



From Hot Metal to Delicate Flowers By E. Shura Pollatsek

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with photography by Mitch Wilson

In theatre, it is not only common but expected that technicians play an active role in helping the designer realize his or her vision. The dyer suggests which fabrics will best take the paint treatment desired, the assistant technical director figures out the most graceful way to have the giant door slide behind the wall. But often, whether because of time, equipment, or resources, designers turn to sources beyond the shops and studios. If we need a custom neon sign, thick rubber platforms attached to the sole of a shoe, or yards of printed banners, designers call upon a group of artisans valued by the entertainment industry, yet not a part of it. Sometimes, this trip outside the theatre can prove especially inspiring.

“I wanted to have it seem that the forest was creeping into the court, had taken over, that the forest has created the clothes” was how two-time Tony Award nominated costume designer David C. Woolard described his take on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the 2010 La Jolla Playhouse production. In addition to carrying out director Christopher Ashley’s central imagery for the La Jolla production—the court as a Victorian room and the forest as that room literally turned upside-down—the designer wanted to bring into it “a very organic feel when we got into the fairy world.” In order to implement his fanciful botanical design for the fairy world, Woolard collaborated not only with the costume shop at La Jolla Playhouse, but also with the specialists at M&S Schmalberg in New York, maker of custom fabric flowers. This small business stamped out hundreds of leaves and petals from fabric Woolard had chosen, but equally valuable was the expertise of Schmalberg’s specialists who helped him shape his designs to match what he saw in his mind’s eye.

The production concept, Woolard explained, had been “in Christopher Ashley’s head for quite a while—I mean around ten years or so.” Ashley also decided the court should be set in Victorian times, which he chose both for the structure of the clothing and for the

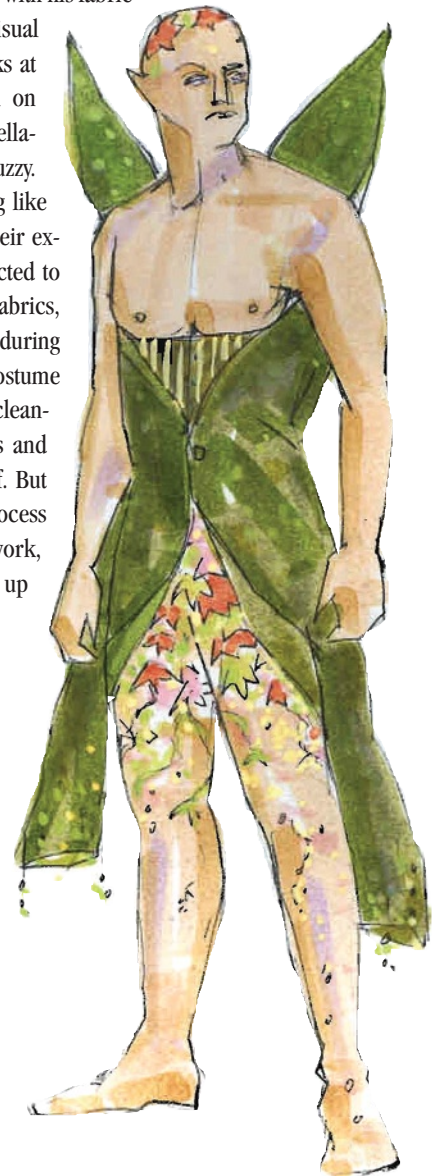
Costume design sketch for “Fairy One” by David C. Woolard. Courtesy of the designer.

strict rules that nineteenth century society embraced. The more uptight the court, the more exciting the transformation to the freedom of the forest becomes, creating “the best expression of upside-down ness.” Ashley left it up to his costume designer to pick the exact silhouette that would work best for the scheme, and after some experimentation at the drawing table, Woolard decided that the early years of the era, the 1840s, would best serve the topsy-turvy scenario. Another plus of this time period was the Victorian interest in fairies, and Woolard drew some of his inspiration from fanciful period illustrations.

