



# COSTUMES, ACCESSORIES, AND MAKE-UP

COLIN UNDERWOOD

If you have followed the previous articles where I talk about the character-brief and inner scripting, the next step of costuming your character falls into place quite easily... this is because you have a distinct feel of what the character should act like, and what his/her attributes are. For example, you might have decided the character's favourite colour is red, which enables you to integrate this colour in the costumes. The costume will define the character immediately.

## INTERNET

I find the Internet a very useful source for character-work costumes. I Google as close to the brief as possible, or source from existing websites to see what is already out there. I print out these photographs or sketches, and then take them to the costume designer. If the character is a known one — say from a movie or television series — then it is vital to be as close to the original as possible. [For example: Captain Jack Sparrow of *Pirates of The Caribbean*.] The attraction of a known character is the attention to detail. People will acknowledge that you are a great copy of the known character.

If the character is not a movie character, then you have more leeway to be creative. If you are a clown and you want to perform as a known character, it is important to choose the main features of the character — and then exaggerate some part of the costume. For example, a clown cowboy can have oversized Stetson or sponge revolvers. The sheriff badge may be oversized as well.

I have a German-tourist character that has so many cameras and lenses hanging round his neck, that you immediately notice the comedy nature of the character.

If you are putting a clown character together, it is important to have the best accessories (wigs, clown shoes, clown noses, etc.). There are now professional companies that supply these items. A clown costume might be bright and baggy — but it should still be colour co-ordinated. I made my outfit stand out by having a 'standard' look — instead of wearing different coloured shirts or pants each time I performed. The same applies with my present children's character for birthday parties — it is distinct and recognisable, and, doing so, allows me to create advertising around the branding.



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The inner script is being aware of the main points from the character brief that you wrote up.

## FASHION MAGAZINES

Here is another great source for ideas — especially for magicians or futuristic characters. There are many styles to source from.

## WEATHER COMPLIANT

When choosing the design, it is a good idea to have a summer- and -winter costume, allowing you to handle the extremes of temperature or rain comfortably. It is best to have the costume professionally made, which allows you to customise the pockets according to your needs. My businessman character has a top hat, wider sleeves, as well as extra pockets in the pants — with a special design of the waistcoat to allow for magic effects. [A large number of magnets are placed in the clothing for certain routines.] If you plan to perform a certain skill-set such as juggling or fire eating, you must design the costume accordingly. Tight fitting costumes are difficult to perform in; large baggy sleeves will hook up a juggling club handle; and chiffon-type material will be highly flammable and really not ideal for a fire act. The costume lady during my circus days had constant problems trying to sew the holes burnt into the netting overlay in our Eastern costumes. We started with Chinese wigs and hook-on moustaches that used to fly off when we performed pirouettes. As a result, we were given permission to remove them creatively in the act during the hat-juggling routine.





The producer needed the Eastern feel, but allowed us leeway to remove them half way through.

Stripes will enhance your height, and make you look thinner as well. When performing manipulation acts, it is good idea to create a natural performing background, mainly your shirt and jacket being in darker colours. (Manipulating white balls against a white shirt is not a good idea.)

My businessman character was an extension from my mime character. The first time I performed it was at an Insurance Trade show, where they required a businessman character. I later removed the make-up and had an entirely new character. The character is moulded after a British businessman from the early forties — with bowler hat, briefcase, and umbrella. All of these accessories define the character, and also add usable props with which to work.

**Here is a list of accessories to my businessman character:**

- Bowler Hat (juggling and flourishes) The hat defines the character based on size and style.
- Umbrella (The umbrella handle can catch on passers-by or on any object as you walk past, and can spring open at inappropriate moments.) The umbrella makes a perfect backdrop for photographs when opened and placed behind you and — if having a striped design — can be spun while walking, adding a more visual spectacle.
- Braces (they can unclip or get entangled)
- Briefcase (mime floating and carry extra items within)
- Mobile Phones (exaggerated, broken, or used within a magic routine)
- Shoelaces (bright shoelaces can become untied, or tied up around other objects)

Sometimes there are sales at theatres, and you can pick up good second-hand costumes. Charity shops will often have unusual items of clothing

## WHO IS COLIN UNDERWOOD?

Colin Underwood currently resides in Johannesburg and is considered one of the top corporate magicians in his field.

This unique multi talented corporate entertainer has had a diverse and rich career spanning nearly 35 years of performing professionally around the world. He has appeared on numerous variety programs on South African television as well as in the UK.

He is also booked for many character roles and really excels at playing different characters for large productions at Casinos in South Africa.

[www.colinunderwood.co.za](http://www.colinunderwood.co.za)

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PHOTOS: A variety of characters from Colin's work.

for sale. Sometimes antique shops will have those much-needed accessories, especially for Steampunk theme items, which are nowadays much the rage.

Maintenance of costumes is a priority, and wear-and-tear should be anticipated. Costumes must be clean and laundered at all times. Body odour is a factor to be aware of — especially if working in close proximity to audiences. The smallest details have

to be considered to keep costumes at their best, and thus maintain a high standard. Dirty performers and costumes are around . . . but will not last long in the business.

Eating and resting should be done out of costume to ensure they maintain a crisp look. In some environments, you will have no change-area or 'green room' and, more than likely, you will use your car as storage- and rest area.





maintenance of the costumes. In circus-type shows wear-and-tear is a continuous problem, and upkeep is essential, beads break off, and sequins fade.

I have mentioned that I prefer one standard costume and a specific look for my characters; but, for functions which extend over a few hours, you can make a continuous changing of costumes a feature of your walkabout experience. For example, you are seen wearing a bright red costume . . . then green . . . and finally blue. When somebody notices, you can reply you are colour blind, and had not noticed.

As you work regularly, certain items of clothing or accessories will become iconic with that character. For example, the bowler hat, baggy pants, and cane walking stick of Charlie Chaplin stand out. It is a good idea to visualise your character in silhouette, and see what stands out for you. Accentuate these features in your marketing and branding. If your clown name is 'Buttons', you could have a jacket made with hundreds of buttons sewn on it; or if your name is 'Charlie Green', you could feature the colour green in the act and costumes.

#### MAKE-UP

Make-up is a vital part of most characters, and cannot be left out. It is this attention to detail that enhances the character's look.

Many shows will require you to wear a base, as the stage lights bleach you out — but most characters are dependent on this finishing touch, and will be enhanced with make-up. Bigger shows will have a make-up artist, but most of the time self-application will be necessary. Specialised make-up for certain effects is learned through trial and error. I suggest going to a professional make-up artist if you plan to use the character a lot; have them teach you the basics; and from there, practise until proficient. Applying make-up is very much the same as drawing. Darker shades will make features recede, and the opposite will accentuate. Exaggeration of make-up will be necessary in larger spaces. If you were standing close to these performers you would be aware of this, and it would come across as false; but under the lights and in the performing space, it will look natural.

Researching make-up techniques will serve you well in the future, and might be a source for future characters.

