

Feature



Van Helsing at the Vampire Ball

Danica Lisiewicz and Sa Winfield



A visit to a costume exhibit and a chance meeting sparked the stunning recreation of a scene from a modern horror classic. Two members of the team talk about the process, costumes, and presentation.

Danica Lisiewicz: My involvement started with a “What am I going to WEAR?” moment that, fortunately, was witnessed by Kent Elofson. He later came to watch Dawn and me dance, and during our break when I went over to chat he said, “I know what you’re wearing to Labyrinth Ball this year.” Kent had already cast Dawn Rose and me as two of the brides. Kent said, “Yours is the costume that shows the most leg.” He didn’t mention the see through pants!

Sa Winfield: Mine began with a visit to see the *Lord of the Rings* costumes in 2004 at the Fashion Institute for Design and Merchandising ([FIDM](#)) in Los Angeles.

Every year they display costumes from the years films, ones that they find worthy, and that are nominated for the Oscar.

Kent and I would go together, then hit “rag town” (the L.A. Fabric District) for our shopping needs. That year, *Van Helsing* had the “hero” spot at the gallery, and I said, “Now that’s a dress I want to have,” pointing to the Verona vampire bride.

Kent exclaimed, “Yes, you are the green one, Dawn and Danica will be the

other brides, I will be Van Helsing. We are going to need an Anna, as that dress is gorgeous, and maybe David Rose would do Dracula.”

Danica: We took the first of more trips to FIDM to do research (“Um. Kent? My costume has no pants.”) and sketching. You aren’t allowed to photograph the costumes, but you can sit and draw to your heart’s content. You can also stand, stretch on tiptoe, kneel on the floor, and contort your



L-R: Sa as Verona, Danica as Marishka, Dawn as Aleera, David as Dracula, Kent as Van Helsing, Mary Ann as Anna, Nicole as Friar Carl. San Diego Comic-Con 2005. Photo by Hello Kenney from [CosPlay.com](#)

body as you attempt to document every detail of the costume from all angles without actually touching it or getting on the display.

Since we were doing a costume recreation, we took notes and drew everything from the jewelry, to span of the wings, to the shoes. The staff thought we were slightly touched in the head but didn't stop us from counting beads, sketching details, and arguing over fabric.

Sa: We also brought along paint chips and fabric swatches to match the colors of everything.

At first we weren't planning on having a "Carl," heck we didn't really know we would have more than Van Helsing and the three vampire brides, but the cast grew from four to seven, having the entire cast that FIDM had assembled for their exhibit:

Gabriel Van Helsing: Kent Elofson

Anna Valarious: MaryAnn Cappa

Marishka: Danica Lisiewicz

Verona: Sa Winfield

Aleera: Dawn Rose

Dracula: David Rose

Carl: Nicole Roberts

Most of the crew were not costumers, and not really experienced at sewing for that matter. Kent and I were the shop heads. Kent has years of expertise in the area, and I knew my way around a sewing machine and had made a few costumes myself.

Danica: Kent drafted the patterns for all our costumes, sometimes by placing muslin directly on the body and then drawing on the muslin, but each person was responsible for their own ornamentation.

Sa: Danica, Dawn, Nicole, David, and I spent weekends having "stitch & bitches" MaryAnn was basically drafted into our



Team sketches of vampire bride costumes from the FIDM exhibit, with screen-worn costumes. L-R: Verona, Marishka, Aleera. Images from [Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes](http://www.costumersguide.com).

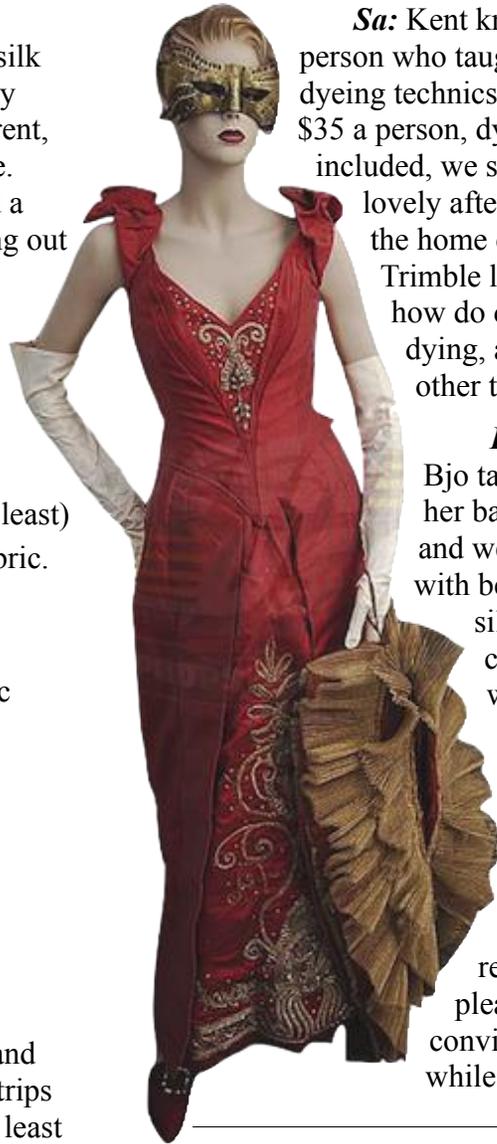
service to finance and wear the “Anna” red dress, I want to say that everyone worked on that dress, it was a masterpiece, as were all the costumes.