The distinguished design team (Woolard, costumes, Neil Patel, sets, Howell Binkley, lights, Mark Bennett, sound, and Basil Twist, puppets) together created a court that transformed in front of the audience from an elegant Victorian setting into the upside-down fairy world. Ceiling lighting fixtures became magical trees growing out of the ground, and a woman appeared in an upside-down dress, the bodice around her thighs and the skirt covering her face. She then pulled the skirt down so that the ruffles of the petticoat became her bodice, and the skirt hung inside out over her legs. Most of the actors played dual roles: Hippolyta doubled with Titania and Theseus with Oberon, so the rulers of the court were the same in both worlds. The servants in the court became the fairies. Woolard created the continuity between worlds in two ways; he had aspects of the servant uniforms carry over into the fairy designs, and he also played around with using clothing shapes upside down, to see which human clothing pieces could create the fanciful fairy silhouettes he desired. For instance, he discovered “what a tail suit looks like if it’s worn upside down, it looks like beautiful wings.” The design Woolard created for each of the fairies combined the Victorian pieces with “some sort of leaf motif or flower motif.” One fairy skirt was “kind of like a ballerina tutu; it’s layers of chiffon but on all the layers of chiffon are flower petals. Some of the corsets and whatnot are vines wrapping around, and then leaves on top of that.”

Being based in New York, Woolard had used M&S Schmalberg many times, but *Midsummer* was the first production where he had needed something other than conventional, realistic floral blooms. At the workroom, he found himself inspired in several ways. Seeing all the diverse options available in terms of shapes, veining, and molding, and the dye techniques as well, set his mind spinning. He asked himself, “How do we actually use these? We don’t necessarily want to create flowers as they’re doing. But we’re using that idea and trying to make that work to create fabric.”

After a brief meeting with co-owner Warren Brand, Woolard simply roamed around the workshop, looking at the molds and the display samples. “It was so fun to go over there and see all these stamping kits. I picked up one and said, ‘This is the leaf I want,’ and he said, ‘Oh, that’s an angel wing, but it can be a leaf.’” Woolard selected about a dozen shapes and chose which fabrics would be made into which shapes. The designer had a clear idea of what he wanted, and with his fabric choices was able to create a range of visual qualities, from fluffy to sharp. The folks at Schmalberg were able to advise him on which fabrics would give a nice crenellation at the edge, and which would be fuzzy. “Whenever I’m dealing with something like that... I am always going to defer to their expertise,” Woolard noted. He had expected to have to limit himself to relatively stiff fabrics, and to fabrics that would hold up well during dry cleaning. Typically, a flower on a costume would be removed before a trip to the cleaners, but for these costumes the petals and leaves were too integrated to come off. But he learned that there was a way to process the fabrics to make virtually any type work, “which was great because it freed me up



Costume design sketch for “Fairy” by David C. Woolard.



Designer David C. Woolard in his New York studio, with his sketches for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* behind him.



Employee Alex Nelson using the “clicker” or die-cutter machine to stamp out flower shapes in multiple layers (left). Molding three dimensional petals with the hot press (below).



Molding leather in the hot press machine (left). Employee Musa Drammeh shaping flower petals out of white fabric at one of the hot press machines (above).

a lot to use brocades and . . . some of the more Victoriana feeling fabrics that I wanted in there—prints and paisleys and stuff like that. I used some richer cut velvets as well, on some of the guys’ garments that were closer to the skin, and then as you got further out on the outside layers in some of the clothing, we had more organzas and Lurex and other fibers like that in the leaves and the petals.” Within a few days, Woolard, along with his Victorian botanical collection, was on his way to California.

The finished costumes used the flower petals and leaves in many kinds of applications. One costume Woolard found especially challenging was “Fairy One.” The performer used the window draperies from the scenery as aerialists’ silks. To successfully hang suspended from fabric wrapped around her limbs, the performer needed a costume with very specific construction. The actress wore harem pants with shirt cuffs at the ankle, made to seem created from an 1840s blouse. Her top half appeared mainly nude, with lightweight purple and maroon leaves crawling strategically across her body, accented with

touches of metallic and green. In the fitting, the fabric leaves were pinned in place on the long-sleeved Milliskin top, and then painter Hochi Asiatico created trompe l’oeil leaves on the flesh-toned stretch fabric. The three-dimensional leaves and painted leaves combined to give the effect Woolard desired, and still allowed the aerialist to contort her body into any position needed without snagging the costume on the drapes. Airy, transparent leaves appeared to sprout out of her shoulder, while on the main area of the torso the decoration was much flatter to the body.

