a used clothing store specializing in garments from TV and film, called It’s A Wrap!, and Linda’s red dress at the vintage store named Hubba Hubba. A large portion of my budget went to the purchase of the fabric for Linda and her dancers as well as the Chinese maiden opera dress. The rest of the budget went to the purchase of trims, dyes, paints, patterns, frog buttons and other various notions, dry cleaner fees for borrowed garments, and travel expenses.

Due to the budget limitations I had to make choices on what costumes to build and what to buy. I discussed with Peter the five scenes on which he wanted me to focus on and we both decided that we would build the costumes for Linda and her dancers for the “Fan Tan Fannie” number, the maiden opera dress, and Mei-Li’s wedding halter-top. My research on the cabaret dancers of the 1960s gave me a clear visual idea for Linda and her dancers’ costumes. After a day of searching, I found the perfect pattern from McCall. The maiden opera dress was trickier to build because three different actors would wear it and the exchange would happen on stage.

In the beginning the challenges my team and I faced in acquiring costume pieces that would accurately display my vision for the characters of the play seemed daunting, but through teamwork and a well-orchestrated plan we were able to realize this vision. It was an added benefit that I had the additional help and support of the actors, volunteers, Peter and the Asian community in Santa Ana.

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6 A Japanese traditional garment worn by men, women and children. Kimonos are T-shaped, straight-lined robes with attached collars and long, wide sleeves. Kimono are wrapped around the body, always with the left side over the right, and secured by a sash called an Obi.
CHAPTER 6

THE BUILDING OF THE CHINESE OPERA

COSTUMES

The designing of the Chinese opera and cabaret dancer costumes was an important study in contrast. In this chapter I will describe the challenges I faced with the design and building of the costumes for the play’s Chinese opera scenes, while in Chapter 7, I will provide detailed information on the design and construction processes for the cabaret dance scenes. My research on Chinese opera costumes underlined the complexity of China’s rich culture and long-standing traditions. Being a large, diverse country, China offers numerous regional interpretations of Chinese opera, each with a long history dating back as far as the third century CE. This extensive history ensures that the players and audiences are highly knowledgeable of the conventions of each of these performance styles, thus fostering high degrees of critique and appreciation.

There are nearly four hundred forms of Chinese opera, of which seven are the most notable. These seven include the Beijing, Yuju and Huangmei operas of the northern regions and the Huju, Yue, Kunqu and Cantonese operas of the southern regions. Although these operas are performed in different dialects with different dances, music, themes, and sometimes with slightly different endings to traditional storylines, they all shared 6 common characteristics: simplicity of the sets, meager use of props, costumes and makeup that define performer roles, fanciful acrobatics, and martial arts.

To design the maiden costume for Flower Drum Song, which would be shared by Mel-Li, Linda, and Ta, I focused on the three maiden characters from the two most popular opera styles in the Western hemisphere. These are the Beijing and the Cantonese operas. The maiden characters in these two opera forms are the Hua Dan, Faa Daan,7 and Yi Faa Daan.8 The Beijing Hua Dan characters, who are mostly from humble families or the maidservants

7 Faa Daan - Literally ‘flower’ of the ball.
8 Yi Faa Daan - Literally, second flower, this role is known as a supporting female.
of rich families, are cheerful and lively young girls with agility in their gestures and movements. The Cantonese Faa Daan and Yi Faa Daan are lively and vivacious unmarried girls from the middle and upper social classes. Hua Dan, Faa Daan, and Yi Faa Daan costumes can be of either Hanfu or Manchu style. Although Chinese maiden outfits offer very few differentiations in silhouettes and styles, the elaborate embroideries and the embellishments on these garments are the main indicators of their social status (Figure 20).

