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Haute couture gets 'Wicked' for Saenger return

BY SUE STRACHAN | STAFF WRITER SEP 27, 2019 - 12:00 PM

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Allison Bailey and Talia Suskauer in the North American Tour of "WICKED," coming to the Saenger Theatre, Oct. 2 to 20, 2019. Bailey is wearing Glinda's "Bubble Dress."

Provided photo by Joan Marcus

Sue Strachan

Sue Strachan writes about art, movies, TV, people, parties, fashion and homes. Contact: sstrachan@theadvocate.com.

It weighs 40 pounds, is made of 25 different kinds of sequins and nine different fabrics. Glinda's "Bubble Dress" in the musical "Wicked" is as layered as a cake and, for those who love costumes. just as delicious.

Glinda's most famous outfit is just one of the many distinctive creations concocted and crafted by the show's costume designer Susan Hilferty.

“The costumes in the show are haute couture, made for each individual,” said Hilferty in a phone interview. “Glinda’s ballgown is hand-beaded with each bead attached one by one. Buttons are made, shoes are made, as is millinery.”

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When “Wicked” opened on Broadway in 2003, it was a smash hit, introducing theatergoers to an alternate “The Wizard of Oz” universe, this one based on the book “Wicked: The Life and Times

of the Wicked Witch of the West,” by Gregory Maguire. A major part of illustrating this world on stage are the costumes.

In the years since the show opened, the costumes have developed their own following. One fan site, galindaswardrobe.com, breaks down every button and bead. Note to Carnival costume designers: This site offers loads of inspiration if you want to be Glinda, Elphaba or any of the other denizens of Oz.

Locals are invited back to Oz when the show returns to the Saenger Theatre from Oct. 2-20. It is part of the 2019/2020 Hancock Whitney Broadway in New Orleans series.

Producers turned to Hilferty, who at that time had just finished designing the costumes for the 2002 revival of “Into the Woods,” for which she was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Costume Design and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Costume Design.

“I got a phone call from director Joe Mantello,” Hilferty said. “It happened to be exactly the right moment in life and career to be ready to design ‘Wicked.’”

The production had secured the rights to the original illustrations W.W. Denslow did for “The Wizard of Oz,” by L. Frank Baum, so Hilferty could use those for inspiration. She worked off the script — the show’s music and lyrics were by Stephen Schwartz and book by Winnie Holzman — but also found that “there were a lot of clues in the novel that aren’t necessarily in the script,” Hilferty said.

“I decided to create a world based in the time of original novel,” she added. “It was set in Edwardian times and I tried to imagine that era and that the center of the earth had been pulled up to find a parallel universe, one where animals can talk.”

“The clothes are very twisted, meaning while it is all traditional millinery and dressmaking; it has a twist and it takes certain type of knowledge to do it,” said Hilferty, who majored in painting and minored in fashion design at Syracuse University.

With her education and previous theater design credits, “I had just enough experience with all of these to invest in creating a whole new world,” Hilferty said. A character doesn’t have

one top hat, but two top hats, or one that is upside down. Dresses and skirts can be asymmetrical. A trench coat can have four sleeves.

Before her ideas became reality, they were made into sketches. “The sketches are the way to communicate, share information,” about how they are shown to the director, choreographer, set designer, lighting designer and others involved in the show, Hilferty said.

From the pre-Broadway tryouts at San Francisco's Curran Theatre to the New York production, Hilferty said 25 per cent of the production was modified because of script changes, lyric changes, music changes, and ultimately, costuming needed to alter as well.

“Costume changes are exactly what happens in a new musical,” Hilferty said. “You get to see the order and spirit of things, including cast changes. That’s why we have the opportunity when out of town to facilitate changes.”

Hilferty’s “Wicked” designs won the 2004 Tony Award for Best Costume Design, Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Costume Design and Outer Critics Circle Award.

A year later the first national tour was organized. “The decision was made to maintain the look of the costumes,” Hilferty said. “We had to make some slight changes for touring, for example to adjust to load in and load out.”

“Our producers, David Stone and Marc Platt, have been really, really amazing because they are committed to having the production as it was on Broadway,” said Hilferty.

The lead characters can have multiple versions of one costume,

In “Wicked,” a lead actor has two understudies. All three have completed costumes ready to go in case something happens before or during a show.

“So far, we have made 50 Elphaba Wicked Witch dresses and 65 Glinda the Good dresses,” Hilferty said.

A good way to see a close up and the innerworkings of the "Bubble Dress" is in a 2014 “Behind the Scenes” video on YouTube in which Kara Lindsay, who has portrayed Glinda, shows how the 40 pound dress and stunt rigging are placed seamlessly within the dress so all the

audience sees is the exterior costume. Fan site Galinda's Wardrobe has photos of each traveling production's version of the dress, including the costumes worn in the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany and Japan. (Costume lovers will geek out at the various tweaks and changes to the garment for each country.)

The chorus and their understudy costumes are all different, Hilferty said, and “There is no repetition of the same costume, they are all one-of-a-kind.”

“If you saw a tour six years ago,” she added, “everyone will see the same experience with slight variation,” referencing some new Emerald City costumes.

What stays the same are the fans reactions to the costumes. “One of the best compliments are the many people who make a version of a ‘Wicked’ costume for Halloween or special event,” said Hilferty, citing a photo of a Glinda dress a person had made to wear for Carnival in Venice.

Hilferty was also the costume designer for “Lestat,” a musical about the Anne Rice character with a fondness for the Crescent City,

but she has not been to New Orleans or Mardi Gras. She does have a book that includes illustrations of past Carnival costumes.

“I understand the inventiveness and skill,” Hilferty said.

"WICKED"

Opening 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, running 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays to Thursdays, 2 p.m. Oct. 3, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 1 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. Sundays, through Oct. 20

Saenger Theatre, 1111 Canal St.

Tickets: \$49-\$183

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