



RIBBONS, AND RUFFLES, AND LACE,
OH *My Fair Lady*!
Backstage with
Costume Director Joe Salasovich

Ahead of what promises to be one of the season's most highly-anticipated classics, My Fair Lady, the editor had the chance to talk petticoats, lace, and the mafia with Arena Stage Costume Director Joe Salasovich.

Lauren Whitehead: Audiences are dying to know—how many hoops does it take to get to the center of Eliza's petticoats in *My Fair Lady*?

Joe Salasovich: Ha, ha! Well, right now the worlds are still being created. We're finding where they collide. Think steampunk meets Alexander McQueen. It's a costumer's playground—quirky and fantastic, gritty, fashiony. **It's going to be a feast for the eyes.**

LW: Can you walk us through the steps of bringing the costumes to life?

JS: First we meet with the designer and director to sit down and work through the concept and budget. We figure out what our resources are and then decide how to use our time and those resources to get the best possible production. By the first rehearsal, we usually know the fabrics, shoes, undergarments. Then the rehearsal process guides us. It's a lot like triage in an emergency room setting! With *Sophisticated Ladies*, we had a night where the assistant choreographer had to go on. We had an hour and a half to pull from stock, go out and shop, and get her onstage. Twelve looks in one afternoon.

LW: That's exhausting! How many weeks does it take to costume a show?

JS: Anywhere from four weeks to six months. It really depends on the scope of the show and the needs of the process and creative team. For example, with *The Normal Heart* we had to wait for the cast to arrive from New York to get to know bodies, shapes, the needs of the show. **If we need to create a petticoat for Eliza that flutters specifically to the right when she flicks her wrist and gazes just-so at the audience, it takes time.** And just when the ruffles and lace on the



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costumes are finished, you get to shop for a new show! I'm learning something new every single week. It's wonderful.

LW: What has been your favorite?

JS: Well, the caliber of designers we get to work with at Arena is absolutely incredible.

Oklahoma! was outstanding, really. The whole collaborative process with Molly Smith (director), Martin Pakledinaz (costume designer), and Parker Esse (choreographer) was a dream come true. We endeavored to not get in the way of the storytelling, to make the characters as real as possible. If you got lost in the story, then our job was done.

Oklahoma! was my very first show in high school, but when I hear the songs in my head now, I hear Eleasha Gamble (Laurey) and Nicholas Rodriguez (Curly). That's quite a big deal that it replaced the Broadway cast for me. It was pretty momentous.

LW: How many staff members are on hand for something like *My Fair Lady*?

JS: Well, *The Music Man* has 27 in house, not including outside tailors, drapers, shoemakers, etc. Up to 50 people I'd say. When a show is smaller though, it's less than half of that. Honestly, there is nothing I love more than a full costume shop. In the coming year, we will have myself, Ted, two drapers, two first hands, one stitcher, and one milliner/dyer. We incorporate additional staff as needed for each show.

LW: What a great team! So were you a born costumer?

JS: I was studying mechanical engineering and statistics and my parents told me to give it a try. It was not just supportive, it was a directive. Having just become a parent myself, it's interesting to look back on what that did for me. **My parents have formed my entire life and career.**



LW: Do you have a favorite piece you've seen take shape?

JS: Hands down Heather Raffo's [costume] from *9 Parts of Desire* (2006/07). Never have garments been used by an actor so well to create those nine strikingly different women. Also, in *Death of a Salesman* (2007/08), Willy Loman's suit was made out of rayon. We had to press it at the start of the show when he's at his peak and it just got worse as the show went on, bedraggled and worn. Sometimes those are the touches that are never really recognized, but for me it's the little things that tell the story best: the constable in *The Music Man* whose badge actually read 'River City Iowa,' or the aid workers in *Ruined* who wore logos of the Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) just like the real aid workers in the DRC. It's about helping the actor to tell a better story and therefore give a better, more authentic performance. That's what makes my job so rewarding.

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LW : I've heard every costume shop has one. That one ubiquitous item (pardon the pun) bursting from the seams in the shop. What's Arena's ?

JS: Safety pins! Or maybe buttons. The collection just gets bigger and bigger with each show, but we try to keep it from getting out of hand. I'm most proud about the quality of our stock. **And when there's something we don't have, we turn to the mafia.**

LW: The mafia?!

JS: The costuming community in DC operates a lot like a mafia between theaters and shops, but it's a very altruistic rental community. We all work together when we need to.

LW: Ha, ha. That explains it. Joe, what's it like to do what you do on a daily basis?

Being an artist professional is a vocation from the standpoint that you are called on to support all the other artists involved in the process by bringing art to the table. It is the collaborative and the creative. **And being drawn to art is being drawn to people and to enriching your viewpoint on the human experience.** I've always been a people watcher. Who isn't fascinated by the human condition? The whole costume shop endeavors to bring the designs to life. We take the static to the dynamic. Being paid to do that is such a great honor.



LW: In closing, what do you love most about your job?

Each show is an opportunity to dive into a different period and learn more. It's the best form of education. Whether it's *Ruined*, *Oklahoma!* or *The Normal Heart*, it's academic, emotional, personal. It's amazing.

***See the abbreviated version of the interview in the Fall 2012 Donor Newsletter!**