My design for the *Flower Drum Song* maiden costume is strongly influenced by the costumes of the Beijing and the Cantonese operas with some modifications. As mentioned above, three different characters would wear this same costume throughout the play with changes occurring on stage. The first challenge was to make the gown in such a way that it could accommodate the various sizes of the actors playing the roles of Ta, Mei-li and Linda. The second challenge was for the gown to facilitate the numerous quick on-stage changes. Next, the costume design had to be sexy enough to showcase Linda’s legs in her performance in the “I Enjoy Being a Girl” number. After some reflection, I decided to merge the Hanfu and Manchu style into one for my maiden gown. This decision came from the realization that by the 1950s the Chinese American community in San Francisco was a melting pot of Chinese from different ethnic backgrounds, therefore, I wanted to showcase this “mélange” through the garments. The *Flower Drum Song* maiden’s upper garment’s fabric consisted of blue flower motifs on a white silk background. Sporting Shuixiu\(^9\) sleeves, this Hanfu hip-length tunic is called a Yi. It had loose lapels with blue and white tassel trims, an open center front, and a belt tied at the waist. A yellow long skirt called a Chang completed the ensemble. The Chang is similar to a long A-line Western skirt. However, to facilitate Linda’s dance movements and to showcase her legs, I designed and drafted an A-line wrap skirt pattern before passing it to Mayra for the building of it (Figure 21).

Next came the research for Wang’s male opera costume. I chose to dress Wang in a Hoy Ching/Fùguìyī character. The characters of Scholars commonly wear these costumes in traditional Beijing and Cantonese operas. The Cantonese Hoy Ching or the Beijing Fùguìyī characters wore long Manchu-style gowns, which have secured lapels crossing the base of the neck with no front openings and are sometimes belted at the waist (Figure 22). These garments are paired with light colored or white trousers. I purchased a black kimono with small-embroidered black and white stylized Yin and Yang symbols in a repeated pattern at the American Way Thrift Store in Burbank, CA. Using Liquitex Acrylic Paints and fabric

\(^9\) Also known as water sleeves. There are the lengths of white silk attached to the sleeves hems of court robes and upper-status dress (Bonds 102).

medium, the volunteer students hand painted red paint over each white Yang. After the painting process, I added white Shuixiu sleeves to the Kimono and finally embellished it with black tassel trim at the shoulders (Figure 23).

![Figure 23. Wang played by Albert Park. Source: Zuniga-Williams, Adriana. Flower Drum Song Production Photographs. San Diego, CA: Adriana Zuniga Photography, 2011. CD-ROM.](image)

The building of these opera costumes proved challenging, but also a fulfilling and rewarding experience. My research for these pieces enabled me to draw from the great Chinese opera costume traditions and adapt my designs to meet the requirements of our production. My understanding of Wang’s sentimental attachment to his cultural traditions was greatly enhanced by my exploration of the beauty represented in the time-honored costumes of Chinese opera. In addition, the flexibility required in the design of the maiden costume was another example of the demands and limitations our production created (Figure 24).
Figure 24. Mei-Li played by Mindy Chu. Source: Zuniga-Williams, Adriana. Flower Drum Song Production Photographs. San Diego, CA: Adriana Zuniga Photography, 2011. CD-ROM.
CHAPTER 7

“FAN TAN FANNIE” AND “CHOP SUEY”: THE CABARET DANCER COSTUMES

During the course of a production meeting, the director Peter Cirino and the choreographer Gina Ma requested that three elements be included in the maiden dress: it needed to be sexy, have ease for movement, and be quickly changeable. The cabaret dancer costumes demanded a closer look into various periodicals and reference books, as well as vintage photographs and documentary footage on the Internet. Trina Robbins’ recent publication *Forbidden City: The Golden Age of Chinese Nightclubs*, along with the websites Foundsf.org, and softfilm.blogspot.com, offered a large selection of primary sources, essays, and pictures, which greatly influenced all of my cabaret dancer costumes. Well-known West Coast Chinese cabaret dancers of 1960s, such as Cynthia Yee, Coby Yee, Dorothy Toy, and Noel Toy, with their elaborate and sexy costumes, were great inspirations. During my research I noticed these performers all shared many commonalities in their burlesque costumes and props, such as two-piece beaded sequined bras and panties, sequined over-bust corsets with appliqués, and most of them had worn the popular stand-up collar Mandarin-style corset at times. Two other important signatures of the Chinese American dancers’ costumes featured full-leg display often seen in fishnet tights, or black or red stockings (Figure 25).

