

# *Costumes, Creativity, and Folklore:* **Halloween and Theatre**

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## Introduction

October is a month full of fun. Pumpkin patches, trick or treating, and fall weather all help to make it one of the most iconic times of the year. Halloween, celebrated each year on October 31st, is a favorite holiday of young children and adults alike. Halloween is one of the most celebrated holidays in the United States- but what is it?

The origin of Halloween can be traced back to the ancient Celtic festival of **Samhain** (*pronounced sow-in*). The Celts, a collection of tribes that originated in central Europe, first appeared around 1200 B.C.E. They shared similar traditions, languages, and beliefs with each other. The Celts spread their culture throughout Europe via migration.

The Celts celebrated their New Year on November 1st- this day marked the end of the summer season and the beginning of winter. To the Celts, winter was historically cold, dark, and deadly. Because of this, on October 31st, they believed that the separate worlds of the living and the dead meshed, and that the spirits of the past returned to the Earth. Many Celtic groups participated in cultural **traditions** on October 31st- like burning sacred bonfires, wearing costumes, and fortune-telling.

Although the origins of Halloween can be traced back many years, the holiday is still very prominent in many countries.

Modern-day spooky season is the perfect time to have fun and get creative. Costume creation, makeup, storytelling, and more- many of the popular Halloween traditions in the United States can be related to the performing arts. Some of the skills acquired while celebrating Halloween can be directly used in theatre!

### Discussion Prompts

- What are some traditions that you partake in during the Halloween season?
- Many Halloween traditions incorporate creative expression.
  - Think of the last time you carved a pumpkin- was it elaborate, or traditional and simple? What about carving the pumpkin was easy? What was difficult or time-consuming?
  - Have you ever created your own Halloween costume? What was the costume? Was this easier or more difficult than purchasing a pre-made costume? What kind of skills do you think a person needs to make their own costumes?

### Theatre & Superstition

A **superstition** is a notion believed despite evidence to the contrary. A superstition is a belief or practice resulting from the fear of the unknown, or trust in magic and chance.

#### Some common Halloween superstitions include:

- A black cat crossing your path is bad luck.
- A full moon means that magic is at its most powerful.
- The number 13 is unlucky.

Theatre is also full of superstitious traditions. Many actors, technical producers and theatre-goers believe in these common superstitions.

### **“Break a Leg” vs “Good Luck.”**

In theatre, it is generally considered bad luck to wish someone good luck-  
confusing, right?

There are many theories as to how this superstition began, but it's common practice to refrain from telling someone involved in a show “good luck” before they begin. Instead, many folks will use the phrase “break a leg” to express their hopes for a great performance.

### **The Ghost Light**

*“One should always leave a light burning in an empty theater.”*

A ghost light is an electric-powered light that is kept on in a theater while the stage is not being utilized and would otherwise be completely dark.

Ghosts are said to haunt many theaters and this is meant to appease the mischievous spirits that may otherwise cause trouble in the empty space.

Although this is a superstition, many theaters do participate in this practical tradition. A theater is a busy, sometimes cluttered place- and a constant light helps to keep people from being injured in the dark!



## The Scottish Play

Saying the word “Macbeth” in a theater is often believed by many theatre practitioners to bring bad luck. Many theatre artists will refer to the famous Shakespeare piece as “The Scottish Play” while in the theater- but why?

The word is said to bring bad luck due to Shakespeare’s use of “authentic spells” in the magic-driven story. There are many tales of accidents and incidents that have taken place while this piece has been performed. To avoid a curse, actors often only use the word while rehearsing or performing the play.

Although many people do follow this superstition, many people believe that a 400-year-old play is bound to have had some accidents happen during its run.



