

CAREERS

college search job search

Costume Designer

[Information](#) | [Interview](#) |


By Dick Davis

Janis Martin cherishes a memory from the play 42nd Street at the Music Theater, in Wichita.

"The production had quite a large budget and somewhere around 250 complete costumes," says the costume designer and professor. "My parents drove down from Minnesota, the first time they had ever seen my work. During intermission, my father was standing in line in the men's room and the gentleman in front of him was going on about the 'marvelous costumes'. My father listened for quite some time and when the gentleman turned to include him in the conversation, he smiled and proudly stated that his daughter was the designer."

Martin is responsible for classroom instruction in costume design, costume instruction, stage makeup and theater appreciation at Marshall University in West Virginia. She's also developing a course in integrated arts and spends about seven hours a week in formal classroom training and 20 hours a week in a laboratory.

"I enjoy the lab experience because I love watching the students work hands-on solving problems in a creative fashion," says Martin.

Her decision to become a costume designer came as a college student. "I had quite a dilemma as I was trying to discover what I wanted to be when I grew up," Martin recalls. "I loved art and would draw and paint in my spare time. I learned to sew at 13 and competed with my garment construction in local fairs."

"As an undergraduate, I was working toward a degree in graphic arts, a separate degree in theater, and employed at a fabric store. One day it clicked that I didn't have to give up any of my interests. Instead I could combine them all as a costume designer."

"The field of theater, film and museum costuming is like an aphrodisiac to those of us who live in it and keep doing it -- difficult as it may be," reflects Robert Doyle, a Nova Scotia costume designer and teacher. "Many of us develop other marketable skills, like teaching, fine arts and the like to sustain us between the costume design jobs."

Doyle's career includes extensive training in New York City, Italy, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, Austria, Sweden and England as well as costume design, teaching and historical restoration in Canada.

"If it's out there I'll find it," is the motto of Penny Dunlap Ladnier, a Virginia-based designer, teacher and historical researcher. She is using her love of costumes to research and write a book on four main areas of costume history. The book will be titled Color Names Throughout the Centuries.

Dunlap Ladnier has designed clothing at colleges in New Mexico and Mississippi, and more recently for three period films in the Richmond, Virginia area. She also researches costume history for authors and other designers and designs and markets Web sites for businesses in the costume industry. Dunlap Ladnier soon will present workshops at various universities on the costume-fashion industry use of computers.

Doyle was commissioned about 20 years ago to research and re-create the 18th century for a restoration of the Fortress of Louisbourg. During the four-year project, he designed the reproduction clothing for the civilian and military animation program, established the workrooms, trained the staff and taught historic domestic reproduction techniques.

"Using specimens and fragments of costumes found at the dig site," Doyle explains, "I was able to teach the staff a great deal about the domestic details surrounding 18th century colonial life. We wove the fabrics for these initial historic samples, based on the site findings."

Martin remembers a production of *The Music Man* for the Santa Barbara Civic Light Opera. She had driven to Los Angeles to pick up some rental costumes and trim at a fabric store. While she was in the store her car was broken into and \$9,000 worth of period costumes was stolen.

"The ironic thing was that the matching hats were in a very large box blocking access to the costumes and had to be removed in order to get the costumes out of the car," Martin remembers. "The thieves did this, took the costumes and then returned the hats to the car. They weren't theater folks or they'd understand the importance of accessories in completing the look."