



An Accidental Masquerade Director

Jean Battiato

Photo: Jeanette Butler

A member of the BayCon 2012 staff found herself suddenly in charge of the masquerade only three weeks before the event! Here is the story of her voyage, and some lessons learned along the way from a first-time masquerade director.

How did I ever get myself into this?

About three weeks before the start of BayCon 2012 in late May, a friend of mine on the BayCon committee contacted me. “I really need some help!” If had been anybody else besides her, I probably would have said “no.” She and I have some serious history where we’ve bailed each other out. Now she was asking me to pull off a miracle.

The BayCon masquerade has had kind of a checkered history for the last several years. It’s changed hands a number of times, and the format has changed a lot in terms of how it’s run and how it’s set up. There had been some kind of battle to get someone to actually run that year, and then some question about whether the masquerade was actually going to happen.

My biggest handicap was that I’d never run a masquerade before, and have only been in a handful of them as an contestant. I didn’t start getting in to it until about four years ago when I entered for the first time.

Once I agreed to take it on, I did several things to get ready. First and most important, I spent some time talking with masquerade directors from various conventions. We talked about ideas that had worked for them, and from that, I was able to come up with something that I was able to make work in the little time I had to put it together.



There were also some very intense meetings with the programming committee and the upper echelons of BayCon about what we could pull off in three weeks that would be acceptable. It entailed a lot of phone calls, email conversations, and sitting down at coffee shops and bars. We went over things like paperwork, setting up how we’ll organize it, what rules we’ll follow, who the judges are going to be, how we’ll break down the prizes, and how to get the

word out in a very limited time that, yes, we are going to have a masquerade.

The rules were just a lot of common sense ideas. The “do not” list was mostly safety kinds of things: no lasers, no fire, nothing that’s going to fall apart, no peanut butter, etc.. The break down of the divisions was were based on what I had seen at BayCon, FurCon, Worldcon, LosCon, and a variety of others. We decided have novice, journeyman, and master divisions. There would also be a young fans division that cut off at age 17. This pretty much fit the International Costumers' Guild [guidelines](#). It worked well for this masquerade, and was something that I wanted to run with.

On recruiting judges, some of them I already had in mind. Others we had to recruit because we realized that we needed a few more. Being masquerade judges had come up in earlier conversations with the Guests of Honor, and almost all of them ended up being conscripted.

Some of the judges had previous experience judging masquerades, and several were also experienced costumers. I divided the judges into presentation and workmanship. The two judges who where costumers themselves were workmanship judges, and the Guests of Honor were the presentation judges.

In addition to being in charge of the overall masquerade, I ended up running the green room myself because we were a bit short-handed. Paul White, my Emcee helped a lot – he was wonderful! I also had three others in and out who were doing the “den mom” thing, helping communicate, and making sure all the paperwork was taken care of. Most of them were people I had talked to in advance, and who were friends on the programming staff.

I also ended up interacting with the front of the house. Having an absolutely wonderful and on-the-ball tech crew made it that much easier. With Albert Baker as tech lead, and Ryn and the rest of the BayCon tech crew out front, I knew there wasn't going to be any stress.

We set up the house to ensure that everybody would be ushered in to the actual show without any problems. The wheel chairs were here, the families of the contestants there, and the judges over that way. Once it was all set up, I just took a look to make sure that every thing was running smoothly and that was it.

The green room opened at 6 pm, and contestants started arriving.

Because we only expected a small number of entries, we really didn't see much reason for a tech rehearsal. Once most of the entries arrived, I walked them through how everything will work, and left them to figure out exactly what they want to do on the stage.

I also got the judges together in that 6 pm to 8 pm time slot, gave them the rules, and told them what I needed from them. I said that if they want to be creative with some of the young fan

awards, have a good time! These are our standards and how the categories work. I also provided printed copies the rules that they could consult.

During the afternoon time normally used for tech rehearsals, we decided to have a panel on entering masquerades. It covered what works best in different situations, how to do a presentation-heavy piece on stage, how to promenade, how workmanship is judged, and other topics.



These kinds of panels are often poorly attended, but I would say that at least a dozen attended, and a lot of those people ended up entering. Some of them signed up in advance, but many of them ended up coming in a little later and saying, “OK, this sounds like fun after all.” Unfortunately, one of the people who was at that panel, a very young fan, had a costume with lasers, and I had to say that I was sorry, but that isn't going to work.”

