Hair

The world of wigs and makeup
BY MIKE LAWLER

When you walk into the wig shop of American Players Theatre in Spring Green, Wisconsin, Ralph Holcomb seems out of place. If it weren’t for the intent look on his face as he ties delicate strands of human hair through fine mesh squares on a molded head in his lap, you’d think he stumbled in from the scene shop next door looking for a quiet place to think. Standing well over six feet, with closely cropped hair and a wild shock of red fuzz jutting from his chin, Holcomb cuts an imposing figure. He’s not the guy you’d imagine as the new wig master for the 2007 season of the classic theatre in the woods.

“If somebody told me when I started school, ‘In ten years you’re going to be sitting in a room tying hundreds of knots of hair everyday,’ I would have looked at them like they were crazy,” Holcomb says. “But once I started getting into it, I fell in love with it.”

Now, after several years of supporting himself with his wigs, Holcomb knows how tedious the work may look to outsiders. Sometimes it is tedious, but it has its rewards, too. “You can definitely see your progress,” he says. “One of my favorite parts is when you put that finished, styled product on somebody.”

From the neck up

“The wig and makeup industry is complicated and variable,” explains Martha Ruskai, who directed wig and makeup training at North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem for nearly twenty years. Though the areas of wigs and makeup may sound quite different, they are frequently interchangeable, and the work is often performed by the same people. Makeup artists are sometimes responsible for the care of wigs during production and are at times skilled wig makers and stylists in their own right. These artists, along with the milliner, are the people who take care of performers from the neck up. They do so, for the most part, in accordance with the costume designer’s vision. Wig makers may use wigs that are already built, having rented them or pulled them from a theatre’s stock, but generally they must still do a fair amount of maintenance and tweaking to make the wig suitable for the design. Makeup artists will assist performers with any complicated makeup application that is part of the design.

According to Ruskai, there are six different skill sets applicable to both wigs and makeup: wig making, wig and hair styling, cut and color, makeup application, prosthetic lab techniques, and design. Most of these are self-explanatory; however, Ruskai explains that the art of one, makeup application, is very specialized. “Not all makeup artists can do all types and venues equally well,” she says. There are several types of makeup application that require differing skills and training, including fashion, aging, prosthetics, and special effects. Again, Ruskai says that even within these specialties there are stark differences.
between how they are handled for the stage versus film, television, or print jobs.

The work of the wig master is also subject to the whims of other theatre artists as they react to fashion and changing trends. These trends often progress along a different trajectory than those associated with costumes and clothing.

“Current taste and fashion affect hairstyles more than costumes,” says Ruskai. “Audiences, directors, and performers accept that people in 1692 wore things that looked different, but often have more difficulty in adjusting to a man in an elaborate, long wig, period makeup, and beauty spots,” she explains.

**Wig and makeup design**

Design can be yet another facet of the job for wig masters and makeup artists. “While there are some costume designers who are skilled at drawing hairstyles and makeup there are an equal number who are not,” Ruskai explains. “In addition, very few have been trained to apply makeup and style hair.”

The relationship between wig masters and costume designers is at times very complicated because of the high level of specialization involved, and, according to some wig masters, the lack of expertise on the part of the designers. “A costume designer is often stretched very thin and so may not want to take the time to think about hair and makeup until all of the costume pieces are under control, which can be right before the first dress rehearsal,” Ruskai says. “This shortens the amount of time available to build, have fittings, and make adjustments.”

For these and other reasons, including the common understaffing of costume shops and the occasional lack of a costume designer altogether, a specialized area of design has evolved: the wig and makeup designer. According to Ruskai, wig and makeup designers are far more common in the areas of opera, Broadway, and film and television than in non-commercial theatre.

James P. McGough, wig designer and head of the wig shop at Virginia Opera for the past nine seasons, falls into such a category, though he admits his situation is uncommon. “What I have in Virginia is so rare,” he says. “Most opera companies don’t have a resident wig person.”

McGough is also the former wig master of American Players Theatre, where he spent fourteen seasons. While his position with APT was wig master, he has done his share of uncredited design there, guiding and assisting costume designers unable or
unwilling to devote energy to wigs and makeup.

Holcomb, McGough’s successor, was trained by a former pupil of McGough himself, and has managed to create a career in theatrical wigs in a relatively short period of time. Still in his twenties, Holcomb is an example of how effective networking can be. He has demonstrated that one can create a niche and build a reputable career as a wig specialist in theatre. However, Holcomb’s career is probably the exception to the rule, and by no means easily replicated. It takes a lot of work to build and maintain a life in wigs and makeup—especially if you are planning to stick to live performing arts.

**A job description for the wig master**

The wig master’s process begins, as with most areas of theatre, when he first reads a script. “We’re reading it with a completely different viewpoint than anybody else,” McGough says. “I’m looking for any hair reference.” As an example, McGough cites a recent production of Tartuffe, in which the costume designer had overlooked a textual reference to Orgon’s moustache. In this sense, it is helpful to have a wig master who takes the time to become familiar with the work.

