

Costume Maker interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Costume Maker interviews are practical conversations. Employers want to see that you can read a design, cut and fit accurately, and stay useful when a deadline moves. Expect your portfolio to carry as much weight as your answers.

- **Portfolio and practical:** A walk through your build photos, toiles and finished garments, sometimes followed by a sewing or pattern-making test on the day.
- **Process:** How you sequence a build, from brief and reference research through pattern draft, toile, cutting, construction and handover.
- **Technical craft:** Questions on period cut, fabric behaviour, breakdown and dyeing, grading, and how you solve construction problems without an original pattern.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of tight turnarounds, redesigns mid-rehearsal, and working with performers who are unhappy with a fit.
- **Scenario and judgement:** What you would do on the day when a costume fails, rips or restricts movement and the schedule will not move.
- **Collaboration and safety:** Working alongside designers, heads of wardrobe and performers, plus WHS in a busy wardrobe room and backstage during technical rehearsals.

Most roles start with a portfolio review, either in person or over video, alongside a conversation with the head of wardrobe or the costume supervisor. From there you may be asked back for a paid trial day or a short build task so the team can see how you cut and finish. Larger companies often add a second interview with the production manager and a walk through the wardrobe room and storage. Screen roles sometimes include a conversation with the designer before the final decision.

1. Walk me through how you take a costume from a designer's sketch through to a finished garment that is ready for stage or camera.

Why they ask

This is the standard opener. It shows whether you have a repeatable method or just sew what you are handed, and where you build in checkpoints with the designer.

How to structure your answer

Answer in sequence and name each stage: reading the brief and references, taking measurements, drafting or grading the pattern, making a toile and getting it approved, sourcing and cutting fabric, constructing and finishing, final fitting, then continuity notes and handover to the wardrobe team. Flag the points where you check back with the designer rather than describing one long solo process.

Example answer

"I start with the brief and the reference folder, and I ask the designer what the character needs to read as on stage or on camera, because that decides how much detail is worth building in. Then I take measurements and draft the pattern, or grade an existing block if the silhouette is close. I make a toile in calico and get the designer to see it on the performer before I touch the good fabric, because changing a neckline on a toile costs an afternoon and changing it on silk costs the fabric. Once the toile is signed off I source the fabric and trims, cut, and build the garment with the lining and fastenings finished properly, since a costume has to survive a full season. The final fitting happens in the rehearsal room where the performer is actually moving, and I note any changes for the understudy version. Before handover I photograph the finished piece and write up the continuity notes so anyone in the wardrobe team can repair or replace parts of it later."

2. You have reference images for a period production but no original patterns. How do you work out the cut?

Why they ask

Period work is common in Australian theatre, opera and screen, and there is rarely a surviving pattern to copy. The interviewer is testing research discipline and drafting judgement.

How to structure your answer

Work from the outside in: study the silhouette and undergarments first, then translate that into a pattern block, then test it on a body. Show that you know the shape comes from the foundations, not just from the outer garment.

Example answer

"I start by studying the silhouette in the references and asking what the performer is wearing underneath, because most period shapes come from the corsetry or the petticoats rather than the outer layer. I look at paintings, photographs and existing garments in museum collections where I can, and I note the seam placements and where the volume sits. Then I draft a block to those proportions and test it in calico on the performer, because the reference figure and a real body rarely match. If the shape still reads wrong on the toile, I adjust the understructure rather than adding darts to the outer garment, which usually just creates a different problem. On a recent production the first toile read far too soft, and adding a small internal corselette did more for the look than any amount of reshaping the bodice."

3. Tell me about a time a costume did not fit or behave as planned close to an opening.

Why they ask

Everyone in this job has a build go wrong late. The interviewer wants to know how you react, what you fixed first and whether you kept the right people informed.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Set the situation and the deadline, describe the specific problem you found, explain what you decided to fix first and why, then give the outcome and what you changed in your process afterwards.

Example answer

"We were three days out from opening on a show with a quick change that had to happen in under a minute, and the dress rehearsal showed the closure on the lead's costume was catching on the underskirt every time. The whole scene was stalling backstage. I sat in on the next run and watched the change happen rather than guessing, and the problem was the hook placement, not the fit. I moved the closure further up the back, added a hidden magnetic fastening at the waist and shortened the underskirt by a couple of centimetres so it cleared the hem. I tested it with the performer four times until she could do it without a dresser. It held through the run, and after that I started building every quick change costume with a timed rehearsal in the wardrobe room before tech week rather than waiting for the dress rehearsal to find out."

4. A principal performer tells you on a shoot day that the costume restricts their movement and the camera rolls in two hours. What do you do?

Why they ask

Screen and live work both run on immovable schedules. The interviewer is testing whether you can make a fast, safe call under pressure instead of defending the build.

How to structure your answer

Show your judgement in order: acknowledge the performer, assess the actual restriction in the garment, work out the highest value fix you can make in the time available, then cover yourself with a fallback and tell the people who need to know.

Example answer

"First thing I do is get the performer to show me the movement that is failing, because what they describe and what is actually catching are often different. I check whether it is a seam, a fastening or a fit issue, and I decide what can be done in the time. If it is one shoulder seam or a closure, I can usually fix that in twenty minutes at the machine and have it back on them for a test. If the problem is structural, I look for a temporary solution that keeps the look intact on camera, such as letting out a seam allowance or swapping to a lighter lining, and I keep the original construction for the pickups or reshoots. Either way I tell the costume supervisor and the first assistant director what is happening and how long I need, so nobody is waiting on me without knowing why. If we genuinely cannot fix it in time, I would rather flag it before the take than have the performer struggle through it and lose the shot."

5. A designer asks for a change you believe will compromise how the garment wears over a long season. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Costume Makers sit between the design intent and the reality of eight shows a week. The interviewer wants to see diplomacy with a practical spine.

How to structure your answer

Acknowledge the intent first, then raise the specific concern with evidence rather than opinion, offer alternative options that keep the look, and agree on the outcome and record it.

Example answer

"I would not say no straight away, because the designer is usually seeing something about the look that I am not. I would ask what the change is meant to achieve, then explain the specific problem in construction terms, for example that the beading they want across the hip will pull the seam open once the performer is dancing in it eight times a week. From there I put options on the table: the same effect on a removable panel, a lighter application, or a sturdier base fabric that still reads correctly under the lights. Then I would mock it up small so the designer can see the difference rather than take my word for it. Whatever we agree on, I write it into the build notes so the wardrobe team knows what was decided and why, and so nobody reopens it halfway through the season."

6. Talk us through your portfolio and one build you are proud of.

Why they ask

This is where the interviewer actually assesses your craft, your judgement about fabric and finish, and how honestly you talk about your own work.

How to structure your answer

Pick two pieces rather than describing everything. For each one, cover the brief, the constraints you were working within, one decision you made that changed the outcome, and what you would do differently. Be ready to open the seams and show the inside of the garment.

Example answer

"The build I would point to first is a full skirt and bodice for a period drama, because almost nothing about it was straightforward. We had a limited fabric run, so I had to cut the skirt panels around the flame to get the repeat to sit right, and I drafted the bodice to sit over a corselette the performer was already wearing rather than adding bulk. The decision that changed the outcome was putting the weight of the skirt into a proper internal waist stay, which meant she could move freely without the bodice riding up. If I did it again I would build the toile a size smaller to test the understructure earlier, because I spent longer than I wanted fixing it at the first fitting. The second piece I would show is a quick change costume from the same production, because that one was about engineering as much as design and it held up across the whole run."