I was happy that we ended up with between 13 and 15 entries. I would say that all of them were novices, because the more experienced ones didn't know that the masquerade was going on and didn't have time to prepare something. About half the entrants were hall costumers who came in because they thought it looked like fun. The other half had heard about it in advance and spent some time working on costumes for the masquerade.

Once most of the contestants filled out their entry forms, I worked with Emcee Paul White to build a run list, and was able to give him and the judges copies of all the paperwork.

Paul would announce the basic information like entry number, entry name, and contestants. If contestants wanted the him to say something or give a little story, they also had that option. A few of them asked Paul to talk about what the costume



Jean Battiato with masquerade Emcee Paul White. Photo: BayCon 2012 [“Cruise Chronicle.”](#)

was made out of, how it was done, and the amount of time it took. It was pretty much open-ended on what they wanted the audience to know about the costume.

As much as I wanted to let entries provide their own music, it just wasn't feasible because we had to put it together as quickly as we did. Instead, we provided fixed pieces of music to accompany the contestants as they promenaded along the edge of the dance floor in the center of the room, and then went up on a raised stage at the front.

I remember how much I enjoyed audience interaction the first time I was in a promenade, so I encouraged contestants to try it. If they had a schtick, I told them to play with the crowd. Some of them chose not to, but the ones who did loved it! There was a group of three who *really* played with the crowd. They'd go up to the audience, and they'd stay in character as they interacted with them. Some of the larger groups would also do a single presentation pose on stage before going off.

We had everything from individual entries to groups. The largest was a group of seven or eight. That group was a real surprise because they came in and signed up maybe 15 minutes before showtime. "Hey, we heard this is going on, is it too late to enter?" I said sure, you guys can come in. It was a little nerve-wracking but

we were still able to get their paperwork in and fit them in.

The show went off much, much better than I expected it to. I honestly thought, "I'm pulling this off in a matter of weeks, but something is going to explode!" Of course, I had no idea of what it was going to be. I also worried that we were going to be light on entrants because



Shael Hawman as "Wonder Woman" received "Best in Show, Workmanship" and "Embodiment of Character" awards. Photo: BayCon 2012 ["Cruise Chronicle."](#)



Mekayla, Morgen, and Sonya as "My Little Ponies" played to the crowd. They received award for "Originality." Photo: BayCon 2012 ["Cruise Chronicle."](#)

word hadn't gone out, but we weren't nearly as light as I had expected.

Once the show was going, everything ran like clockwork. Thankfully, I have a voice that can be heard backstage so we got everyone in line and set to go, and everything

stayed pretty organized. I was standing by the door signaling contestants when to enter, so I could see how the contestants were feeling and how the audience was reacting to the costumes. It was an absolutely packed house, and I was pleased that the contestants got a lot of very positive reaction.

The biggest scramble was getting the awards put together. When the judges came back, we had to fill out the ribbons and certificates, and make sure everything was filled out properly so the winners could actually have them when they went up on stage.

Two entries really stood out for me. The most interactive one, and the best one as a presentation piece, was three "My Little Ponies" that just played with the crowd. The costume that, when I saw it originally I could say this is the one that's going to win, ended up winning. It was a knit and crocheted Wonder Woman. She had done the lasso, the hair, and the entire costume. It was entirely hand-done. She had planned on entering, but it was her first time ever and she was very nervous. I told her afterwards that I thought hers would be the one to beat. It was beautiful, and she absolutely deserved to win!

We also had two young fan entries. One was probably five years old (right), and she was darling. She was with dad, and she made dad dress up. It was very cute.

My main advice to anyone considering running a masquerade for the first time, which saved me a lot of heartache over that month, is to make sure that you have the support of your convention, and that they're going to let you do what you need to do with the people you need to do it with. Personal relationships are also very important. Had I come in from the outside, it would have been much harder.

It's absolutely OK to say that you need an extra body to help me with this, that you can't deal with this amount of paperwork, or that you need a gopher to help you with this.

What helped me most was talking to other masquerade directors. I was very, very fortunate to be in contact with one of the masquerade directors from FurCon from a few years ago. It was a phenomenal help.



Young fan "Princess" Danielle Lujan won "Best Grace.". Naomi Kaufman as "Arriety" won for Showmanship. Photo: BayCon 2012 "[Cruise Chronicle](#)."