The wig master must then determine how the desired hairstyles and wigs will be created for the show. In doing so, the wig master will consult extensively with the costume designer who is, in most situations, responsible for the look of the performers’ hair.

The wig personnel will schedule appointments with each of the performers to assess such things as head size, current hair length, hair color, and existing facial hair (if any). If it is not deemed necessary for certain actors to wear wigs, their hair length and style will be examined carefully so that any needed haircut or restyling can be determined and agreed upon. Actors requiring wigs will be measured and sometimes photographed so that the wig shop can create a wig that fits their heads perfectly.

Often, wigs will be built from scratch. Other times a wig shop will use wigs that are already built, having rented them or pulled them from their own theatre’s stock. The shop must still do a fair amount of maintenance and styling to make existing wigs suitable for the design and the individual actor. The wig makers spend hours ventilating (see the sidebar on page 23), a term used to describe the tying of the wig material (be it human hair, yak hair, or a synthetic material) to the mesh cap that will hold it together.

Once the wigs have been created, the stylist will go to work manipulating the wig to match the desired look. During all of this, the wig shop may have the actors in for further fittings. For instance, a wig master would ideally want to have a fitting after the wig cap was built, after the wig was ventilated (or tied), and after the wig was styled. Depending on the theatre or organization, this may or may not be possible based on the typically demanding schedules of the actors and the technicians.

When the wigs are complete, they will need maintenance during the run of a show and probably will also require periodic restyling.

Though professional actors are usually responsible for applying the makeup designed by the costume designer, there are times when specialized makeup is needed for a produc-
tion for one or more of the characters. If this is the case, a makeup artist will apply the makeup so that it is consistent at each performance. (My favorite example of this was a costume design for Caliban in The Tempest that included very little clothing and lots of body makeup—the makeup artist earned her wage every night for that one!)

Because makeup is chemically based and in contact with a performer's skin for long periods of time, the makeup artist will also assess a performer's history of allergic reactions, and ensure that all products used are safe for anyone using makeup.

Makeup artists work in numerous venues and a variety of productions. Therefore they must be able to make decisions about how makeup will "read" from the stage. They will do this based on many factors, including the performer's skin tone, the lighting, costuming, and scenery. The overall design and mood of the show are also critical considerations for a makeup artist, since the makeup they apply will reflect these ideals.

When necessary, makeup artists will also devise, create, and apply any prosthetic pieces, or special-effects makeup applications, such as wounds, scars, or other modifying features that are required by the design.

As with any other tech theatre position, the makeup artist will generally be present for technical rehearsals—either to apply the makeup as they will during the run of the show, or to ensure that performers are properly using the makeup, and fulfilling the demands of the design.

The realities of freelancing

"This work takes a lot of stamina," says McGough. "You're always looking for work." While this is obviously a common dilemma for all theatre artists, McGough suggests why it may be even harder for wig and makeup artists to find steady employment.

"Most theatre companies don't use wigs," he tells me. "And when they do—and I hate to say this—they do
Where does wig hair come from (and where does it end up)?

“It’s usually human hair,” James P. McGough explains. As a wig master with over twenty years of experience, he’s handled a lot of it. “It comes from hair merchants.”

Such hair merchants are all over the globe, with the region determining the price, type, and quality of the hair. “There is never a hair shortage,” McGough says.

Natural hair must go through an extensive preparation process before being put on the market. “They take it, color strip it, dye it,” says McGough. “They delouse it, of course.”

McGough and Ralph Holcomb have spent many summers building and maintaining wigs for the outdoor stage at APT and point out that wigs made of human hair will react to weather in predictably unfortunate ways. Certain conditions like severe humidity often necessitate restyling.

The hair is not always human hair, though. Frequently, theatre companies use dyed yak hair as well as synthetic hair. These types of hair can be very useful for certain applications and are often preferred for building facial hair.

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Whatever the hair’s origin, it doesn’t always end up where you’d think. “I am so used to finding hair everywhere,” Holcomb says. “If I’m in a restaurant and I sit down at a table and I see a hair, I wonder, ‘Did that come from me?’” It’s a question most people could answer easily, for we know what our hair is like—but wig makers like Holcomb work so closely with so many different types of hair that it’s hard for them to know what they’ve brought to the table. Holcomb also tells a story of going home after work and finding a long human hair wrapped around one of his toes as though someone had taken the time to carefully secure it there. So, if you don’t think you’d ever get used to that sort of thing, wigs may not be the life for you.

—ML

Film and television versus theatre

Work outside the theatre is abundant, but different professionals see the opportunities in very different lights. “Monster, sci-fi, and gore get all the attention,” Ruskai says, summing up the dilemma she feels serious theatre artists will have to face.

“You make a lot of money in film,” says McGough, who also freelances from time to time as a costume designer. “But there are a lot of sacrifices too.” There are, of course, the decisions that inevitably go along with relocating to one of the country’s filmmaking centers. Then there are industry requirements to consider. McGough views work in film and television as an entirely different ball of wax. “It’s industry standard in film and television that you have to have a cosmetology degree,” he says. Many states require that you have certain training and licensing to work as a hairstylist or cosmetologist, regardless of where you have studied or earned a degree.

