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Designer Susan Hilferty backstage at a production of *Salome* at the Royal National Theatre's Olivier Stage. Photo by Graham Michael.

WHO'S
WHO

Clothes THAT TELL A Story

BY CARA JOY DAVID



How *Wicked* designer Susan Hilferty stitches audiences into the world of the play

Unless they're dragged there by someone else, most audience members entering a theatre come there hoping to escape. They seek to be whisked away to the world onstage, transported into the tale unfolding before them.

Stitched into the story, you might say.

Few are more keenly aware of this fact than *Wicked* costume designer Susan Hilferty—she is committed to bringing that story to life by dressing it up. Throughout her career she has become a favorite of fans and creatives not just because of a single look or a set piece, but because of the way her vision captures a character or a moment.

“She is much more than a designer of costumes or sets,” said writer/director Richard Nelson. “She acts as a type of dramaturg many times. I constantly ask her advice about production el-

ements, as well as script and casting.”

Nelson said, “She is a complete partner in the whole creation of productions. As a costume designer she doesn't just design clothes. She is constantly dealing with what the play is about, what the production is about, who the characters are, who the actors are, and what is that relationship between the actors and the character.”

And that is the essence of Hilferty. You may remember the unique, fantastical work she did on the costumes for Broadway's *Wicked*—work that was so special at creating a distinctive new look for the Land of Oz that it netted her a Tony



Top: Susan Hilferty's original costume design for Elphaba in *Wicked*. Above: Original *Wicked* cast members Kristin Chenoweth and Idina Menzel in Hilferty's Tony-winning costumes.



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Award. On the other hand, you may not remember how the characters were dressed in the 2013 musical *Hands on a Hardbody*, about country folk determined to win a shiny new pickup truck, other than to possibly think: “They looked average.” But that too, in its own way, suited the narrative and the characters just as well.

So it’s no surprise that when Hilferty talks about her role on these and hundreds of other shows, including two dozen Broadway productions, she frames herself as a storyteller. With her white hair pulled back, walking back and forth in her New York City apartment as we talk over Zoom, Hilferty exuded the enthusiasm for her art form you might expect in someone just discovering a craft, rather than a 40-year veteran.

“I’m not actually interested in being in a production unless it’s the whole team working at the same time,” she explained. “It is the team together that creates their response to the text. The director doesn’t just direct, the designer doesn’t just do the designs, the actors don’t just act, and

the playwright doesn’t just write the story. The text doesn’t ever have the answers—it really just has the questions.”

To answer these questions, Hilferty is constantly in conversation and collaboration with the rest of the team. She is also learning, not just about the project she is working on at that moment, but about theatre in other periods in history, and other cultures. She knows that the impact a designer can have is immeasurable. She knows you can see multiple productions of *King Lear*—and Hilferty once did two in a single year—and the difference that most sticks with you is the look of them. Writers, directors and actors get the majority of the credit for the theatrical experience but in fact designers often are the ones who transport you to a time or place.

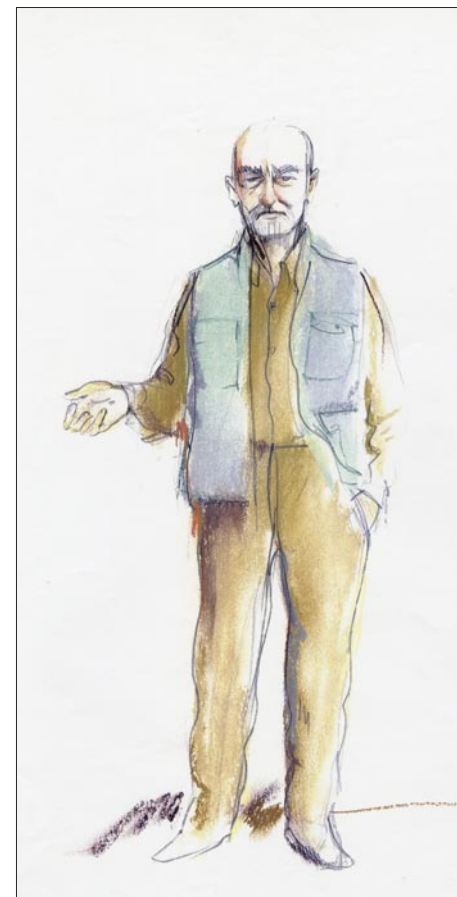
She Made Her Own Clothes

Hilferty’s love of theatre came to her as a college student. She grew up in Arlington, Massachusetts and never saw a professional theatre



Facing page: John Lithgow and Clarke Davis in the 2014 production of *King Lear* at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. Photo by Joan Marcus.