We learned how to make pleated silk for the brides dresses, and painstakingly beaded the gowns. Each one was different, so there was a pretty big learning curve. Everyone took direction very well, and a good deal of fun was had while working out collective butts off.

In the end the project required:

- Thousands of beads
- 100 yards of white silk.
- 50 yards various gold ribbons
- 40 hours “stitchen & bitchen” (at least)
- 10 yards of various upholstery fabric.
- 12 sparkle balls
- 8 yards of red dupeoni silk.
- 8 yards Dracula grade black fabric
- 8 Vampire fangs
- 7 beading needles
- 5 tablespoons of dye
- 4 gold sharpies
- 2 cow hides
- 2.17 mins of music
- 1 Dutch mom slave

Danica: Shopping for the fabric and beads was not simple. We made a few trips downtown to the Fabric District and at least one trip to Little India in Artesia in our quest for fabric that matched. We already knew that in order to create the Fortuny pleated



silk used in the brides’ outfits we would have to order silk and then dye it ourselves.

Sa: Kent knew of a person who taught fabric dyeing technics, and for \$35 a person, dye included, we spent a lovely afternoon at the home of Bjo Trimble learning how do do gradient dyeing, among other things.

Danica: Bjo taught us in her backyard, and we ended up with beautiful silk for our costumes as well as some bonus veils for dance, dyed out of the scraps.

Although we were ready for the challenge of recreating Fortuny pleating, we were convinced for quite a while that the fabric for

Anna Valarious' screen-worn red ball dress. Coral dupioni ballgown with boned bodice and trained skirt, featuring trim of dimensional braid and embroidery, Image from [Costumer's Guide to Movie Costumes](#).

Danica prepares silk with Soda ash & Synthrapol



Kent tending wool for pants



Kent & Sa hang finished silk to dry

Sa & Bjo carefully dye only part of the silk

my character, Marishka’s “golden bikini” would be easily located and would not have to be created. It was not. It was impossible to find. There was much cursing, mostly from me.

After traipsing through every small store in the L.A. Fabric District and Little India, we were able to locate fabric for the infamous pants in a store we went to originally in search of beads. In the end, we had to create the fabric used in Marishka’s wings and bodice. Kent drew the patterns on my bodice from our reference sketches and I used a gold paint pen to create the fabric used in my wings.

Working, fitting,
drafting, etc



market and took apart. Marishka's beading and jewelry had an abundance of "big ass gold beads," which were not in vogue when we were making the costumes. Of course, I see them all the time downtown now.

I had never beaded before, but learned pretty fast, mostly out of necessity, and found that I was able to bead rather quickly. That was a huge asset. Getting my beading and my jewelry completed fairly quickly allowed me to help out a tiny bit with some other beading and, most importantly, to work on the bodice and skirt for Anna's red silk ball dress.

Once Kent discovered a hidden talent for tedious hand sewing, he utilized it.

We had some beige beaded lace net that we then colored red with a Sharpie. The lace was cut into the proper pattern and then it had to be painstakingly sewn on the bodice and the skirt. The edges of the net backing were folded under and sewn with tiny stitches onto the red silk so that it looked as if the silk were beaded. The golden net ruffle

also had to be hand sewn on the voluminous skirt. I spent a lot of time with that red dress, and the end result was fully worth all the time we spent on it.

I found a pair of vintage leather wedge shoes at the flea market, sprayed them gold, and beaded them to match Marishka's. I reproduced the beads and the fringe on my bodice and belt exactly as it appeared on the

Aspects of Kleera



Each one of the brides' costumes had its own unique beading, and each bride did her own beading.

