Weekend and beyond

Big ‘Producers’

Musical has twice as many costumes as any other production Clark College Theatre has done

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Producer of one wondrous wardrobe

Costuming for "The Producers" takes theater to new level

By BREIT OPPEGAARD
for The Columbian

They started putting this together in June. Clark College Theatre's costume designer, Patricia Rohrbach and several assistants knew "The Producers" would be unlike any show they had worked on before, but it wasn't until they began making specific plans together over the summer that they fully realized the magnitude of their undertaking. Even the college's biggest musicals in the past, such as "Fiddler on the Roof," didn't involve more than 300 or so costume pieces. "The Producers," opening Feb. 16th, has 400.

That has driven the 84-year-old Rohrbach to work at least 50 hours a week on this production for the past seven months, in addition to her primary job as the theater program's coordinator. She rarely has taken a day off during that time, and her assistants, including Tony Bunge, jokingly have started to call her garage, where most of the costume construction takes place, "Pai's Sweat Shop."

"The Producers" was created by Mel Brooks - famous for such films as "Blazing Saddles," "Young Frankenstein" and "History of the World, Part I" — as a remake of sort of his 1968 movie of the same name. The musical version tells a similar tale, of a desperate Broadway producer, Max Bialystock, who determines he could make more money on a flop than a hit. He just has to sell 25,000 percent ownership in the piece and make it so bad it closes immediately, before any investor starts thinking about returns. To make that plan work, though, he has to locate a guaranteed loser. He thinks he hits the jackpot when he finds the script.

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If you go

What: Clark College Theatre presents "The Producers," the Tony Award-winning musical created by Mel Brooks.

When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 19, 20 as well as Feb. 26-27, with dress rehearsal to be held Feb. 21; non-ticketed performances will be offered Feb. 25 and March 4-5.

Where: Clark College's Gaiser Hall, 1913 Fort Vancouver Way, Vancouver.

Admission: $25-$35, $15 for non-ticketed shows.

Information: 360-992-2815, http://www.clark.edu/
Clara’s cascade of costume changes

Here is a glimpse of three crucial costume designs in the show, through Clark College Theatre’s costume designer Patricia Rohrbach’s perspective:

Scene: The “Springtime for Hitler” performance, the musical within the musical.

Challenges: Maybe the most critical juncture in the plot, in which Nazi Germany has to appeal light and funny in a huge song and dance number that includes iconic German symbols as well as historical characters, such as Adolf’s Hitler and Eva Braun.

Rohrbach’s approach: “The scene starts with Beethoven dancers, demonstrating sort of the traditional Germany, with peasant blouse and lederhosen. I wanted lots of color, lots of patterns, ready to make a splash. The stormtrooper girls then come out in brown shirts and black skirts. They don’t really look like stormtroopers, of course, but I pictured this as something that makes fun of the Nazis.” Later in the scene, the icon girls parade out blue jumpsuits. One is decorated with a beer stein, another with pretzels, another with bavarian bread. Making blue jumpsuits balance properly is really hard to do. The shape of them. They can be too heavy. They need to be weighted evenly on each side. For the girls in this scene, we eventually had to put on sewed on ribbons to keep them on.

Scene: Any involving Ulla, the flirty secretary.

Challenge: She has to look great but also be able to perform athletic dance moves.

Rohrbach’s approach: “Right from the top of the show, Ulla has a white dress that has to be cut enough to show off her other physical assets. Every Ulla outfit will have to do something more for Hitler’s number.” She first appears as the German Imperial Eagle, with a large cape, decorated with a big swastika edged in black feathers, held up by dows. She returns later in the scene as Eva Braun, in a black and silver evening gown. She designs a dress in one scene that needs to twist, and in another, she’s doing the samba with a hat.

Scene: The director of “Springtime for Hitler,” Roger DeBri, introduces his fascist team.

Challenge: Usually, costume designer’s work is not seen by audience. This is one of those rare cases in which audience is being dresssed. If the actor isn’t comfortable in the costume, that person is not going to perform well. My goal here was to make them look damn good. Roger comes out, for example, in a dress that is supposed to resemble the Chrysler building. Our actor is naturally very masculine looking, so I wanted to cover his arms as much as possible, to make him look more effeminate. I also used a lot of flowing material, to give the dress movement as he walked, to make it dance, even when he wasn’t. The rest of the team had a Village People theme. One of them was wearing black leather motorcycle chaps and a vest, with no shirt. The costume has a purple scarf, animal print cuffs and a bolo tie, with fringed chaps and tight pants.

“Tend to look at what Broadway did and try to get as close to that as I can on my budget.”

Patricia Rohrbach
Clark College costume designer

Clark College costume designer Patricia Rohrbach, right, finishes a fitting for Cora Kendall-Broy, who plays Ulla in the community college’s production of “The Producers.” Ulla requires a new costume for every scene.

ZACHARY KAPLAN/THE COLUMBIA

“Springtime for Hitler” But that’s when everything starts to backfire for Bilykstock.

The unusual staging of the show and large cast (30 in the Clark version) require at least a half-dozen costume changes for the chorus, switching back and forth between the 1940s and 1930s, to differentiate the musical within the musical. The lead female character, flirty secretary Ulla, has a new costume for every scene, and there are numerous casts of historical characters that need to create instant recognition in the audience, Rohrbach said. “Professional designers even comment that this is the biggest show ever for costumes.”

“The Producers” won a record 15 Tony awards in 2001, and the Broadway version toured through Portland soon afterward, in 2003. That New York-based company hasn’t returned, but The Lakewood Theatre Company spent more than $10,000 just to rent the costumes for the production last season in Lake Oswego, Ore. Rohrbach’s budget to create all of the costumes for Clark from scratch: $5,000.

Rohrbach, who dabbled in drama in high school, started volunteering for local theater companies 25 years ago, as a way to support the interests of her daughter, Rebecca. Kraner, who is now the board president of the Old St. Louis House Theatre Company in Vancovuer.

The retired optician acknowledges she didn’t own a sewing machine and didn’t even know how to thread a needle when she found herself helping Clark recover from a costume design disaster a decade ago, just before the opening night of “Cabaret.” She learned quickly, though, and her hard work and dedication to salvaging that show earned her the job. She since has designed costumes for a variety of local and regional productions, including Washougal’s Blue Parent Theatre, Portland’s Quotable Space and Lakewood. When The Producers’ show was held in Lakewood, Rohrbach helped to collect and ship the costumes back to their owners, giving her a chance to get a first-hand look at the techniques used by those designers. She also has done extensive research on the internet and through books, examining every other approach she can find to try to create the highest impact she can, considering the resources she has.

“I tend to look at what Broadway did and try to get as close to that as I can on my budget,” she said. “I always find someone else’s idea, on a tighter budget, that looks good. I’ll do that, too. There are some costumes that just have to be done a certain way, because that’s what the audience expects. Then, there are other places where I can put in my own imagination.”

Brett Oppenfield