

Feature



Basic Black: The Making of Ursula

Lisa Ashton

A member of the Costume-Con 31 "Basic Black" masquerade entry describes how she transformed "Ursula," the tentacled villainess from "The Little Mermaid," into a live-action character.

The presentation of the evil villainesses was conceived by Rae Bradbury-Enslin early on, and when she asked me to join in and play "Ursula" from *The Little Mermaid*, she had a specific type of costume/reveal in mind. All of the villainesses would "throw off" their outer evil garb to reveal the sexy characters inside, all in "little black dresses." I would throw off "Ursula's" outer lumpy form to reveal a "little black dress" that was curvy and that also encompassed a "tentacle skirt".



Inspiration for "Ursula" costume. Fashion by [Vecona](#), Photo: [Frank Wiesema](#).

At left below is the actual picture that Rae sent me to work with for "Ursula's" tentacle skirt. I liked the idea of pairing it with an "hourglass" corset. Of course I planned to wear a lavender stretch velvet bodysuit under it, with long black opera gloves and high black heels.

Planning and mocking up the outer "coat" that would be the real "Ursula's" body and dress would be the challenge.

I made the "little black dress" components first, because I'd have to fit and drape the outer coat over it. The corset was one that I had made many times, a "sweetheart" over-bust corset with LOTS of boning in it, that gave a very curvy hourglass shape. I made it in black and a dark purple/black brocade, so that it would look black but bring in a little bit of color.



The bodysuit is a simple cat suit pattern that I've used for years in many different costumes and for others too. It was the foundation for my "Malachite Samurai", as well as "Isis" years ago. Finding the right shade of purple stretch velvet required research, and I got six yards online, I think at [Distinctive Fabric](#) or [Fashion Fabrics Club](#) during a great sale.

I initially got swatches to preview the colors, and ended up with a slightly lighter purple than I wanted. The darker one was too blue, and the lighter was more pink. I decided that it would be easier to do facial makeup to match the pinker one. The rest of me would be completely covered, so there was no need to worry about hands, plus, I would make a high collar for the leotard to cover my neck.

I decided that the outer coat would be basically a large baggy coat with no sleeves—I used petal shaped foam-lined pieces of the velvet over the shoulders, to suggest "Ursula's" large flabby arms. I

Outer coat. Photo: Don Searle.



designed “Ursula’s” black outer dress as an “appliqué” on the coat, to give it the bustline. It was made with black microfiber. I initially lined it with a foam-fleece old blanket, but that started to shed, so I retrofitted it with a satin lining fabric, all done by hand.

The tentacle skirt was the centerpiece of the costume. I made it in several steps. First I made all the tentacles. I wanted to have 8, but it would make the “skirt” that had to support the wide ends, too heavy and crowded; and would be too difficult to support—so I tried 6 and that worked. With 3 in front and 3 in back, there was plenty of tentacles on the sides, so no one would actually count them! (Technically, including my own arms, that DOES make 8 arms).

I designed the tentacles on paper (each one is a little differently shaped) so that the lengths were roughly similar, and they could be stuffed. They are made with the lavender stretch velvet on the bottom, and black heavy brocade on the top. The bottom part was made somewhat larger, so they would stretch realistically when stuffed with poly stuffing. The tops have purple and black brocade appliques that are outlined in sequins. The proximal part of the each tentacle was shaped like a half-circle, and these were attached by hand with buttonhole thread to the top of the skirt (these top areas lie flat, and can be overlapped as needed).



I bought a collection of lavender buttons and hand-sewed them onto the underneath of each tentacle as the “suckers”.

Inside of outer coat showing satin lining and tentacles with buttons. (left) Photo: Don Searle. Detail shows attachment of tentacles to short skirt. above) Photo: author.

Each tentacle is wired with about half a coat hanger that was straightened out. They are attached to the main black skirt so that they will swing freely once the outer coat is taken off, and they really do have a life of their own, and look very organic. The side ends of each tentacle required me to hand sew them carefully onto the black short skirt, because the skirt itself has steel boning in it to support the weight of the tentacles. The tentacle skirt can smush down for packing as well.

I made the wig by starting out with a short white cosplay wig. I hung this upside down on a wire in the garage, and tied it in a point, and sprayed it with hair spray, every day for several days, all the while brushing it downwards, to get “Ursula’s” identifiable pointy white hair.

What I ended up with was surprisingly realistic. I did have to adjust the front hairline, and I did this by hot gluing small wads of polyester stuffing around the hairline



to make the forehead point. This had the added benefit of blurring the hairline and covering my own hair better.

It was challenging but fun to build the “Ursula” costume, and I enjoyed performing in the “Basic Black” skit with Rae, Bill, and Regan at Costume-Con 31.

Lisa A. Ashton is a Sci & Fantasy and historical costumer who started costuming after attending Noreascon in 1989. Over 20 years later, she is still trying to design and build that perfect costume that will make people gasp in wonder. Other passions include beading, hunting, stamp collecting, gardening and canning, and collecting authentic Victorian photographs to study fashion history. As a Physician Assistant in Emergency Medicine for the last 25 years, she has had many opportunities to hone her sewing skills on her patients. Lisa was Program Director for Costume-Cons 29. Visit her [web site](#).



Details of wig and makeup. (left)
Finished little black dress. (right)
Photos: Don Searle.