Before moving on, I'd like to discuss what could be an unpleasant aspect for a new masquerade director. There were people on the BayCon chat groups afterward who were critical of the masquerade and how it was run. My take is that the ones who were really criticizing weren't aware that it was put together in less than a month. One thing I said very publicly was that if you have a problem with how the masquerade is run, try doing it yourself. Once word got out that pulling it off was pretty much a miracle, most of that went away

What bothered me the most, though, was criticism of the costumers. My instinct is to defend my competitors. These were mostly novices, kids, and people for whom it was their very first time building and showing a costume. The worst part for me was hearing people who put their hearts and souls into creating beautiful costumes and putting themselves out there being criticized for what they did. Unfortunately,

some of them read the criticism. To my mind, no one has a right to criticize people who put themselves on the line like that until they do it themselves.

One bright spot was that support from the convention community and those who put it on was phenomenal, and they rallied behind the masquerade staff and contestants, and set the record straight. I know that I did the best I knew how in the amount of time available, and so did the contestants. Having the community rally to support the contestants and masquerade staff was amazing. A supportive community really is the most important ingredient in the end.

Would I do it again? Absolutely! In fact, BayCon asked in late January whether I'd do it again in 2013, and I agreed. There are things that I wanted to do last year that I didn't get the opportunity to, changes that I'd like to make, things that I've seen work other places, or just thinking out of the box that would make a new costumer feel even more welcome.

For example, if someone doesn't want to do a presentation, they shouldn't have to do it. They don't have to do a big production, and they don't need to compete against massive productions by more experienced costumers. It's OK to simply walk out on stage, do a little turn, and walk off stage. Or, if they choose to, they can do a promenade. I'd like to see more of a mix of out in the audience and on stage presentations.

If contestants want to do both, they can, but if they just want to do one or the other, that's OK too. I don't want to require doing both because not everyone is comfortable with both formats. A lot of people have a fear of stages, for example. They are fantastic costumers, but they don't want to be out on stage. However, walking in a promenade along the perimeter of the dance floor is something they can handle.

I'd also like to see a little bit of change in workmanship. I wanted to do it last year, but there just wasn't time. I've seen cases where all an entrant did is purchase a costume and add something to it. I would like to see some genuine workmanship, with time spent building something, even if it's a just one thing.

The best example from last year was a "punk" Green Lantern (right). Most of what he had was purchased and put together, but he entered workmanship because he actually spent time constructing the ring and the Green Lantern symbol. He didn't enter the rest of the costume in workmanship, but he entered those two pieces because those were what he built. If someone genuinely spent time constructing something, even just one thing, I'd like that person to be able to enter workmanship because he or she built a particular prop or part of their costume.

Those are really the two major things I'd like to make happen for the BayCon 2013 masquerade.

As far as this year's schedule, I still don't have a timeline yet, but it's something



Chad Peterman as a diesel-punk "Green Lantern" entered just the badge and ring he made himself in the BayCon 2012 workmanship competition. Photo © 2012 by Danny Low.

I'm working on setting up. At this point, I'm still working out who my staff will be. I have a list of who I'd like to help me in the green room and with different things. I know that Albert and Ryn will be on tech, and I'd love to have Paul back again as my Emcee, if he'd be interested. I'd also like to have a few other friends help back stage or usher the crowd in for the show. As for judges, I'd like them lined up by the end of April, about a month out from BayCon 2013.

Finally, I want to have time to reach out to the more traditional masquerade

community this year because I'd like to see some of the veterans who have been doing it for so long come back again. The important thing is to have a good mix, and many of the veterans have told me the same thing.

Seeing so much new blood in the masquerade last year was amazing to me. Most of them were new to costuming, or had only done one or two masquerades in the past. I thought it was wonderful that all these new people are interested. I still remember the thrill when I was doing it for first time. This is the next generation of costumers, and having them learn from the current generation would be all to the good.

It doesn't matter what level you are, or what your background in costuming is. If you have something that you really want to do, it's OK. With a masquerade, it doesn't matter if you're recreating something as cosplay or creating your own thing. There's a freedom to it, and it doesn't matter if you just came up with the idea a week before, pulled it off to enter. It's not necessarily less good than one made by a costumer who spent months on theirs. In fact, a novice can take the top prize in a masquerade with a really creative idea and a little luck.

Jean Battiato started out costuming in film before she started in fandom and masquerades. She did the costumes for a number of films that have been shot though the bay area. She even did a small stint with Industrial Light and Magic before making the jump into fandom costuming.