

Qualifications and courses

Entry without qualifications may be possible, however most people have a Foundation degree, degree or postgraduate diploma in a relevant subject, such as art, costume design, fashion, theatre design or performing arts (production). Entrants commonly begin their career as a wardrobe assistant or costume maker and progress to designer as they develop experience and build contacts.

Useful training courses include the City & Guilds Level 2 and 3 qualifications in Design and Craft – Fashion (Theatre Costume) (7716-42 and 7716-71), the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA)'s 2-year vocational course in Theatre Costume, and various awards from the National Open College Network (NOCN).

Work experience is invaluable as it helps you to build up a portfolio or 'showreel' of your design work. As well as contacting theatres and film and TV companies, you could become involved in student productions or amateur theatre, or possibly undertake a work placement as part of your degree. There are also Apprenticeships in Costume and Wardrobe available.

Joining the Society of British Theatre Designers or the Costume Society might facilitate networking and lead to work experience opportunities.

What the work involves

You will design, buy or hire the clothes and accessories worn by casts in films, plays and TV shows.

You will read scripts, research the period and setting of a production and come up with original sketches to best represent the director's vision. You will then decide which fabrics and materials to use. You could also be involved with making costumes or overseeing costume production.

You will be responsible for organising fittings and ensuring that costumes are delivered on time, are comfortable and within budget. Depending on the size of the production, you may also manage a team of costume professionals.

Type of person suited to this work

Creativity and originality are essential. Having the skills to draw designs by hand and to use specialist computer-aided design (CAD) software when required is also important.

You should have a meticulous eye for detail and demonstrate a passion for costume history, fashion and the arts. It is important to be a good communicator and to work well in a team.

You must be organised to ensure that projects are carried out on time, within budget and as requested. As deadlines can be tight, you need the ability to work well under pressure.

Working conditions

Hours are long and irregular, including evenings and weekends. It is possible to work for production companies

but most costume designers are freelancers who travel around the UK and sometimes overseas.

You will normally work in a studio using drawing tables, computers, cutting tables and sewing machines.

It is likely that you will be standing for long periods of time and you may do some heavy lifting.

Future prospects

Costume designer vacancies are rarely advertised and most work is centred in major cities such as London and Manchester.

It is essential for costume designers to have a strong portfolio and to build up good contacts.

If you work for a large organisation such as the BBC you could progress to head of department or to head of wardrobe for a theatre company.

Advantages/disadvantages

It is rewarding to see your original work on the stage or screen, providing enjoyment for viewers.

You might be able to work flexible hours but they could also be unsocial.

You will often be required to work to tight deadlines which could be stressful.

Money guide

Industry salaries vary depending on the type of employer and geographical location. Earnings in film and TV are generally higher than in theatre.

The starting salary for a trainee costume designer is typically £13,000 per year rising to £28,000 with experience.

Senior designers can earn £35,000 or more.

The Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) website lists guidance on the rates charged for freelance work dependent on the budget and seniority involved.

Related opportunities

- Fashion Designer/Milliner p159
- Tailor/Dressmaker p229
- Visual Merchandiser p175

Further information

Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union

www.bectu.org.uk

Costume Society

www.costumesociety.org.uk

Society of British Theatre Designers

www.theatredesign.org.uk