With that in mind I began to sketch out several outfits using combinations of various elements from the Manchu gowns and the contemporary Qipao and Cheongsam. During my research for the female dancers, I discovered a 1935 picture of Anna May Wong in a very reveling Cheongsam, a late nineteenth century picture of a noble Manchu woman in the Qing dynasty, and an image of Nancy Kwan on the front cover of the 1960’s *Life* magazine. I drew inspiration from all of these images and I wanted to include a variation on each of these styles in my designs for Linda and her dancers. There were a total of seven dance costumes to build for “Fan Tan Fannie”, four females and three males. After two unsuccessful long days of searching for “Fan Tan Fannie” fabric in Los Angeles, I was pleasantly surprise to find the perfect McCall’s pattern and the right fabric at Yardage Town in San Diego. The
fabrics I chose for “Fan Tan Fannie” had identical golden dragon patterns, but came in two different background colors, hot pink and bright yellow. I decided to use the hot-pink golden dragon pattern for Linda while the rest of the dancers would have the bright yellow golden dragon. Beginning with a McCall’s pattern for a high-hip length, one-sleeve tunic I added a gold waist belt and completed the set with gold seamless dance shorts (Figure 26). Starting with a 1970 man's Kimono robe pattern for the male dancer costumes, I modified the kimono
robe into a pocketless kimono with a gold lapel. Accompanying the kimono, the male
dancers sported loose fitting trousers made from a gold silken brocade fabric that had elastic
cuffs at the ankles. The resulting products gave the Flower Drum Song actors colorful, sexy,
and manageable costumes.

The costuming for “Chop Suey” presented far less of a challenge for me as a
designer. The female actors were garbed in black halter-tops and black high-cut shorts
contrasted with white tie-up cropped shrug sweater, all of which were supplied by the
choreographer, Gina Ma. The male actors for this scene were dressed in black slacks, white
tuxedo shirts and red cummerbunds donated by a member of the cast. All of the dancers’
costumes were accented with red bow ties. Peter provided the chef uniform worn by Wang.
With the help and effort provided by the production team and cast in supplying these
costume items, I was able to stay within my limited budget while still realizing my ultimate vision (Figure 27).

CHAPTER 8

ENSEMBLE: “A HUNDRED MILLION MIRACLES” AND “GRANT AVENUE”

Designing for the *Flower Drum Song* ensemble, which was already a challenge due to the large number of cast members, was further complicated as we drew closer to tech week due to Peter’s addition of new members. Besides the large ensemble, I was faced with double and triple-casts that differentiated the Mainland Chinese group from the American Chinese group, along with the dancers of the nightclub. Although my principal focus was centered on the lead actors, I found that a large portion of my time was devoted to insuring that the ensemble received the attention needed to bring out the character and detail of each member’s costume.

The play begins in the turbulent setting of Mao’s Cultural Revolution with Mei-Li and the Mainland Chinese ensemble performing “A Hundred Million Miracles.” The ensemble was divided in two groups that included the Red Guards and the proletarians (Figure 28) wrestling with a new cultural reality. There was an abundance of images from film and periodical sources to draw from that documented this chaotic period in history and helped me visualize the authentic look I wanted to portray. Although the silhouettes of each group’s costumes were similar, they were differentiated by color and accents. The Red Guard’s uniforms were a military green, while the proletarians’ were dyed dark brown. Peter supplied the Red Guard costumes and Mao caps; while I was fortunate enough to find the number I needed for the proletarians at the American Way Thrift store in Burbank, CA. I added a red armband to the Red Guard uniforms and stitched patches on the costumes of the proletarians to project a distressed look. Although the Red Guard characters are only present during the prologue, the proletarians can be seen throughout the play (Figure 29).

For the Chinese American ensemble present during the singing of “Grant Avenue,” my designs were based on the fashions of the late 1950s and early 1960s. I referenced Fee-based service websites that included *Pbase.com* and the *LIFE* photo archive hosted by Google to capture the authenticity of the period. The viewing of images from the influential film *Blue Denim* and the television sitcom *Happy Days* helped me refine my design concepts.

Once I found the images that expressed my vision for the cast, I distributed these pictures to the appropriate cast members, who had offered to help with the purchase of the costumes, as guidance.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, straight-cut dungarees, corduroys, and khaki pants paired with white T-shirts, sweatshirts or knitted cardigans over the top were extremely popular with the youth of this time period. Keeping with my concept depicting the fashions of sunny California of this era, I costumed the male ensemble cast members in a mix of solid colors, plaid and striped button-down shirts over a variety of period-appropriate trousers that included denim jeans and flat-front slacks made of both corduroy and khaki. In addition to the sweatshirts and cardigans, some cast members wore striped windbreaker jackets while others wore shirts with skinny ties or went open collared. All male ensemble members for this scene wore sneakers.