But according to Ruskai, who has been working with wigs for nearly thirty years, the debate is moot. “Very few wig makers don’t work both industries,” she says. “You can’t really earn a living as a makeup artist in theatre unless you run a Broadway
spectacle.” A realist, Ruskai is upfront with her students and other young people interested in pursuing wigs and makeup in the theatre. “Be prepared to work very hard for very little payoff.”

The labor organization that represents many artists in the field, IATSE Local 798, is another determining factor in the building of a career. “The union requires that you specialize in hair or makeup,” Ruskai says. “For me, the joy comes from creating a complete being or complete cast of beings.” As a result, Ruskai is one of many working pros not affiliated with the union.

There is also ongoing pressure to require union members to hold a cosmetology degree, which puts veterans like McGough—who is a member of IATSE Local 798 and holds an M.F.A in costume design—in the unwelcome position of defending his expertise in the areas of both makeup and wigs. The debate surrounding the decision to join is hotly contested, and should be considered carefully, depending on how one wants a career to unfold.

And then there are the people in the industry who have aspirations that are altogether different. I met one young wig stylist who had recently graduated from the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music with an M.F.A focusing on wigs and makeup who had something entirely different in mind: the CIA. She hoped one day to land a gig designing and applying disguises for America’s elite spies.

Collaborating with designers
It’s interesting to note that in the over 250 pages of Lynn Pecktal’s great costuming resource, Costume Design: Techniques of Modern Masters, the subject of wigs comes up in only two of the eighteen interviews the author conducted with some of the theatre’s most revered contemporary designers. Even then it only receives a brief mention. “Most people don’t really understand what goes into good wigs,” Ruskai says.

As a result, there is a tendency among those collaborating with wig masters and designers to have unreasonable expectations. “The biggest challenge is getting directors and costume designers to have thorough discussions and make timely decisions,” she says. Many wig masters believe that costume designers give the area above the neck much thought. This can sometimes leave the wig master to take charge of the design and implementation of a cast’s hair.

Aside from working with folks inside the theatre, wig masters and makeup artists often find that an outside support group can be quite helpful—especially for problem solving. “You’ve got to build a network of people,” McGough says. “[You can’t] be afraid to call them and say,

The art of ventilating

“VENTILATING IS what we call the process of knotting or tying the wig,” McGough explains. “I have a friend who is in respiratory therapy, and she says, ‘Every time I hear ventilated I think of something completely different,’” he says. “A wig with a tube running down its throat!”

“It’s basically like doing a latch-hook rug,” Holcomb says. “Or crochet.”

With a small tool called a ventilating (or tying) hook, Holcomb demonstrates the knotting technique he uses to tie the fine hair on the mesh that has been pre-fitted to a wig cap created from the actor’s actual skull shape. The number of hairs tied together at a time depends on several factors, including where they are on the cap, and how many strands will be tied for each knot. The back will often be tied thicker, with more hair per knot, while the front will be tied with a finer look.

“Once you learn, it’s a very basic skill,” he says. “Some people like really thick wigs, some people like thin wigs, and some people like it in the middle,” Holcomb explains. Over the years he has learned to accommodate the tastes and styles of the different wig masters and designers he has worked with.

—M.L.
’Hey, I’m doing this. How do I do it?’

For wig masters, being able to contact other artists and brainstorm makes their jobs much easier, in addition to providing a collection of knowledge that any single person couldn’t possibly retain. “You can’t be one of these closed, tight-fisted people,” McGough says.

Paths to a career in wigs and makeup

So, what type of training should wig and makeup hopefuls pursue? It’s hard to say. Only a few schools offer degree programs with a specialty in the field. Ruskai’s program at North Carolina School of the Arts is one; others include the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music, Webster University, the University of Utah, and Virginia Commonwealth. Wigs and Hair Chicago, a private vocational school, has also partnered with Columbia College, DePaul University, and Northwestern University to provide specialized training in the field to students of these respected Chicago-area theatre programs.

In spite of the small number of university-based training opportunities—especially in comparison with other specialties of tech theatre—there does not appear to be a shortage of trained wig and makeup personnel. This is because of the multitude of private vocational schools focused on the field. Since they are geared toward the film and television industry, such schools are especially plentiful in Hollywood and New York City, but can adequately train those interested in live theatre too. McGough advises caution in considering such schools, though. As an example, he tells the story of a friend who visited a California training school for an interview after deciding to become a makeup artist. “The receptionist was a graduate of the program,” McGough says. “What does that tell you?”

The decision of how to gain the necessary practical training for employment as a wig and makeup specialist is affected by many things. The primary considerations should be: 1) What industry you want to focus on, be it theatre, film, television, or print; 2) Whether or not you consider a liberal arts education valuable for your future; 3) If you have access (or can gain it) to working professionals who are willing to teach you the trade in either a volunteer or entry-level capacity.

However one decides to pursue the fields of wigs and makeup, it should be understood that there is no shortage of opportunities to learn them thoroughly.

An historically accurate reproduction of a Marie Antoinette hairstyle from 1777, created by North Carolina School of the Arts graduate student Rebecca Kuzma.