When I visited M&S Schmalberg myself, I found I shared Woolard’s enthusiasm and fascination. “It’s one of these rare places that you get to find,” said Woolard, “and I’m sure every industry has those hidden secrets.” He discovered, for instance, “how they get the dye to press out and get heavier on the outside of the flower petal when they dye them. That’s totally intriguing to find out those things.” I delighted in browsing the shelves full of heavy metal molds, puzzling over the ancient

wheels and dials on the machinery, and watching, mesmerized, as fabric transformed into a botanical garden full of shapes.

Warren Brand greeted me at the door, casually dressed in an Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and sandals. Very gregarious and personable, he is clearly in his element in sales. “I do my thing here. I call myself the flower man, and I like that. I like dealing with people, I like being able to dress comfortably, and my staff is key. I couldn’t do it alone, and they know it.” M&S Schmalberg has held on tenaciously in New York’s garment district for close to one hundred years. Over time, the business has moved from what Brand described as “a little dungeon” at the basement level to quarters with a chic window-lit showroom. The business has a website and a Facebook page, but its products are virtually unchanged. The flowers are still stamped out using the same antique metal molds and assembled by hand with wires and glue. These flowers adorn hats, shoes, and dresses for both the fashion and bridal industries. They have also turned up on giant turtles for Disney and they have carpeted the stage of the Metropolitan Opera.

The basic process starts with fabric being stretched across large wooden frames. The edges of the frames are covered in short spikes, which grip the fabric and hold it taut. Workers apply starch to both sides of the fabric—leather and velvet are only starched on the back. Next, many layers of fabric are stacked, right sides up, and stapled together. The “clicker” stamps out the shapes like a very forceful cookie cutter. Schmalberg has been using this hydraulic die cutter since 1980; however, many of the older dies, the ones with handles, date from the era when all shapes were pounded out by hand with a mallet. The next step for the petals is the hot press machine, which molds the cut fabric. Different treatments can create immense varieties of textures and forms. The machines look like something from the mind of H.G. Wells: solid curving metal forms ornamented with tubing and dials. Fabric is put into the head molds three or four layers at a time. Heat and pressure then turn the flat fabric into organically curved or veined shapes. Leather is more difficult to mold and has to be done one piece at a time.

Next the workers in the front assembly area separate the stacks of petals into individual layers and string them onto wires, which often have beads at the center mimicking a cluster of flower stamens. I watched one woman apply a small dollop of glue from a tub to the wire before adding the petals, measuring the perfect amount with her pinky finger each time. The workers alternate the layers to stagger the petals in just the right way, snipping out flaws in the petals as they find snags. They all are clearly performing their own quality control as they go, and their pace is efficient but not hurried. One worker, Clio Young, custom shapes flowers by hand. He is a skilled sculptor with an arsenal of metal tools, which he heats over a gas camping stove sitting on his workstation. He curls edges of petals using small tongs, or uses custom pleating techniques. Near his station hang completed flowers that resemble elegant pom-poms, each tendril of silk individually spiraled. Other more undulating shapes are created with small mallet-like forms used

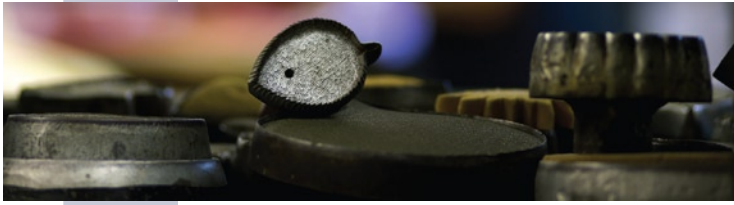
as a combination of iron and anvil.