The female ensembles’ costumes consisted of midriff striped shirts and a black and pink poncho with Oriental-inspired embroidery over high-waist shorts in a variety of patterns and colors. Image resources for 1950s and 1960s daywear garments were plentiful via the Internet, as well as films and TV sitcoms. I also selected a series of pictures from Trina Robbins’s book, *Forbidden City: the Golden Age of the Chinese Nightclubs*, along with some images from vintage Internet clothing stores, which included Etsy.com, to help me with my designs. These garments were easily found at several San Diego AMVETS thrift stores (Figure 30). Due to the many overlapping scenes, which included dance numbers, for practicality and timesaving I decided to dress the female ensemble in character dance shoes throughout the play. The only exception was in the prologue where everyone, female and male included, wore Chinese flat shoes. The costumes for the wedding scene ensemble will be discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 9

DESIGNING AND COSTUMING THE “WEDDING PARADE”

Designing and costuming the wedding parade was at the top of my list of favorite moments for here I allowed myself the freedom of inserting a little fanciful visualization that transcended cultural and traditional conventions. Furthermore, I wanted to create a fusion of cultures for this closing act that would highlight the harmonious confluence of traditional Chinese and American contemporary weddings of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Up to the 1950s and 1960s, the clothing associated with Chinese weddings had seen very little change throughout centuries. Traditional planning of weddings in China centered primarily around the family and the extended family members with time-honored conventions strictly adhered to. This is evident in the preparation and division of tasks among the family members who were directly involved in the intimate process, with very little input from the bride and groom, who often had not even met prior to the actual wedding. However, in matching the relaxed social trends of the general population of America in the 1960s, Chinese Americans began to shift their view of the wedding ceremony, and with it the garments worn, more towards acculturation, assimilation and a focus on the individual desires of the bride and groom.

As discussed in Chapter 2, my research for American and Chinese bridal dresses led me to focus not only on the differences between the two, but also to try to identify commonalities. Although sparse, there are some aspects of these outfits that are similar, such as the use of veils and long flowing dresses. Mei-Li’s wedding dress was a combination of store-bought and built pieces. As previously mentioned, I found a red mermaid evening gown (Figure 31) at It’s a Wrap!, which I modified into a skirt by removing the top. Next, a halter-top made from Chinese silver brocade of phoenix patterns over black fabric background, found at Yardage Town in Chula Vista, CA, was drafted and built. I added to

10 Long dress that is close fitting through the bodice, down through the hips to about mid knee or lower calf where the skirt flares out creating a fish-like tail silhouette.
the top of the halter a matching red organza ribbon fringe and red chainette fringe trim at its hem. A small accent of silver ribbon trim was added to the skirt and the halter to tie the outfit together. A traditional Chinese bride will also wear a lucky blood red headscarf embellished with elaborate embroideries that covers her head. For Mei-Li, I designed a see-through red Western style veil with Mayra’s handmade silk red flowers.

Ta was dressed in a true traditional Chinese groom outfit that included a lucky blood red Changshan gown and a matching red phoenix brocade silk coat. Due to the large Chinese and Vietnamese population in Orange County, wedding items and garments were easily found. Ta’s wedding set was bought at the Salvation Army in Santa Ana. Wang also sported a Chinese traditional suit that consists of a red Tangzhuang and black straight pants.
Linda’s red velvet dress was purchased at Hubba Hubba in Burbank, CA and consisted of a signature, narrow-waist full-skirted silhouette associated with the New Look of the 1950s. Although the dress was beautiful by itself, I felt that some embellishments were a must to keep it in the spirit of the wedding celebration.

Rita was businesslike and wore a vintage 1950’s two-piece rayon suit with padded shoulders that was provided by the actor. The skirt was straight with a soft flair toward the hem. The suit was taken in at the waist in order to create a fitted contour. To compliment the suit I added a red cocktail hat.

The female ensemble all sported 1950’s red and white cotton, full skirt tea gowns borrowed from the SDSU Costume Shop and the male ensemble wore red shirts, black tuxedo pants, and black single breasted vests with either red or white ties. The shirts, ties and vests were bought at the American Way Thrift Store in Burbank, CA while the pants were borrowed from the SDSU Costume Shop (Figure 32).

