

essential Style

That's the way I like it

Nothing to wear to a special event?
Then make your own outfit.

Words Cotton Ward

The idea for this story arose when I mentioned an Amish outfit and burqa I'd ordered online, then modified and worn to dance parties.

Why? They're a bit different and cheap. The burqa was made in Pakistan for Tribal Elegance (<http://search.stores.ebay.com/Tribal-Elegance>) and cost \$US45.95 (\$55). It has netting to cover the face and goes from head to toe.

It feels liberating to wear the burqa – at one major dance party, the door staff waved me through without asking for my ticket and the security personnel didn't frisk me for drugs.

The Amish outfit, from Plainly Dressed (<http://plainlydressed.bravepages.com>) cost \$US110 for a dress, cape, apron, prayer bonnet and formal bonnet. The web-based business is run by a Seventh-Day Adventist in Pennsylvania who hires Amish and Mennonite seamstresses who don't have access to the internet.

Hammer it out

I've met a few people who enjoy making costumes, such as Alison Haberfield, 24, who started by modifying op-shop garments. She has been making dance party and burlesque outfits for the past five years.

"I'm keen on using a hammer – gorgeous things can be done with eyelets and rivets. I have no sewing training and do a lot of hand-stitching," Haberfield says.

"I get carried away with the silhouette of an enormous tail-piece or bustle-style skirt, or the fact that particular dance moves look especially hot in a skirt that's split to the hips. I'm a drama queen in that way."

She sometimes looks at sites such as Burning Man (<http://images.burningman.com/>) for inspiration.

"If you're the sort of person who sighs despondently when the prevailing fashion is a sort of mandated hideousness, then make your own clothes," Haberfield says. "There's no need to suffer just because someone, somewhere, has decided that this season's fashions must look like an upholstered plaid cardboard box."

Steampunk

Mary Delfin, who I met at a goth stitch and bitch group, has a passion for steampunk fashion, which is based on fantasy fiction set in Victorian England during the steam power era. She's often inspired by the Steampunk Fashion LiveJournal (<http://community.livejournal.com/steampunk>).

"I start from scratch or look at what is available then

chop and sew," Delfin says. When a garment becomes worn out, she "might take the sleeves off and combine it with another article of clothing".

Her favourite tip is to always have safety pins on hand for an emergency, such as when an oil lamp set her skirt on fire, "exposing my underwear". "We were heading to a club so I closed the hole with safety pins. I was nicknamed 'Groin of Fire' for about a month."

When wearing costumes in public, Delfin says, it's important to watch out for door handles, plants and escalators that tend to catch on "long trains and droopy bits".

"I was in a taxi and slammed the door on my own frock and it caught under the rear wheel as we drove off."

Sew as you go

Delfin put me onto her friend, Anna Kucharski, 32, who is a prolific costume maker.

"I've had no special training; it's all been learning as I go," she says. "I've made some things without a pattern, but I try to find patterns even if that means buying three separate ones and modifying them into one outfit."

When making a costume, she guesses how much fabric is needed. Then she wraps the fabric around herself and holds it in place with pins until it looks right, and stitches it. "I rarely do a mock-up costume," Kucharski says. She sketches cutting lines directly onto the fabric. If she can't find the right shape of beading or trim, she finds something similar and paints or modifies it.

She recently made matching outfits for herself and her partner for a late-1800s theme wedding and is making a Professor Snape outfit for the next Harry Potter release.

Her tips for wearing costumes include noting that "long false nails make everything more difficult" and "put your shoes on before you're laced into a corset".

Furry friends

I met Patrick Bremner, 27, at an anarchists' stitch and bitch group. He's a member of the furry community, which likes to dress up as anthropomorphic animal characters. "Wearing furry gear out to large dance parties always gets a good reception," Bremner says.

He studies theatre costume making at Ultimo TAFE and helps make outfits at an alternative clothing store, The Wild One, in Newtown (www.thewildone.com.au).

Bremner likes a "weird hybrid of vintage, cyber-goth and theatre-inspired outfits".

"I like it to be loud, colour co-ordinated and kooky. You can wear anything anywhere if you have the confidence. People love you for it."

For inspiration, he looks at online images of Tank Girl, Dita Von Teese and furry art.

