

A Christmas Carol

A Conversation with Beaver Bauer, Costume Designer for *A Christmas Carol*, and A.C.T. Costume Shop Assistant Manager Joan Raymond

PREPARING THE COSTUMES FOR THIS PRODUCTION HAS BEEN AN INTENSE, TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS, FROM SKETCHING THE INITIAL DESIGNS TO SHOPPING FOR FABRIC . . .

BEAVER BAUER: We went to New York and Los Angeles just to shop for exactly what we needed for *Carol*, and we've been to every store here [in San Francisco], and we've ordered a lot through the mail.

JOAN RAYMOND: We went to New York in July. Shopping for *A Christmas Carol* in July in New York during a heat wave and a thunderstorm!

BB: I wouldn't have considered doing a show this complex at another theater, in part because A.C.T. is a unique place where you know you can make a bold creative choice in a rendering and then have a ghost of a chance that what you are envisioning can actually be achieved. There is enough depth [of talent and experience] in the costume shop to paint fabric and create a hat from scratch and really take something all the way from the ground up—from just fabric. We're even painting fabric for [the *Ghost of Christmas Present*].

HOW DOES THE DESIGN PROCESS EVOLVE FOR SOMETHING LIKE CHRISTMAS PRESENT'S COSTUME? DOES IT BEGIN WITH A CONVERSATION WITH [DIRECTOR] CAREY [PERLOFF]?

BB: I think Carey first called me in January or February [2005], and by March I was sketching. I don't feel quite as verbally dexterous as some designers, and I feel more comfortable with my pencil. It's easier for me to go home and just start drawing. I convert ideas best that way. I feel better with my pencil in my own little room. I can drive everybody crazy because I always have 15 different versions of everything, but it's usually something I'm trying to work through, some adjustment that seems minor but I'm trying to process something. I start casting through all these ideas and discarding and choosing and sometimes going back to the original idea. It can be a circuitous and complicated process.

One of the first things we did after reading [Dickens's] book was reflect on the fact that the spirits [of *Christmas Past*, *Present*, and *Future*] don't really have a gender. They really are spirits, in a way more than ghosts, and that interested me. My first thought [for *Christmas Present*] was that I was interested in the power of the color green as a life force, as a metaphor for the present tense—especially because it seems like Scrooge is so disconnected from his present life and from his environment that he is walking in almost a parallel universe. I thought that it would be great, in contrast, to have something really, really vital. In the book, *Christmas Present* is described as someone, either a man or a woman, wearing a green robe, and it brought to mind for me something more organic and more, not necessarily Druidic, but something with a powerful force of life and nature running through it.

SO, YOU DID A SKETCH FROM THAT FIRST CONVERSATION AFTER READING THE NOVELLA . . .

BB: Yes, and then we looked at that sketch and at the show as a whole to begin to figure out where we were in terms of the budget [laughter]. In terms of priorities, we knew that we had earmarked a fair

amount for the ghosts, that they were something we weren't going to stint on; we knew they were significant characters and would carry a lot of visual impact in the show. And then I think we started talking about what the fabric was going to be. We considered all the options of possible color and texture, and then we set out to find the fabric. We knew we wanted green velvet, with red veins running through it, and we hoped we could buy that fabric.

JR: We couldn't find it! It might be in Milan, but it was definitely not in New York or Los Angeles.

BB: So then we decided to buy white fabric and dye it ourselves, and to create the veins in the fabric by using a caustic chemical to burn the velvet away. At that point, we started creating samples, because you never know how the fabric is really going to behave with the dye, to figure out which is most effective. And then we had to decide what to line it with. There are an unbelievable number of considerations, in terms of creating the shape of the fabric, creating wearability, and creating the overall impression of what a costume should look like.

BB: And then we thought, well, we're going to have this huge skirt now, so we better have a big collar to balance that. What is the collar going to be made of? We want something grand, but we want it lightweight, so we decided to use these really long pheasant feathers, but we weren't happy with the color of those. So we decided to dye those, too. It's staggering how much work goes into something like that. what state is a costume in when an actor is finally being fitted?

