

On the road with MSMT's costume packages

When I visited Maine State Music Theater's rental manager Amy Mussman and rentals coordinator Travis Grant at the MSMT costume shop last year, my curiosity was piqued. Theatrical costume shops are always a surreal environment, like wandering into Wonderland and glimpsing the trappings of dozens of eras, themes and locales.

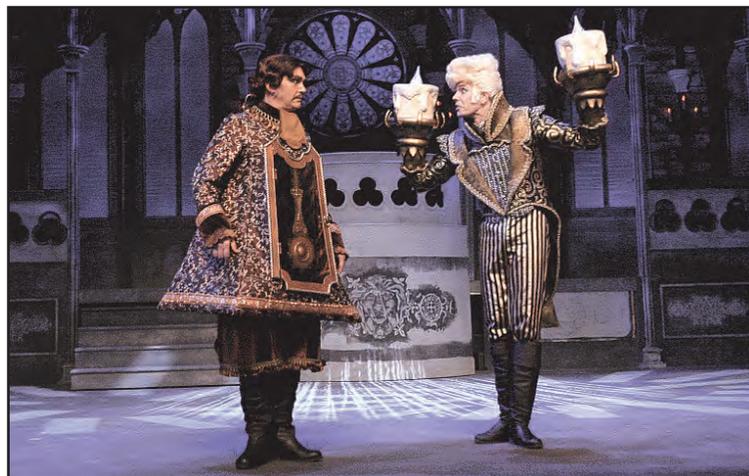
The gangsters and molls of "Guys and Dolls," the prayer shawls of "Fiddler on the Roof," the sequined habits of "Sister Act," and the fanciful fins of "The Little Mermaid." You can imagine the costumes have a life of their own, when the lights turn down, when no one is looking and the belle gowns dance with the military uniforms.

Along these lines, I became fascinated with the idea of being a fly on the steamer trunk of costume packages as they travel the country. Maybe not a fly ... more of a magical roaming costume gnome. Costume packages (complete or partial packages specific to an individual show) are rented by high school, community and professional theaters around



Masine State Music Theatre Costume Shop

Rental costumes for "Mary Poppins," above, and "Beauty and the Beast," below, are shipped around the country by Maine State Music Theatre's costume department.



the country. I asked Mussman to shed a little light on my romantic notions of the traveling costume package. As with many aspects of theater reality, the romance comes with a heavy dose of logistics.

She explains, "One of the biggest problems with booking rentals is that we usually have multiple interest for roughly the same date slots. Let's say you wanted the package from March 15 to

April 15. We would send you the package four weeks in advance and you would have about two-and-a-half weeks after you closed your show to clean and ship the costumes back to us.

"So one package is then booked from February 15 to April 30. If someone calls and wants the package for a Feb. 1 through 12 production, we can't do it because there is not enough time in between

the end of the show and when we've already agreed to ship out to the next customer.



Tamara Lilly

"Same goes on the end of the rental. So we end up missing out on rentals. We'd love to have dozens of packages for the same show! But there's a practical side — it costs money to create a package and space to store the costumes when they're back in house."

Currently, the four most popular packages are "The Little Mermaid," "Beauty and the Beast," "Mary Poppins" and "Spamalot." Mussman shares the history of each.

"The Little Mermaid": "We have one package to rent, built in 2014. MSMT has not used this package for a production. It was built for North Shore Music Theatre's 2014 production and meant for us to keep as a rental package.

"Since summer of 2014, this package has been rented to 9 companies and is also booked for spring of 2017. It has been to Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Iowa, and Alaska and will be heading to Canada next spring. We get a lot of inquiries about this show, most of which we cannot fill because the package is booked for roughly the same dates as the new inquiries are for and we have to turn companies away."

"Beauty and the Beast":



"This package was originally built by Seaside Music Theatre in the mid-2000s and has been rebuilt multiple times by us. Since 2010, this package has been rented 15 times and has three bookings for 2017. Another package that we get multiple interest for roughly the same production dates.