![Figure 32. Wedding Parade. Left: Male ensemble. Right: Female ensemble. Source: Zuniga-Williams, Adriana. Flower Drum Song Production Photographs. San Diego, CA: Adriana Zuniga Photography, 2011. CD-ROM.](image)

My intent for the Wedding Parade scene was to display a climatic visual radiance and through a diligent shopping and borrowing, along with the generous help from the actors, we were able to achieve my vision (Figure 33).
CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSION

From the beginning of the production process of *Flower Drum Song*, our director was adamant that historical accuracy was a priority to his vision for the play. Being set on two continents and representing very different cultures presented numerous challenges. The prologue offered the opportunity to define the struggles the Mainland Chinese encountered on a day-to-day basis and I emphasized this repressed environment through the use of drab colors and distressed fabrics to enhance the back-story. This dreariness is in distinct contrast to the vivacious lifestyles of the Chinese Americans who frequented the cabarets of San Francisco, CA during the early 1960s, which I depicted by designing colorful and vibrant costumes for the characters involved in these scenes (Figure 34).

Figure 34. “Grand Avenue” San Francisco, California, USA. Source: Zuniga-Williams, Adriana. *Flower Drum Song Production Photographs*. San Diego, CA: Adriana Zuniga Photography, 2011. CD-ROM.
My design process began with a phone call from director Peter Cirino, extending an offer to become the costume designer for this production and a verbal description of the setting and storyline. With preliminary research on the two juxtaposed cultures, I discovered a wealth of information and was ready for the script. After receiving the script I delved deeper into my research. My extensive study of text and images from books, movies, periodicals, and the Internet allowed me to develop a clear vision of how I wanted the characters’ costumes presented.

I was fortunate to be part of a talented design team who shared the same vision and a director who clearly defined his mental picture for the production while allowing the freedom for his designers to be creative. One could not ask for a better creative working environment.

After receiving approval of my designs from Peter, I was ready to start the process of deciding what items could be pulled from the SDSU Costume Shop and what we would need to purchase or build. Due to the large cast and limited budget, I learned to develop a resourceful strategy for acquiring the pieces needed. With this strategy in hand, and with the help of my two assistants, the cast and Peter, I was able to not only compile the necessary components to realize my vision of the characters’ costumes, but also to meet the budget restrictions.

With the acquisition of the items needed, it came time to start the assembly of the costumes. Starting with the Chinese opera costumes I once again was fortunate to have an abundance of resource material to draw from due to China’s long-standing tradition in this theatrical genre. I was able to merge two different opera costume styles while still meeting the challenge for the maiden’s gown being shared requiring a quick change on stage. The costumes for the cabaret song and dance numbers needed to not only accurately portray performance styles of the period, they could not inhibit the dancers’ movements. We were able to merge these requirements seamlessly not only allowing freedom of movement, but also demonstrating extravagance in the style of the cabaret costumes. The large double and triple cast ensemble further challenged my limited budget. I was able to express through costume the despair felt by the proletarians and the aggression of the Red Guard in the Prologue, contrasted with the freedom of the cabaret lifestyle in San Francisco of the 1960s. The play concluded with the wedding parade, where the brilliance of colors and textures manifested into a lavish portrayal of the merging of two disparate cultures.
To complete the accurate account of this project it is worth mentioning at this point that my hair and make-up design was intentionally kept conservative to align with the Chinese American fashions of the time. Males wore their hair short and slicked back, while the females had their hair unbound, braided, tied-back, or in a bun. I used straight make-up techniques throughout the show to promote realism. Straight make-up techniques are used when the actor’s natural appearance does not need to be altered due to the close resemblance to the character being played.

After a highly successful run, my final obligation was to collect the costumes from the actors and account for each item. Clothes borrowed from the SDSU Costume Shop were dry cleaned per agreement, while the bought and donated items were returned to Peter and the proper individuals. This left the balancing of my accounts for budget purposes and I am proud to say I was narrowly within budget.

The pride I feel for the success of this undertaking overwhelms me. Being Asian myself, I thought I was thoroughly familiar with the experiences of my fellow Asian cultures and was pleasantly surprised by what I learned designing the costumes for this production. This production left me with a heartfelt appreciation for the opportunity to work with individuals who possess such a high level of professionalism, resulting in a successful collaborative effort.
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