*A performance of “Macbeth” by the National Theatre.*

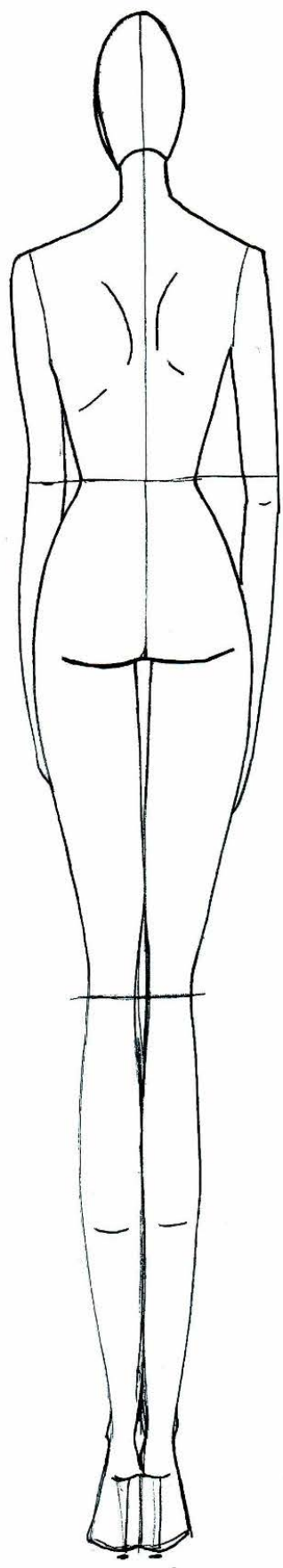
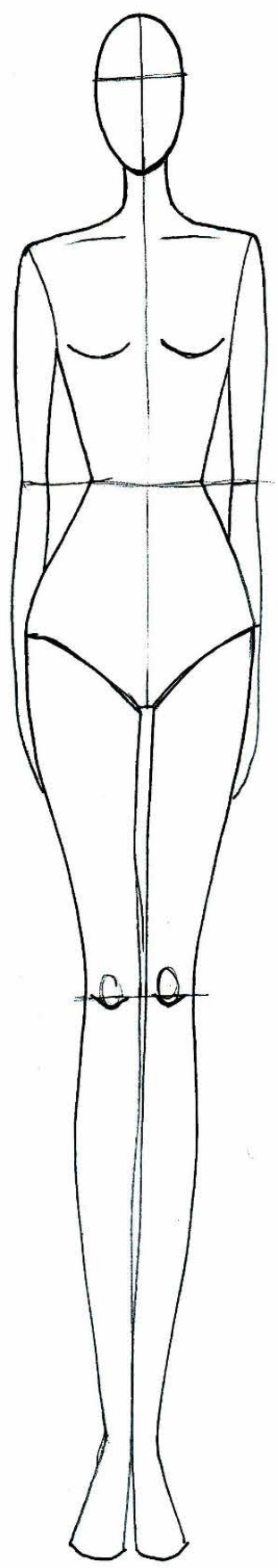
### **Discussion Prompts**

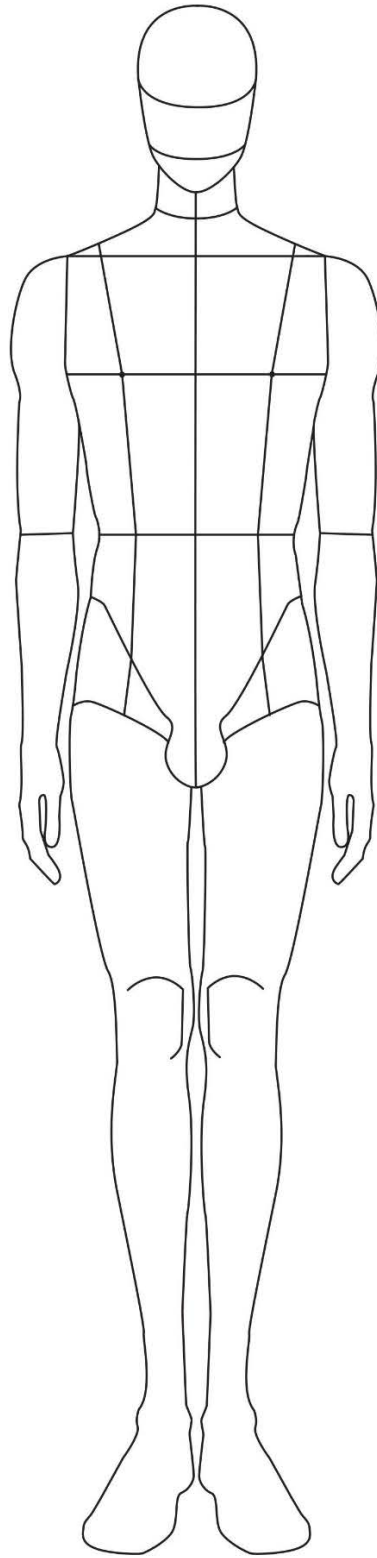
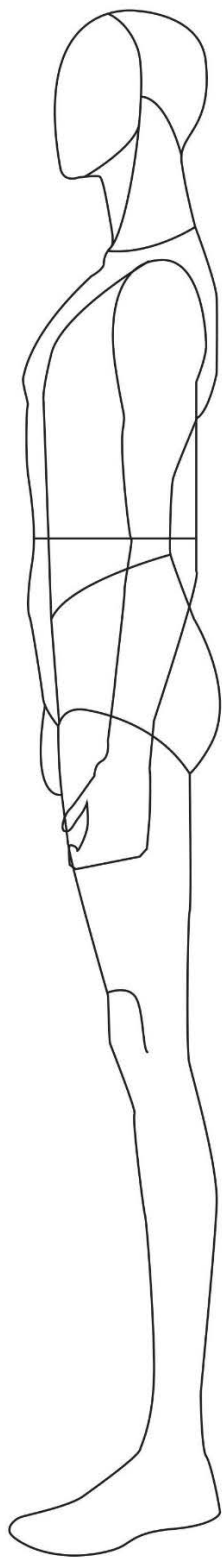
- What superstitions have you heard of?
- Do you consider yourself to be superstitious? What ones do you follow?
- Why do people follow superstitions, even if there is no evidence to prove them true? Do you think that following superstitious traditions can be fun?