M&S Schmalberg is a true family business. The current owners are Warren Brand and his sister Debbie. They took the business over from their father, Harold, who inherited it from his uncles. The uncles, Morris and Sam Schmalberg, started their business just after the First World War. Harold Brand lost his mother, father, and three siblings to the Holocaust. After the war, an American soldier found Harold and helped him get in touch with his uncle Morris in New York. There, this frail seventeen-year-old helped his uncles with their business, eventually taking it over after they passed away. The Brand siblings helped their father during summers and holidays, not always by choice. “My father would throw me out of bed,” Warren recalled, “and bring me down here.” After going to college, where he majored in business, Brand immediately went to work full time for his father. Far sooner than he anticipated, he was running the business on his own. In 1981, just four years after he finished college, the business became very busy. “It was a real flower phenomenon time, everything was flowers, and we couldn’t keep up with the demand.” Two of the temporary workers hired to keep up with the boom got into a violent argument one day. Harold Brand tried to break them up and make them take it outside. In the scuffle, was shot in the neck. “I happened to go out for lunch that day, which was so rare, but God has a plan, I guess,” Warren said with a shrug. His father survived, but a bullet remains lodged by his spine and “he’s in pain 24/7.” The young Warren appealed to his sister Debbie for help. She was a special education teacher in Florida at the time, but came back to New York to help out. The current arrangement is that Debbie is a fifty-percent partner, but only works part time. She devotes a lot of her time to service at a Holocaust Memorial Center on Long Island. Recently, Warren’s son Adam has joined the business, adding another generation to the chain. As a child, Adam visited frequently, playing around making “absolutely terrible flowers” or pitching in at busy times with “actually helpful” simple tasks. Today, Adam is responsible for the growth in Schmalberg’s online presence.

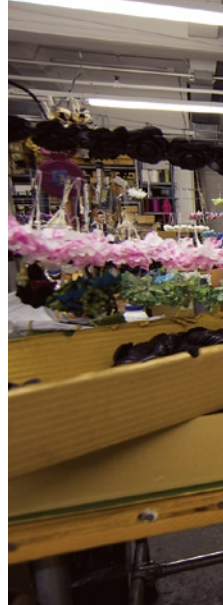
Brand estimates that roughly a quarter of their business is for the entertainment industry. Fashion and bridal designers are Schmalberg’s main clients. Business varies depending on the time of year—hat decorations for the Kentucky Derby, bridal hairpieces and gowns, new looks for New York’s Fashion Week. The company still does very large orders, but not as often as in the past. Sometimes Schmalberg just does the samples, and ruefully assumes they are mass duplicated overseas. Like many other aspects of the garment business, on-site attention and convenience can’t compete with cheaper labor.

When customers comes in to have flowers made, the first step is usually a visual reference. Sometimes they bring a sketch, sometimes a photograph, or sometimes they start with the collection of samples in the showroom. Usually the look of the flower is the most important factor. As Brand said, “Even though all we do is make flowers and leaves, we are not exactly horticulturally correct.” For instance, a shopper came in for poppies, to

A few of the molds for cutting out leaf shapes.



Debbie and Warren Brand in the workroom of M&S Schmalberg.



be used as set dressing for a production at the Metropolitan Opera. After looking at Schmalberg's options, the designer chose a gardenia to create the poppy look he had envisioned. Seeing the options can change a client's mind. "Sometimes someone will come in here desiring a soft, closed, onion-type flower, and end up with an open cascade of something else," Brand said. Of course as often as changing a client's mind to a different existing shape, Schmalberg's artisans will figure out a new combination of their molds to replicate a client's research. Milliner Arnold Levine notes that a colleague of his, Aaron Keppel of ID Design, had great success having realistic flowers made using a combination of molds. For instance, not having a calla lily in the size he needed, they used a leaf mold instead.