We had taken meticulous notes of the size, quantity, and shape of the beads needed, and as a group we became intimately familiar with all the bead shops downtown. Some of the beads had to be located online; mine came from the bead shops and a necklace that I found at the flea

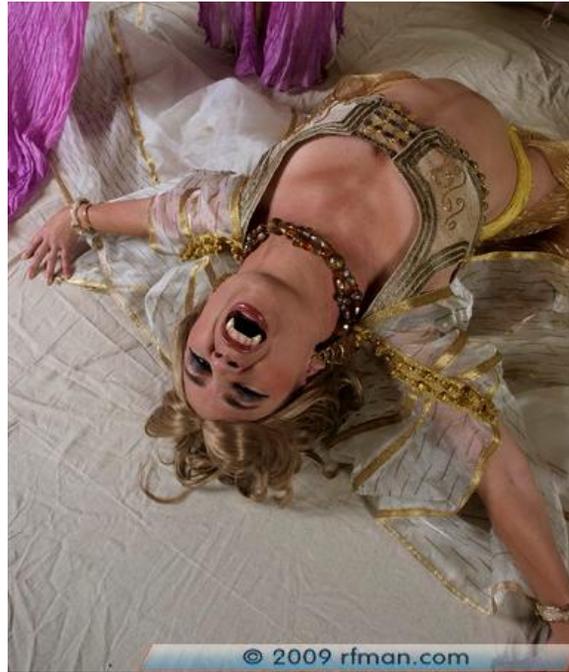
original costume, even to the point of counting rows of beads not just the order of the beads in the fringe. I think I am inordinately proud of the fact that there were thirteen rows of fringe from the closure of the bodice to the armpit on the original bodice, and there are also thirteen rows on my bodice.

Someone at one of the cons once commented, "Oh, I know you can get those appliques from Joann's." I did not say anything to that person at the time, but I want to go on record now and say, "NO, you can NOT get these appliques at Joann's."

The vampire brides have wings-gorgeous, fluid, fabric wings. Lacking the magic of a special effects department, we created casings in the wings and placed dowels inside so that we would create a type of [Loie Fuller](#) effect when we danced. Veil work is fun when belly dancing, but wing work is more challenging. Wrangling the wings when not dancing with them is also an acquired skill.



L-R: Sa as Verona, Danica as Marishka and Dawn Rose Aleera with their wings.



Danica as Marishka showing bodice detail. Photo by [Richard Man](#).

Sa: This was all for the Masquerade at San Diego's Comic-Con International in 2005. Entries are encouraged to do more than simply walk out on stage and turn around. We had up to two minutes to do a presentation that involved turning all the way around, so the judges could see all angles of the costumes. But more than that, a little bit of theater can really impress, and that we did.

One of the reasons the three brides even knew each other was

through the world of dance. Dawn and Danica met in a bellydance class, and Dawn was also a Arthur Murray Ballroom dance instructor. When Kent met Dawn and Danica at a LOTR event, he said, "oh, you have to meet my friend Sa, she too is a belly dancer." Dawn is a bang up choreographer, and she put together a marvelous waltz that got us all turning, and changing partners. it not only was pretty, it was very fun.

Danica: As beautiful as the costumes are, the presentation would not have been as sensational as it was without Dawn's choreography. Kent had an idea of "telling a story through dance," which is what we did. Dawn's choreography allowed us to tell the story in a visually interesting way, utilizing the skills of the dancers and showcasing the costumes we had worked so hard to create.

Sa: The theme of our presentation was the rescue of Anna Valarious, who had been put in a trance by Dracula and his brides. The scene was a masked ball, where Carl and Van Helsing break Anna out of her trance, and battle the vampires, one by one, with a series of popular vampire vanquishing devices: holy water, a cross, some spinning knives, and well, a light saber (a little humor is also good).

The final blow was what we, the Van Helsing crew called, the "Hamster Ball of Doom." I was a prop that Nicole made out of a hamster ball from a pet store, and filled with light up toys, aluminum foil balls, and anything else she could find that was shiny.



Mary Ann Cappa as Anna Valarious dances with Kent Elofson as Gabriel Van Helsing at the Vampire Ball. Photoshop composite of two different photos by Atomic99 from CosPlay.com.

A good friend made an edit of music from the film, with added explosions, and other sounds effects. All in all it was a dazzling presentation, and we received the Judges Choice award that year

Danica: Everything on our costumes was a labor of love, time, creativity, and dedication to recreating the stunning costumes originally designed and created by [Gabriella Pescucci](#) for *Van Helsing*.

Danica Lisiewicz has been part of award winning costume groups at Comic-Con for the last eight years, starting with her involvement in the infamous *Van Helsing Motion*. She is still frightened of patterns and believes that machine embroidery is cheating.

Sa Winfield started costuming when she was 13, when she first worked at the *Ren faire*. She studied dance, many styles, which required costuming skills, from *Can Can* girl to exotic belly dancer. Sa built every costume for the original *Reduced Shakespeare Company*, all quick change costumes. “*Van Helsing*” was her first costume competition; two more Comic-Con wins followed. She most recently got to costume one of her fave musician, *Todd Rundgren*, and his band, for his 2009 tour.



Watch the Comic-Con 2005 performance of *Van Helsing* at the *Vampire Ball* on [YouTube](#). More photos on [CosPlay.com](#)