



SHE BELIEVED
SHE COULD,
SO SHE DID

A Q&A with Erin Stumm '17

BY SAMANTHA LEAGUE,
COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR



If you attended an OLP Theatre production in the last two years, you have witnessed Erin Stumm's '17 talent firsthand. For the last five productions, Erin designed more than 100 costumes and fully constructed about 50. This talented costume designer— who learned how to hand-sew just four years ago — exemplifies what can be achieved when you fearlessly pursue a passion at any age. Read on to learn about Erin's journey and future plans at Otterbein University.

Q: When did you learn how to sew?

I learned how to hand-sew freshman year. My mom taught me when I wanted to help her and some other parent volunteers finish costumes for *The Little Mermaid* (at OLP). I got my first sewing machine in July 2015. My mom taught me the basics, but I started going to my local quilt shop, Paradise Sewing, to learn more. On Friday nights, a group of women get together at the shop to work on various sewing projects. The group is run by LeeMary Heath, who has more than 40 years of experience as a professional seamstress. I brought my sewing projects there and LeeMary helped (and continues to help) me learn new skills.

Q: How did you get into costume designing?

I first got into costumes by helping the student in charge of costumes at OLP. I got more and more into alterations, and when the opportunity arose to be in charge of costumes for the 2015 spring show, *Legally Blonde*, I took it. It just became something I did. When I got a sewing machine, I began to design and build costumes for OLP shows.

Q: What are your sewing essentials/favorite tools?

The biggest luxury I have is probably my industrial Juki sewing machine. It's amazing and can sew a lot of fabric very quickly. It also cuts my threads for me, which is fantastic. I also can't sew without my seam ripper — it can erase almost any mistake I make. A good pair of dressmaker shears is also a must. Serrated blades are preferable because they keep the fabric from slipping when you cut it.

Q: What is your favorite part about costume design?

I love being able to feel the fabric and make this two-dimensional, lifeless thing into a beautiful, 3D form that can really add depth and realism to a performance.

Q: What is the hardest part about costume design?

The hardest part about costume design is sharing my concept with other people. When I get a project, I think about it and start to visualize it in my head, but I don't always draw it out and even if I do, the drawing doesn't always do the vision justice. It was hard for me to learn that people don't understand what I'm talking about unless I fully explain myself.

Q: What designers do you look to for inspiration?

I definitely look to the "greats" like Julie Taymore (designer of Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway), but I tend to look more towards local designers for my inspiration. I really look up to women I've worked with, like Beth Connelly (mother of Emma Connelly '11) and Janet Pitcher. These are women whom I've come to respect on both a professional and personal level. I admire their dedication, talent and willingness to share with me through mentorship.

Q: How many costumes did you design for OLP's Theatre productions?

Over five shows at OLP, I designed more than 100 costumes and fully constructed approximately 50.

Q: I heard you made your own prom dress! What inspired you for that design?

My prom dress was inspired by design elements I really like. I love high necklines with low backs, cap sleeves and box pleats. I essentially combined all of those things to create my dress. I built my dress the weekend before prom, probably putting 20 hours into it.

Q: There is often no clear pathway for a costume designer in high school. What kind of extracurricular activities did you do to gain experience and boost your resume?

I went to International Thespian Festival my sophomore and junior years. It is a gathering of high school theatre students every summer at the University of Nebraska. It was there that I started to realize I really enjoyed working with costumes. It was also there that I auditioned for colleges.

I was also introduced to Beth Connelly. At the time we met, she was working with San Diego Musical Theatre on 42nd Street and she agreed to take me on as an intern. I've continued working with San Diego Musical Theatre over the past year as a Dresser, and then as a Wardrobe Mistress/Head Dresser. A dresser makes sure actors change their costumes in time for their next scene and assists them if necessary (sometimes a costume change needs to take place in 15-20 seconds). The Head Dresser is in charge of all of the dressers. A Wardrobe Mistress is in charge of costumes during the run of a show. She is responsible for all maintenance necessary.

Q: Congratulations on your recent graduation! Why did you ultimately decide to attend Otterbein University?

I received more than \$600,000 dollars in scholarship offers, but I ultimately decided on Otterbein because I can customize the curriculum to emphasize things that are not the "norm," but that I want to study. For example, I can do independent study and focus on show tutus for ballet, or armor for stage.

Q: What advice would you give to a young girl who is interested in costume design?

Look for opportunities to volunteer at local theatres: send emails, make phone calls and talk to everyone you meet. No one will know who you are unless you make the effort to get involved. Also, attend professional theatre — it's incredible to see what can be done by professional designers, drapers and stitchers with education, innovation and imagination.



“
I love being able to feel the fabric and make this two-dimensional, lifeless thing into a beautiful, 3D form that can really add depth and realism to a performance.
”



----- QUICK FACTS -----

Learned how to hand-sew:

Freshman year

First sewing machine:

July 2015

Sewing essentials:

Juki sewing machine, seam ripper, dressmaker shears, serrated blades

In charge of OLP costumes for:

5 shows

Number of costumes designed for OLP: **100**



Number of costumes fully constructed for OLP: **50**

Favorite design elements include:

High necklines with low backs, cap sleeves and box pleats

Worked at: **San Diego Musical Theatre**

Attending: **Otterbein University**

Amount of scholarship offers received: **\$600,000+**



Top photo opposite page: Erin designed her own prom dress, seen in the photo. It took her almost 20 hours to manufacture by hand.

Bottom photo opposite page: Erin is pictured receiving her diploma from Assistant Head of School, Mrs. Hooper. Erin will be attending Otterbein University in the fall.

Three photos this page: Erin has designed more than 100 costumes during her time in the theatre program at OLP, including the three seen here.