A Most Designing Woman

costumes that appear on the Sooner stage are the creations of Helen Forrest Lauterer

By CONNIE RUGGLES
Photos by Frank Garner

After conferences with the director and the scene designer have established the color scheme, Mrs. Lauterer can begin the process of buying, draping, cutting, fitting and altering.

Buying the material is one of the most important steps in costuming a play. "Comedies generally call for brilliance of color, tragedies for low-key tones," she explains. "Certain colors and fabrics are correct for some historical periods and wrong for others."

Mrs. Lauterer feels that a costume designer must have a sound knowledge of the history of costumes matched by a good knowledge of textiles and the best possible color sense. Only then can the designer depart from the basic patterns and create something really wild and original.

She buys materials mostly on the local level, Norman and Oklahoma City. "I just start at the top of the store," she explains, "and go clear down to the basement, wherever I can find yard goods and accessories."

On these buying trips Mrs. Lauterer gets material samples and then reviews her plans. "With a handful of samples," she says, "I reread the script over coffee and a sandwich. If I can't obtain material of the right color, I often have to dye it."

Of course, as in every other field, cos-
Turning must be done with an eye toward the budget. The University Playhouse box office supports the expenses involved in producing the plays, but the budget is limited, and Mrs. Lauterer cannot afford to spend a lot of money on trimming for the costumes.

"We must depend on color for effect," she says. "Besides, trimming often produces too kaleidoscopic an effect, ruining both the costumes and the scene designs." Each costume costs from $15 to $18. If one garment requires more expensive material that pushes the costs higher, then another costume, for a smaller part, will have to be a remake of an existing one.

Mrs. Lauterer usually makes new costumes for the principal characters and remakes older costumes for the lesser roles. After 20 years with the University, she is still using costumes that she made when she first joined the faculty. Costumes she made during her first four years at O.U. were destroyed in a fire on the North Campus, but her other costumes are still in use.

"We try to make solid costumes that will last," she says. "Each one is lined and sewn like iron because every costume is reworked and reused time after time, especially for the Studio Theatre productions (the student-produced drama school shows)."

Mrs. Lauterer's costumes have lasted through the years because she employs a minimum of total remaking. Taking a costume completely apart requires too much time when the garments can usually be restyled simply by making accessory and trimming changes. Minor fittings can be accomplished without taking the garment apart by taking tucks or letting out darts where the alterations will not show.

Nearly all the costumes for O.U. productions are made in the drama school. Rental is an expensive proposition with no future value for the school. "You pay money," Mrs. Lauterer says, "and after the play is over, you have nothing—no wardrobe for the next production. We try to build up our wardrobe for every period and rent only occasionally, such things as uniforms, shoes, boots and arms." These items are rented from a large costume firm in California which also supplies the movie studios.

In recent years Mrs. Lauterer has given up making preliminary sketches of her designs, doing all this work in her head. Her patterns are made by draping paper or muslin on dress forms. Occasionally she will use a commercial pattern if the play calls for contemporary styles.

"What most people fail to realize," she says, "is that the basic garment is only part of the overall costume. Usually each outfit has a headdress and undergarments and shoes, and the shoes may have bows. All this takes time.

In designing a costume you must suit the mood and qualities of the play," she explains. "You must suit the character and also the actor. These are the three big problems in design. You are dealing in a sculptural effect viewed from all sides."

Mrs. Lauterer is a firm believer that a costume designer must have acting experience. The designer must know enough about acting to know how a costume will move. She feels she must identify with the character wearing the costume.

For "Kismet," this year's first Playhouse production, there were 85 costumes. The play required elaborate headdresses and a large amount of braiding on the harem outfits. Also, each costume had to be solidly made so that the men did not need to worry about their turbans coming unwrapped on stage. Instead of wrapping the turbans, Mrs. Lauterer stitched each one on a wig block so it could be put on and taken off like continued
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For "Kismet" Helen Lauterer made 85 elaborate costumes including these detailed harem outfits.