

Not a hair out of place

The care and upkeep of wigs

BY KIMBERLY USLIN

THE WORLD OF WIGS is complicated but crucial. After all, it's unlikely that a good wig will garner any attention, but a bad one makes any production look instantly amateur. Whether curly or straight, synthetic or human, these diverse disguises can make or break the costuming of a show. "You can't just throw a bunch of wigs in a wig closet," says Allison Lowery, a wig and makeup specialist and co-author of *Wig Making and Styling: A Complete Guide for Theatre and Film*. Caring for the pieces requires delicateness, diligence, and a little bit of love. Not sure how to give those wigs the TLC they need? Don't wig out. The experts are here to help.

Before the show

Education

"Every show has at least one destroyer," Lowery says, "the one who will just totally trash their wig. It's usually the same person who's most likely to rip their costume or fall over the set."

That's why it's important to teach the cast and crew about wigs and their care before the show, especially when high schoolers are involved. Wig, makeup, and costume designer Sarah Bussard agrees, "Occasionally, I have actors who find the lace uncomfortable, feel like it's very obvious from stage, or are bothered that it's getting in their eyes, so they take a pair of the scissors to the lace that starts at roughly \$70 a yard." Ouch.

Although Bussard, also an educator, has studied the storied history of wigs extensively, she tends to keep her lessons fairly simple for her students. "You can stand in front of a bunch of high schoolers and say, 'This is super expensive, don't screw it up,' but that's not going to be effective," she says. "A lot of my students have a sort of disposal mindset. They think if they mess a wig up, we can just get a new one. So I tell them it's an expensive piece of equipment, and they should treat it like they would a lighting instrument or rental costume."

Bussard holds tutorials for the entire crew on the proper way to put on and take off a wig and how best to store it between shows so that, no matter who is handling the wig, it's in good hands. Taking time to talk to the actor wearing a particular wig is key, too. Often, she says, actors and actresses will see the wigs as an extension of themselves and treat it like their own hair by brushing or cutting it, which can cause damage. The pre-show conversations help them understand that the hair is not theirs — and that it's valuable. "It's all about sitting them down and teaching them to respect what they have," Lowery adds. "You want to make sure they're handling it properly and not just throwing it on their dressing table."

Styling

When styling the wig, both Lowery and Bussard advocate the use of a steamer rather than potentially hair-damaging hot tools. Steaming a wig involves running a steamer over the style you'd like to set, such as curls in



Storage plays an important part in wig maintenance. Some people like laying wigs flat while others store them on heads. Just don't throw them unprotected in the back of the closet.

rollers, for five to 10 seconds per section. This is the safest and most effective method, particularly for synthetic wigs, and while wig-specific steamers are available, any handheld steamer (like those used to get wrinkles out of clothing) will do.

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Otherwise, a wig can be styled like your own hair, with regular human-hair products. However, according to Lowery, it's safest and most effective to style on a canvas head-block. It may require a bit of an investment (\$25 to \$30 as opposed to those ultra-cheap Styrofoam heads), but the canvas blocks are closer to natural human head size and are more secure when pinning or brushing. After the style is set, Lowery advocates putting a hair-

net over individual elements, like a bun or a beehive, to protect the style and help it stay put for longer. And the audience can't tell.

After the show

Sanitation

Once a show's run is complete, it's time to get back to Strand Zero. Often, teachers end up doing a lot of the cleanup, because they don't trust students to handle sanitation properly, but it doesn't have to be that way. "I hate washing wigs, so I take the time to teach students how to wash and dry them," Lowery says. "That way, when there are 20 dirty wigs at the end of the production, I'm not doing it all by myself."

The first step of the sanitation process is to un-style the wig by removing all pins and returning it to its natural state (i.e., steaming it straight if it was curled for the show). "The best thing is to un-style wigs right after the production, so they're not sitting around tangled or covered in sweat or hairspray," Lowery says. "Things can




happen. Bobby pins can rust. Wigs can be ruined."

Then it's time for a good wash — the sooner, the better. "I like to use baby shampoo, but the product doesn't really matter," Lowery says, though both she and Bussard agree not to waste money on designated wig shampoo. "It's more about the technique. You don't want to put both hands into the wig and touse it. Gently pull the shampoo through using the water you're washing it with."