This page above: Thomas Silcott and Zainab Jah in the Signature Theatre production of *Boesman and Lena*. Photo by Joan Marcus. This page left: Costume design for actor/playwright Athol Fugard in *Valley Song*. Image courtesy of Susan Hilferty.



production as a child. Her dream was to be a painter.

“There were no arts in my background,” she said. “Somehow, out of nowhere, out of six kids, there is somebody who insists on being an artist. We didn’t even know what it was.”

She headed to Syracuse University as an arts major, but her practical upbringing told her she needed to have something else to study that was more likely to bring her cash. The answer? A fashion design minor. Hilferty had begun making her own clothes when she was 12 and believed she could get a job doing that while she pursued painting. When her work study was in the theatre program’s costume shop, she began to be transformed. Then came her junior year study abroad in London, when she got her first taste of professional theatre.

She saw everything from *The Rocky Horror Show* to unknown works. Perhaps her most profound experience was at the Royal Court The-

atre Upstairs, a small theatre where she saw Athol Fugard’s *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, about the extremes a black South African must go to in order to work under the country’s racist apartheid system.

“I had never heard of Athol Fugard,” she said. “I didn’t know anything about South Africa. I sat down in the room—there is a blackboard on an easel, a table, a chair, and something else. At the end, I had been changed. I had been to South Africa sitting there. I knew through this experience I could understand the world more—not just in a historical way, but I could understand humans more.”

And a theatrical designer was born. Of course, not everyone who wants to be a theatre designer can make a living that way. It takes hard work and luck, though, as Hilferty notes, she was always “prepared to be lucky.” After college, Hilferty worked in costume shops and began designing at small theatres. She was already a full-fledged costume designer before heading to Yale for a Masters of Fine Art degree in design. It was there she learned about doing sets, rather than simply costumes. While Hilferty is still best known as a costume designer, she has consistently done set design as well throughout her career. Whether she does one

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or the other or both, it does not matter to her as long as she is involved in creating the whole world of the play. She wants to be involved in the totality of what the audience sees.

And she has been blessed to find others committed to that way of working. In graduate school, she was assigned a Fugard play. The man who inspired her love of stage design became a collaborator. She has now done more than 40 productions with him.

Hearing Hilferty speak about her career it is clear how she cherished each experience. She sees all of the steps she took as building blocks—each person she met along the way inseparable from the artist she is today.

“That’s Why I Design”

By now, Hilferty has worked on more than 300 productions. She has done both sets and costumes for theatre. She has done costumes for opera, dance, film, the circus and a Taylor Swift concert tour. In addition to her Tony Award-winning work on *Wicked*, her Broadway credits include the *Spring Awakening*, *Dirty Blonde*, the 2017 revival of *Present Laughter*, the 2012 revival of *Annie*, *Wonderland*, *Lestat*, August Wilson’s *Radio Golf* and *Jitney*, Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman’s *Assassins*, the 2002 revival

of *Into the Woods*, and the 1995 revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. Her collaborators are a Who’s Who of theatrical luminaries. She has received countless awards, including a handful of lifetime achievement honors. She has long-term collaborative relationships with Nelson, Fugard and South African playwright/director Yaël Farber—which she characterizes as the most fulfilling relationships of her career—but she is equally happy taking risks on projects big (such as a Las Vegas-set *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera) and small (such as the solo show *Jackie* at the Women’s Project Theatre).

It does not matter to her that her more traditionally successful projects will always be the bigger ones. Her favorite work is not necessarily splashy—it is the work that transforms the actor into the character, the work that fades into the background because it is simply another part of the scene.