JR: There are three [fittings] for each costume that we build in the shop. The first is the muslin fitting, where [Costume Shop Manager] David [Draper] will drape a muslin pattern, based on Beaver's drawings, on a form in the shapes she has talked about. They'll often have a conversation with the pattern on the form to change a line, even before we put it on a person. And then we have a second muslin fitting with the actor, with actual muslin stitched into the shape of the costume. At that point we're still working in broad strokes, even though in that fitting we'll start to fine tune where the detail comes in. Our first hand then takes the pattern and makes sure that any patterns [in the fabric] are matching and aligned, so if there is a floral pattern, for example, the flowers match up. You could place a floral somewhere that makes it look like a polka dot, or you could place it where it hits at a lovely place on the body. If there is a stripe with a blue and a grey and a white, maybe putting the strongest color of stripe in a certain place will guide your eye to flatter the body even more. It's an unbelievably detailed and precise process. Then the pattern goes back to the drawing board, and all of the alterations to the muslin get translated into paper patterns again, and then those get cut out of the real fabric, which is then stitched into the real shape. Finally, we do a fitting with the fabric [on the actor]. Then we may not see the actor again until we get to the theater.

BB: Honestly, I am really dependent on Joan and David for the finer points in fitting. I think I have a good perception of silhouette and what I want, but they have a finer eye sometimes for things like where the sleeve starts, how it hangs, where we're going to put the waistline. Any of those things can totally alter your perception of the costume and the way that person moves. It's really a delicate dance, especially with the performer standing there, with all of their own particular issues about their body and their character.

JR: Some of it is men's wear, which is where the tailor comes in. In theory he does the same thing that David does. On this show specifically, we have six different outside contractors building costumes, as well as us here in the shop. There is also the communication between our team and when they come in to fit things, that throws another spin on the dressing room dance.

THEN YOU GET TO THE THEATER AND YOU'RE IN TECHNICAL REHEARSALS. PRESUMABLY ALL THE COSTUMES ARE FINISHED, RIGHT? [LAUGHTER]

BB: There is this whole other series of events that takes place then: the making of the list of the costumes, and what gets worn with what, by whom and in what order, and where the pieces will be placed backstage, and which actor goes to which dressing room, and who in wardrobe goes to what part of the stage to make sure that the actors make their changes on time.

JR: I make the dressing lists and get them to wardrobe. Wardrobe figures it out with stage management, depending on where the actors' entrances will be, where the quick change booths will go, how many wardrobe people they've got, where the wig people will be, and so on. And they all have to get out of the stage crew's way, because they're all scrambling, too.

BB: It's a whole other dance that is never seen.

JR: It takes me about six hours to make the first pass through the dressing list. And that's without specific descriptions. For example, at that point I just write down "overcoat," but not "the black overcoat [made out of the fabric pattern] with the white windowpane and the dot in the center," or "the grey one that looks like a 1950s swing coat." That will come later.

BB: In most cases now, [tech rehearsals] are the first time we see a wig and costume together.

AND AT WHAT POINT DO YOU COORDINATE WITH THE SET DESIGN? THE COLORS HAVE TO COMPLEMENT, RIGHT?

BB: I forget when, exactly, but [scenic designer] John [Arnone] came out to San Francisco with reams of information. And I had sketches I had already shown to [director] Carey [Perloff]. I think Sparky [lighting designer Nancy Schertler] came in a day later. We had a five- or six-hour meeting where we all just started talking and playing with things, and then we met again the next day after we all had time to weigh what each other had said. So there were some fairly good strokes, and when we got to New York we finally had a decent set of sketches. John, luckily, is a fairly collaborative person by nature, so he wanted to see what we were putting forth, rather than issuing a dictum himself. Some designers operate that way. There are lighting designers who don't even want to look at the [fabric] swatches, you know? Which is shocking. How can it not matter? Especially if you have party dresses. Who do we want to come forward, who do we want to recede? Are What kind of light are Scrooge and Dilber walking through? Is it so dark that we're going to lose them? Do we need to put light colors near their faces so at least we can find their faces? All those things are important.

JR: That's why Carey put together a team this time that really is collaborative.

BB: And it's all done with humor, usually. Because it's such a stressful process, having a couple of jokes on the side, or even in the main, really helps carry one through it. There are all so many things that when you look at a costume you just don't know how many people's hands it has passed through. Their energy, and thought and time and love have been put into it. I don't think anyone can ever begin to know.

JR: It would be great to know how many hours went into Christmas Present's costume.

BB: I would imagine that [A.C.T. Accessories Artisan] Jane [Boggess] had to spend well over 80 hours, don't you think?

JR: Oh, I think it's going to be way more than that.

BB: And then someone will look at it and think, Oh, they probably bought that at Britex, or something. But it takes 120 hours, or whatever it is, to make the fabric—and that's before it is sewn, before the collar is made, before the cuffs are made, before the drape with the feathers and the train and the wig . . .