

UA costumers rushing to get ready for ‘Straw Hat’

By Mark Hughes Cobb

Staff Writer

Published: Monday, February 27, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

TUSCALOOSA | Even with nine costume shop graduate students, more undergraduates and a handful of professional staff on hand, the University of Alabama costume shop has been sewing, cutting and fitting from late fall to the last minute for the French musical farce “An Italian Straw Hat,” which opens tonight in the Marian Gallaway Theatre.

By mid-afternoon Friday, with the shop closing at 5 and a dress rehearsal that night, there was a full house on the bottom floor of

Rowand-Johnson Hall: every desk and table covered, hands busy with yards of fabric, hats and shoes, down to the finest tiny glued-on diamonds of filigree as workers considered how they might reflect the stage lights.

In sheer cast numbers, “An Italian Straw Hat” is not as huge as the 2004 “Ragtime,” for example, which came in Donna Meester’s second year as director of costume design and production at UA. That musical, spanning decades and several communities, had the cast of several dozen, most playing multiple parts, scrambling with crew all over the building to dress and change.

But being set in the early 20th century, “Ragtime” could draw from stock. Like most costume shops, UA’s shop keeps a fairly extensive collection of previously built pieces, along with donated clothing from numerous eras, uniforms to dresses to shoes, hats, ties, vests, jewelry and so on. Whenever possible, with a show of any size, it’s more workable to mix and match from what’s in stock than to build from scratch. A costume designer might focus on a handful of showpiece creations while filling in the chorus with costumes from the warehouse.

“An Italian Straw Hat,” with a cast of a little more than two dozen, couldn’t be done that way.

“It’s set in 1831, which is a period that’s hardly ever done,” Meester said. “So just about everything you’ll see in this show was built.”

Some similarities exist to silhouettes you might have seen before in 19th-century styles — bustles and hoops and petticoats — but details differ. And details matter. Meester still cringes at the memory of a show in Louisiana where she outfitted a World War II soldier in all-period detail, but for one small ribbon on his tunic that was from a later time. One audience member noticed; it took him completely out of



Dusty Compton | *The Tuscaloosa News*

Anne Sorenson, 25, a costume design and production graduate student, works on a chorus dress at the University of Alabama on Friday. The costume shop is cranking out 20 period costumes, plus props and accessories, for the French musical farce “An Italian Straw Hat.” Almost all the costumes are being built from scratch. The production is set in 1831, and the costume shop has few stock articles depicting that time period.

the staged illusion.

“And all these years later, he’s the guy I remember: the one I let down,” she said.

So research and a “bible” of what’s correct for the time comes months in advance, after shows for a season are chosen. Then there are discussions and negotiations with the other creative staff, in this case director Edmond Williams and musical director Raphael Crystal. For the wedding scene, the chorus of singer-dancers who play guests, the numbers are left flexible. Williams suggested eight. Eight couples, he quickly clarified.

For that party of 16, Meester followed the bible, but allowed musical-theater creation to slide in.

“At what wedding are you going to see the women’s dresses match the men’s vests? I told Ed he couldn’t have any more (chorus members), because we’d used all the colors I knew,” she said, laughing.

In crafting the total look — from tops of the heads to bottoms of the shoes, not just clothing but also hair, makeup, accessories and costume props — costumers serve the intent of a show. Last November’s designs for “The Seagull,” for example, might not have been as showy, but Chekov isn’t musical comedy. Sometimes a costumer works to complement, to blend. With a show like “An Italian Straw Hat,” there’s more sense of play.

“The crinoline is a few inches off the floor, about eight inches. Showing ankles was risqué at the time,” Meester said. “The sleeves are just ginormous. It really looks like they were hiding basketballs in the shoulders.”

The hoops and raised skirts service the whimsy of the show, she said. “It’s a farce, so there’s a lot of movement and running around. You can see the feet moving, whereas with longer hoops you just see them floating.”

Because of UA’s separation from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in 2009, students working on a master’s in costume design who used to spend seasons in Montgomery are now in Tuscaloosa for studies. Some of the grads excel more at design, some at the technical end; a few want to teach. But all have pulled together and done the work, finding skills at the sewing machine, even if they prefer drafting paper. For this show, each has a particular large piece to oversee, and a schedule by which to finish it. Others could step in if work falls behind, but no one falls behind, Meester said, because they all maintain such pride in ownership.

Seven of the nine are from that first expanded class of Tuscaloosa grads.

“Seven of them are about to graduate,” Meester said. “And I’m going to cry.”

But she and her crew will have to hold the tears for a few months more, because the UA season is hardly over: There’s still the Alabama Repertory Dance Theatre’s spring concert in March, and “Fefu and Her Friends” in the Allen Bales Theatre and the Kander and Ebb smash “Chicago” in the Gallaway, both in April.

Copyright © 2015 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.