“With *Dirty Blonde*, where clothing was an essential part of the characters’ identities,” *Dirty Blonde* writer and star Claudia Shear said. “Susan Hilferty expanded and illuminated the characters. Yes, of course Mae West and her amazing shimmering gown, but lesser characters were instantly and completely defined by a madras shirt,

a polyester suit jacket, a shantung tunic.”

One of the things that people don’t understand about costume designers is they do not necessarily make everything. All of *Wicked*’s nearly 200 costumes were made, but sometimes Hilferty can just go pick up a t-shirt or rent a cape. Hilferty has no preference; it’s about the story.

Tony Award-winning director Rebecca Taichman, who has worked with Hilferty on a handful of projects calls Hilferty “totally singular in the very dramaturgical way she thinks about what is on an actor’s body.” But for Taichman it is about more than that—it is about the way Hilferty inspires those around her and the way she cares so deeply about her work. Once Hilferty even donated her own shirt to a production the two did together.

“With *Wicked*, whenever I visit, there is always someone that takes me aside and goes: ‘Mine is the best costume,’” Hilferty said, laughing. “I always agree with them. If the actor feels that they

This page: Lea Michele and Jonathan Groff in the original production of *Spring Awakening*.

Facing page left: Chenoweth and Menzel in *Wicked*. **Facing page right:** Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick in Hilferty’s costumes for the 1995 Broadway revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. **All photos by** Joan Marcus.



have been changed because of their clothes, then that is my favorite costume. It might be an elaborate look or Ed Harris in a pair of oversized pants that I got at the thrift store. The fact that he loves it and it transforms him, then that’s my favorite costume. For me, that’s why I design.”

Lestat and Wonderland

Hilferty stresses that she is not bent on commercial success. She has never changed anything based on audience reaction. For her it is about whether the team is telling the story they intended to tell.

Hilferty does not regret working on commercial flops such as *Lestat* and *Wonderland*, even though she oddly partially blames herself for the failures. That is so even though her work was not attacked on either.

“I believe that the reason both of those shows weren’t successful is that we were never able to make a real arc of the story,” she said. “I loved working on them, but I knew in the end that we somehow had missed the connection, the structure wasn’t there. And the structure doesn’t mean just in the writing—every piece is connected, the structure is what the musical journey is, it is in the writing, it is in the sets, it is in the clothes that are supposed to move in a certain way.”

Of course, she would rather feel like the team has gotten the structure right—they have achieved telling the story in the way they wanted to tell the story. Therefore, while she is not specifically thinking about the audience, the goal is that the team’s vision will translate to a wondrous experience for the theatregoer.

And luckily many of her shows have profoundly impacted theatregoers. *Wicked* was an

unusual experience for Hilferty because she was not on it from the beginning. She took over for another designer who was not working out before the show ever hit the stage. But, once she was on board, she committed to creating this totally unique universe. Yes, there are one-off costumes—for example, a Glinda dress—that could maybe come from, or be part of, another show. But most are quintessentially *Wicked*. It took around two years to perfect the world that we now know. Every look is special and more than an audience member might think it is with a quick glance. Elphaba’s “black witch’s dress” is not a plain black dress at all. It is multiple colors and layers, all of which have a meaning to Hilferty. She originally imagined the kids at Shiz University all wearing distinctive clothes, but then settled on mix-and-match uniform pieces. A casual audience member might not think that makes a difference, but in that way the costumes for those characters symbolize both a tie to uniformity and a break from uniformity. Not to mention all of Hilferty’s work on the creatures and styles that are completely unique to Oz. The fabric for the productions has to be woven just to remain true to the way everything was at the start.

Her work for the long-running and widely-touring *Wicked* has touched fans around the world. It still garners her fan mail.

A Laugh From Stephen Sondheim

“One night, we had a day off at the same time that *Billy Elliot* was playing,” she said. “I went to the theatre with [*Wicked*’s original Elphaba]



Idina Menzel to see it. And we arrive at the theatre and I give the tickets to the ticket taker, and he says: ‘Oh my God, you are Susan Hilferty.’ He went on and on and on about the clothes. Then he turns to Idina and says: ‘And you were very good, too.’ We howled with laughter.”