"We rent this out roughly three times a year, spring, summer, fall. Seems to be a popular classic that schools and professional companies still do. It has gone to New Jersey, Illinois and Florida a few times, Indiana, Connecticut, Colorado, Massachusetts, and California. It will be heading to Canada this fall, then to Michigan, Louisiana and then to Rhode Island in 2017 for now ..."

"Mary Poppins": "We built a costume package for MSMT to use in the 2013 production and then we built another package over the 2013-14 winter. We have rented them out a total of 15 times since. This package is not yet booked for 2017.

Like "Beauty and the Beast," this will be a classic. After we closed our production, the first package went to the Fulton in Pennsylvania, then to Beef and Boards in In-

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COSTUME

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dianapolis ... The second package we built debuted at Art-park in New York state. Since then we've rented a package to theaters and schools in Wisconsin, Canada, Pennsylvania, Texas (three times), South Carolina, North Carolina and New York again."

"Spamalot": "This show is rented about two to four times per year. MSMT produced the show in 2010 and in conjunction with other theaters, purchased the set, costumes and props from the London production with MSMT allowed to keep the costumes and props for rental.

"The package has been out a total of 15 times since 2011. It's traveled to Long Island, Canada, Arizona, Tennessee (three times), North Carolina, New Jersey, Colorado, Iowa, Rhode Island, Florida, Washington state, Texas, Massachusetts and is scheduled to return to Tennessee again spring 2017. We keep making repairs on this beast of a show and it is showing age, but the pieces

are still fabulous and our customers are thrilled to have it (and not have to build this show themselves ...)"

I asked about the over-the-top and iconic disco-focused costume package built for this year's MSMT hit based on the music of ABBA.

"'Mamma Mia' is booked for spring 2017 at a theater in Elmsford, New York," Mussman said. "Interest in the package is starting to be generated and I'm sure as the rights to the show are released far and wide, this package will begin to be a staple to our revenue."

While I know that getting rights to shows can be a big headache for theaters around the country, I had not thought about how this effects package rentals. Leaving some wonderful costumes to hang stagnant.

"We have some costume packages that cannot be rented out right now because the rights were pulled for a Broadway revival or tour or some such reason — 'Les Misérables,' 'Cats,' 'The King and I,' 'Miss Saigon,' and possibly 'Singin' in the Rain' soon.

bellies (also pickles), breads and date cookies, as well as a hooked rug each and patterned washcloths that Susie would embroider around the edge. Those washcloths are still in my little hope chest to this day. I'm unable to either use or part with them.

After Frank and Susie's, we'd head to his brother's, my grandfather Herb Lilly, at the top of the hill on Route 127, near Hatch's Corner in Dresden. He lived there with his wife Edna and she would cook a spread each year and serve it for the extended Lilly

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"When this happens, these packages just sit and wait until the rights are released again (if ever). These shows were popular rentals up until about a year ago. We're constantly trying to research what shows are popular that we have costume packages for and reach out to the customers that have secured those rights. We are

always trying to pay attention to what shows have just had their rights released and are on the popular wave and how much money and work and time would it take us to make a costume package for shows that we don't have."

For information, visit msmt-costumes.org, where you can see many more photos, make

inquiries for productions, as well as donate and volunteer.

Tamara Lilly is a Woolwich native and Studio Theatre of Bath board member with over 30 years' experience in community theater. She has performed, teched, produced, directed, taught and worked at theaters in Texas, Pennsylvania and Maine. She can be reached at: tamara.b.lilly@gmail.com

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DRIVE

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with him. Frank would bring one of those tall covered milk canisters with him, stuffed with lunch that Susie had packed, pulling out layer after layer of food and drink and pastries to fuel his work. And fuel it they did, as the stories also included feats of incredible strength doing the work of lifting and moving the logs. But now, in his golden years, he had taken up rug-hooking.

We left at least one year with the traditional banana box full of pickles and frogs

Christmas Spirit in a dime-store pin

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