"I have also dabbled in medieval re-creationist societies. The Society for Creative Anachronism [www.sca.org.au] holds fairs, tournaments and feasts throughout the year."

Late bloomer

Bremner often refers to the Australian Costumers' Guild website (www.australiancostumersguild.org.au) for tips. It's a non-profit group that provides forums on costume tips, holds regular workshops and social meetings, and is an excellent site for beginners. Members dress up and go to movie premieres or various theme conventions.

NSW Guild Chapter organiser Wendy*, 43, was a "late bloomer" to costuming, though she'd been making her everyday clothing for the past 30 years.

"Three years ago I found a lump on my ribs and in the couple of days between discovery and test results – a benign tumour – I thought about what I'd regret not having done. And [making] costumes was high on the list."

She has studied shoemaking at TAFE and is part way through a certificate in pattern-making.

"I still get nervous when I start something I haven't tried before. I like to make the best I can with the least amount of hand-sewing," she says.

"The act of creating is a bit addictive and self-medicating. When I broke my foot two years ago and couldn't sew for months – it was my foot-pedal foot – I got cranky, like a junkie deprived of a fix. I bought a 1960s sewing machine that has a knee lever instead of a foot pedal."

When you're reproducing a character's costume, you don't need to look anything like the actor. Describing herself as an "older stout woman," Wendy copied Nikki



Foxy ... Patrick Bremner with muzzle, ears and tail he made with partner Konrad; PVC outfit by The Wild One and boots from Invisible Light, Newtown. Hair, make-up and photo: Furr, Newtown

Opposite page: (from left) Wendy, Chris Walker and Justin Yem, of the Australian Costumers' Guild. Photo: Angela Brkic



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New looks for winter jackets.
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Arthur Galan's style secrets.
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Webster's Olympic opening ceremony outfit for the guild's annual 2002 convention.

"I couldn't find a pink hibiscus flower fabric for the dress so I bought pink fabric, made a stencil of a hibiscus flower and painted lots of them on. I outlined all the edges with a black [marker] pen.

"I knew I couldn't wash the dress or wear it again as I'd used acrylic craft paint instead of fabric paint. I also dyed a pair of sandals pink. A lot of people knew the costume but couldn't place who I was. I was a good 20 years older and far from her twiglet figure."

Dark side

Justin Yem, 27, has made costumes for 12 years and has run the Sydney production of Rocky Horror Audience Participation Picture Show for almost five years.

He wears costumes when he attends many midnight movie premieres.

"When I'm doing something hard I try a few trial and errors on test costumes and see what works," Yem says.

Two of his favourite costumes include an angel outfit with 1.5-metre wings he made for a drag queen, and a recent straitjacket he made overnight without a pattern.

His claim to fame, though, is winning a Star Wars costume competition when he wasn't wearing a costume.

A friend dared him to enter when he was wearing a black Bonds T-shirt, black trousers and black 20-hole Doc Martens. "The competition was starting right then so I sprinted down the stairs to the cinema tripping and rolling. I jumped on the end of the line, which included a perfect Twi'lek [a blue-skin humanoid with a giant tentacle coming out of the head], several Padmes and a Darth Maul.

"The MC asked each person who they were and listened to the applause, he asks me which character I am and I reply 'Ummm, anonymous extra B' and the audience erupted.

"The MC worked out who had the largest responses and narrowed it down to me and the Darth Maul. The MC raised his hand over my head and the audience went crazy. I was awarded first place but, luckily, when we got off the stage, the MC gave us both first place prizes, so Darth was a good sport about it. But I was getting death stares from the Twi'lek for the rest of the night.

"A week later, my chest was still hurting from rolling down the stairs so I went to the doctor and discovered that I'd fractured three ribs. It's just the price you pay."

* Surname withheld

I did it my way... (from left) Anna Kucharski, Mary Delfin and Alison Haberfield. Photo: Fiona Morris



Vision splendid

If you don't have any idea of how to sew, see sites such as YouTube (www.youtube.com - type in "DIY fashion" and "Thread Heads") or Videojug (www.videojug.com) for lessons on making garments and accessories. For knitting lessons, see KnittingHelp (www.knittinghelp.com).



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