After selecting an array of molds and dies, the client will often order samples before committing to a larger order. Sometimes the client just needs to double check how the fabric will look in a chosen shape; sometimes the client wants to see a range of options. Warren recalled a large order for Disney's Animal Kingdom done years ago. The designers wanted to experiment, and brought a variety of fabrics to try as samples, in a variety of shapes. The winning combination turned out to be ultrasuede leaves in a variety of colors. "Giant leaves, coincidentally, not flowers also in this case—big leaves—six and ten inches, and we made them samples first," Brand said. "I guess they had a meeting, and then they came back and ordered over 10,000

ultrasuede leaves, which was a nice shot for us." The leaves were used like scales to cover ants and turtles and other animals.

Why have flowers made? Costume shops and milliners can certainly make their own fabric flowers in-house, and many do, but subcontracting is often the best compromise between a completely custom job and settling for what is available pre-made in stores. Between the complete realism of silk flowers purchasable anywhere and making your own simple ribbon rosettes lies a huge range of décor options. Levine, the milliner and craftsman who runs Arnold S. Levine Inc. in New York, bemoans the fact that "you can't find [variety] in stores anymore." Also, since Schmalberg's molds are vintage, he finds it is much easier to duplicate vintage styles. He recalls using felt flowers for New York City Opera's *Intermezzo*, (costumes designed by Martha Munn) which was set in the 1920s. Felt flowers made from a four-petal shape were transformed into what he called "art-deco buds dangling in a cluster on the side of a cloche hat."

Sometimes, using a specialty artisan may provide just the infusion of inspiration or time a project needs. However, in other instances it may be better to have interns spend days hand-cutting shapes or custom painting purchased flowers. And, many times, a flower from the dollar store will do just fine, and often that is all that the budget will allow.

During my years working in costume design in New York, I regularly made rounds to cobblers, pleaters, welders, and

Employee Clio Young curls white lace petals for a custom order for Carolina Herrera.



Yolanda Peñu and Marie Calizaire assemble flowers in the workroom of M&S Schmalberg.



Molded petals being stacked onto wire, secured with a small dab of glue.

embroiderers. Theatre artists outside large cities often patronize craftspeople whose main business is historical recreation. These collaborations can be efficient, inspiring, life-saving, or sometimes frustrating. Sunburst pleating from Stanley Pleating creates effects that would be nearly impossible to reproduce with an iron, even with a lot of time. Many workspaces do not have the ventilation, let alone the equipment and know-how for welding. I worked on a project which hired custom welders to make fan-shaped wire frames upon which to base showgirl headpieces. These were difficult to carry on the subway at rush hour, but would have been much more difficult to create in-house. During my time as an assistant costume designer, I remember needing multiple visits to convince a cobbler to create a blue suede “slipcover” for a pair of Converse sneakers for Broadway’s *All Shook Up* (designed by David C. Woolard).

These businesses are often intrigued by what theatre folks do and enjoy working with us as a break from their more standard clients. Many of us have spent time explaining to a bemused person behind the counter that we want the dry cleaning to remove the sweat from the garment, but not the carefully painted fake food stains.

Theatre design is a uniquely collaborative art, and the artisans who implement the design are an important part of the process, through their creative problem solving and the nuances they add visually. Each person who forms a link in

the chain adds something unique to the final product, from assistant designers to shoppers, painters, stitchers, and carpenters. This collaboration does not end at the walls of the shop or the theatre—often specialists out in the “real world” provide unique insights and technical expertise that guide us to ideas we might not have come up with on our own. ❖

E. Shura Pollatsek worked professionally in New York as an assistant costume designer on productions for the Metropolitan Opera and Broadway (including *All Shook Up* with David C. Woolard), and as a costume designer at Off-Broadway theatres such as the Pearl Theatre, Storm Theatre, and HERE Arts Center. She is currently Associate Professor of Costume Design and Technology at Western Kentucky University, and continues with an active professional design career as well.

Mitch Wilson, a National Press Photographer of the Year recipient, is widely known for cinematography and still photography, and is a DGA director. He has been recognized with many awards including the Primetime Emmy, the duPont Columbia Award, the Peabody, and two International Documentary Association Awards. He began his career as a combat cameraman and underwater photographer in the U.S. Navy’s elite Combat Camera Group.