### **Activity #1**

Ask: If there were no cost or logical limitations, what would you go as for Halloween?

- Have students sketch their dream costumes on the attached templates.
- Give students ~5 minutes to work on this.
- After they have completed their sketches, ask them to volunteer to present the following information:
- What is your costume of?
- How did you express through your sketch the intent of the costume? How would people know what your costume is- close up, and far away?
- Were there any things that you drew here that you think wouldn't be possible to create in real life? Why are these costume pieces challenging to create?







## Costumes in Theatre

Costuming is a very important aspect of performance art, especially theatre. **Costumes** can impact an actor's performance- for better or for worse. Great costumes can help actors get better into character while simultaneously expressing to their audience who, what, and where that character is. However, sometimes costumes can take away from a piece, too. There is a delicate balance between too much and too little.



*Above: An elaborate costume from "Shakespeare in Love".*

### Discussion Prompts

- What do you think a good costume is?
- What are some 'good' costumes that come to mind when we talk about adding to a character and their story?
- Are there any costumes that you can think of that have distracted or confused you in media?
- Costumes can change a character- just like our clothes change us. Think of the differences between someone that is wearing high heels, vs someone wearing sneakers.
  - Who might be walking more comfortably? Who may be exuding confidence? Are there any movement differences between heels and sneakers? What do you think of when you see someone wearing heels- how about when someone is wearing sneakers?

## Activity #2

- Ask students: “What are some well-known characters that have iconic costumes?” Write these characters in a public document or on a whiteboard.
  - Some examples may include:
    - Spider-Man
    - SuperMan
    - Harry Potter
    - Spongebob
- Split students into small groups randomly.
- Ask the groups to compare two characters and their costumes.
  - Who are these characters?
  - What do they like to do?
  - What do their costumes mean?
  - How do their costumes change how they may act?
- Have the students write down the differences and similarities between these two characters and their costumes.
  - What’s different?
  - What’s similar?
  - Why might a costume that makes sense for one character not make sense for another?
- Prompt them to share their findings with the class.

## Glossary

<b>Samhain</b>	<p><i>(pronounced sow-in)</i></p> <p>A festival traced back to the Celts that marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter. Some communities still celebrate today!</p>
<b>Superstition</b>	<p>A widely held but unjustifiable belief in supernatural causation.</p>
<b>Tradition</b>	<p>Beliefs or customs that are passed through generations or groups of people.</p>
<b>Costume</b>	<p>What an actor wears on stage. Costumes can be elaborate, minimal, or somewhere in between.</p>

## Sources

**History.com Editors. "Halloween 2021." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 18 Nov. 2009, <https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>.**

**History.com Editors. "Who Were Celts." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 30 Nov. 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/celts>.**

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