What if you have a very dirty wig? After shampooing, pour a liberal amount of baking soda onto the wig and comb through, creating a paste. Continue to comb through gently until the hair is completely detangled, then rinse. "This is fantastic for getting rid of the sweat and hairspray gunk that builds up," Bussard says.

A good conditioning comes next. Lowery uses whatever cheap conditioner she happens to like the smell of, so there's no pressure to spend too much. Once your wig is conditioned and rinsed, lay it on a towel, then wrap the towel around the wig in a tube, hugging it to yourself to squeeze out the excess moisture. "Once I've done that, I will put the wig back on a canvas head-block and use a wig detangler with a wide-tooth comb," she says. "You have to make sure it's securely blocked, and that you're not putting too much stress or tension on any one area."

Bussard adds that it is vital to invest in good brushes and, perhaps more important, to avoid bad brushes like those with the little balls on the bristles that can yank on the hair. Traditional methods might prove a little too rough for delicate lace-front wigs. Bussard outlines her process as follows.

-  Put the wig or piece on the block and secure it with pins at the crown, leaving the lace front unpinned.
-  Put a strong paper towel between your block and the lace.
-  Using 91 percent alcohol and a bristle brush, strong white toothbrush,

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The safest way to style your wig is to pin it to a good-quality block. When finished, cover it with a hairnet so it stays put longer.

or shoe-dye dauber, gently tap or scrub the lace.

“Allow time for the alcohol to dissolve the glue and dirt on the lace by gentle, repeated daubing, she says. “Give the process time, as it’s more of a chemical reaction than a friction cleaning. You may need to make a couple of passes with a clean paper towel.”

Whether lace-front or not, allow the wig to dry either on the head or on a towel, with the foundation (i.e., the underside) facing out. Do not hang the wig, as it can cause the foundation to stretch. It’s important that the wig dries completely. If it’s stored damp, it can incur fabric rot or mold. To sanitize and deodorize the piece, spray the foundation with a solution made from one part 91-percent alcohol (cheap vodka works, too) and three parts water. Again, allow to dry fully before storing.

Storage

Storage may seem like the easiest part of wig maintenance, but improper

storage can have disastrous consequences. Lowery works with an outdoor theatre in Texas in the summer. “For a long time, they used to store their wigs by throwing them all into a Rubbermaid container,” she says. “The first time I dug it out, I was met with the smell of freshly cooked sweaty wig. The bobby pins that were still in the wigs had rusted, leaving stains all over the wig. It was not pretty.”

Her experience isn’t unique. “I have walked into schools or theatres where wigs have been shoved in the bottom of plastic tubs and left there, uncleaned for years on end,” Bussard says. “That produces a truly distressing smell. And if you leave colored spray, UV hairspray, or hair white on wigs too long, they will solidify into little helmets of doom.”

So, how to prevent this doom? Sanitation, of course, but the post-wash care is equally important. “Once the wig is totally dry, I will braid it to keep it from tangling and store each one in its own individual Ziploc bag,” Lowery says. “Then I use a hole-

How to work with a cheap wig

SO-CALLED HALLOWEEN wigs might seem like a cheap way to stock the costume room, but they will *look* cheap, too. If your budget doesn’t support a high-quality synthetic, it’s still possible to make a cheap wig look better. “About three-quarters of the wigs out there are made with way too much hair,” Lowery says. “I will go into the wig itself and remove tracks of hair, so it looks more realistic, which you can also do with thinning shears.” For wigs that are too shiny, rinse them with liquid fabric softener or dip them in vinegar to dull the sheen. You can also use art markers to add highlights, lowlights, and darkened roots, because a single solid color looks unrealistic. Just be careful not to get too heavy-handed. And don’t be afraid to go a little MacGyver when it comes to wig creation. “I’m not afraid to chop up anything,” she says. “If I’m doing a historical show, I may take two different cheap wigs and piece them together to get the specific look I’m going for.”

punch to let in air without ripping the bag.”

That’s pretty common practice. Bussard, for example, uses bags but leaves a small part unsealed for air flow. Still, the best method for storage is debated. “Some people believe in laying it flat; some people like to store them on heads,” Lowery says. Whatever you do, though, organization is key, as well as keeping all wigs in a cool, dry place to prevent mold.

After all, the last thing you want to do is let your hair down. **T**