She also has some pretty famous fans. Many of Hilferty’s looks for the 2002 *Into the Woods* revival were lauded, but it was the costume for the cow Milky White that received the most press. In the original Broadway production, the cow was a set piece, dragged around when needed. Hilferty knew the animals were too important to the story to merely seem like props. She wanted a person inside a cow costume. She presented about a dozen looks to librettist/director James Lapine before they agreed on one—a wrinkled body, forlorn eyes, a character that said “trouble is in store” without speaking a word.

“One of the greatest moments of my career happened when we were out of town in L.A.,” she said. “Chad [Kimball, the actor who played Milky White] comes out on the stage, and in the back of the auditorium, everybody can hear Stephen Sondheim laugh. And I thought: ‘I made Stephen Sondheim laugh! Okay, I’m done. Good luck, everybody, I’m ready to go.’ But it



Above: Hilferty's original sketch for Taylor Swift's *Speak Now*. Courtesy of Susan Hilferty. Below: Hilferty's costumes in the 2019 Public Theatre production of *A Bright Room Called Day* with (L-R) Nikki M. James, Grace Gummer and Michael Urie. Photo by Joan Marcus.

wasn't because it was an ordinary audience member, but it was a storyteller, the storyteller understood what that moment was about."

Taylor Swift's *Speak Now*

One of her other famous fans is none other than pop star Taylor Swift. Swift's *Speak Now* tour offered Hilferty a challenge, with new collaborators. It was something she just could not pass up. Hilferty humbly says she got the call to do the costumes simply because Swift "needed somebody to help tell a story." Swift said at the time the *Speak Now* tour was inspired by Broadway, including the experience of seeing *Wicked*, and to this day some of the nearly dozen looks from that tour remain memorable. What Swift fan doesn't remember her in the two-tone gold fringe dress?

"I was so impressed with her understanding of her own self as a talent and what she wanted to do," Hilferty said of the megastar. "There was a designer who had created the character of Taylor Swift, but then she grew out of that country fairytale character. When she got to *Speak Now*, she understood that there was a story. That's why I got the call. It was completely different than the way I prefer to work in terms of immersive storytelling, but I loved it. I have no need to do another one now that I've had that experience, but I loved it."

Like designing for the circus, it might be a "one and done" experience, but it did impact her, and leave a memorable imprint on audience members.

Designing the 2020s

The past 12 months have been difficult for all theatre artists and pretty much every feeling human. Hilferty has not had downtime, despite cancelled productions. She chairs the Department of Design for Stage and Film at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and has been busy adapting the programs to the new normal. She has had to change the way she teaches because of both things gripping the world right now.

She believes the time calls for a deep examination of whether the theatre has been receptive to new voices and changes to what and how she is teaching. And, while Hilferty does not believe in a blanket rule dictating she step aside even if a project is right for her, she does embrace new voices. She wants to make sure that everyone, from every background, feels they can tell their stories and have the right collaborators to do just that. "I'm completely committed to that in terms of a teacher, a theatre maker, and even an audience member. I think that's the way that we're available to help," she said.

Additionally, she is reflecting on how best to teach an art form based on in-person human interaction at the exact moment when that audience is compelled to maintain distance. Her skills classes take place in person—masked with social distancing adherence—but other classes are webcast over Zoom. Amazingly, the program put on live performances during the fall semester, with actors masked and about 10 masked audience members in a 50-seat theatre.

But when will this be over? And what will theatre look like when it all ends? "I spent the whole summer saying, 'I don't know' over and over again," she says. "Our responsibility is to just offer the students the opportunity to develop themselves, so they are prepared, whatever the outcome. It's the same thing I would imagine educators went through during World War II, where you cannot promise any outcome."

Whatever the theatre of the 2020s has in store, one thing is certain: Hilferty will be there, telling stories and helping others do the same.



Another one of Hilferty's Tony Award-winning costumes for *Wicked*: Carole Shelley as Madame Morrible. Photo by Joan Marcus.