

# Feature



## Behind the Scenes at a “Mega Fan Convention” Masquerade *Martin Jaquish*

*The long-time Coordinator of one of the largest and most elaborate Masquerade costume competitions offers a rare behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to put it on.*

Quite unintentionally, San Diego Comic-Con International (SDCC), a comics and popular arts convention, grew over its 45 years to become surprisingly big. You've probably heard of it, if for no other reason that many TV shows, from *The Big Bang Theory* to most every late night talk show seem to enjoy mentioning it.

You might well assume, with 130,000 people, attendee badges that sell out within an hour of going online, and worldwide exposure, that its annual Masquerade costume competition, set on the high-profile Saturday evening, has generous resources assigned it, nicely respectable prestige, and flourishes comfortably in the advantages of having the same staff, and being set in the same convention center venue year after year. When I mention that it's had the same

Masquerade Coordinator, yours truly, running the costume event for 23 years as of this writing, you likely feel even more inclined to expect it must be smooth sailing by now, especially with the large budget and venues the convention has to utilize.

However, if you will read on, you may see that a large, very successful, and technically cutting-edge convention also brings with it unique challenges and ironic limitations to its Masquerade. I should mention that the views in this article are my own and do not necessarily represent those of SDCC, nor should they be quoted for other publication use.



The convention pulls in both seasoned fans and novices.

First, to show a little of my point of view, let me mention that I've run, or at least helped at, many and varied costuming events over the course of many years. I've run some pretty small convention masquerades in my past, and I remember well how it was to practically beg for contestants so as to have a decent-sized show. The phone calls to costumers weeks in advance, the canvassing of the convention itself trying to recruit costumers to participate, some of you reading this will certainly know what I am speaking of.

A Masquerade Coordinator can work very hard planning and promoting, but in the end he or she is at the mercy of how many costumers choose to participate. For SDCC, however, the challenges are of a very different sort. With popularity comes advantages but also a price, and oft-times the elements of time and space make many decisions for you.

For example, what's rather unique for this convention, in good and bad ways, is that while it does attract many attendees intimately familiar with fan convention culture and protocols, it obviously pulls in a ton of the public who have never attended any other kind of fan convention, and some of those can be a bit slow to grasp what a fan costume show is all about.

About eight months before the convention, around the time the first badges are put up for sale, the Masquerade rules and entry information go online on the [SDCC website](#) for contestants to download. Some contestants send in their entry forms right away, but most do so a few months later, and by early May all our contestant slots are filled.

**SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON INTERNATIONAL 2014**  
Celebrating The Popular Arts July 25-27, Preview Night July 23 - San Diego Convention Center

**Masquerade - Contestant Information & Rules**

**What It Is:** Our 49<sup>th</sup> annual Costume Competition, showcasing costumes inspired by movies, comic books, TV, fantasy, Japanese animation, video games, and the imagination of our attendees. Note this is **not** a dance or party, but a show on a stage. It is free for Comic-Con attendees to participate in or be in the audience. Most contestants provide recorded music and choreographed dramatic or humorous action for their presentations. Some entries will be individual, others will be groups with a shared theme. Impressive Comic-Con custom award medallions, as well as cash and other prizes will be given in various categories. The large stage will feature theater-style lighting and sound, and excellent viewing for all in the audience will be provided by giant high-definition video screens suspended overhead.

**When & Where:** 8:30 p.m. Saturday, July 26 in Hallroom 20 of the Convention Center. The event will run three hours, and doors will open at 7:45 p.m. for audience seating. As the line will start forming long before then, early arrival is suggested. Tickets for seating will be given out free to people in the line beginning at 2:00 PM. A ticket guarantees a seat, so you need not stay in line after you receive yours, and after tickets have been distributed to those in line, any that may remain from the 3,000 available will be given out at the Masquerade Desk. Should you be unable to obtain tickets to the main hall room there will also be seating for 2,500 in the South Pavilion and in other hall rooms where the show will be projected on giant screens. Reserved seating is available for Comic-Con special guests.

No flash photography of the show is allowed, and any photos or video taken must be for personal, non-profit use only! Photographers who wish access to the flash-friendly Photo Area, where contestants will pose after exiting the hall room stage, should write to the Coordinator ahead of time to request a reserved spot, as only a limited number is allowed.

**How To Enter:** Send in an Entry Form no later than July 3, via mail or e-mail. Some years we fill up as early as May, so submitting a form early is recommended. A photo of the costume you will be wearing is also required by that date, and until received your entry is only tentatively accepted. Photos may be sent via e-mail or regular mail. A "work in progress" photo is acceptable if only a small amount of work remains to be done. Send it with your Entry Form, or as a follow-up afterwards. If your entry is a group please provide photos of all costumes. This is to assure costumes meet all the Rules criteria and to assist us in helping your presentation by letting us know what to plan for. Photos will be kept confidential so that you will still be a "surprise" for the audience and judges. Many costumes reserve a space months early, then send photos by the end of June. Confirmation of receiving your form should arrive within two weeks.

**No badge?** Read on: Our contestants go to much work to craft their amazing creations, but some great costumes are unable to buy attendee badges due to the sell-out. For ONLY those contestants who have been accepted into the Masquerade at least once since 2010, if you've a costume suitable for the show, and submit an entry form and photos, and we deem you meet the acceptance criteria as listed in the rules, we can arrange for contestants to be able to buy an 2014 attendee badge even though all badges are sold out. Write the Coordinator at [sdccmasquerade@sdcccon.com](mailto:sdccmasquerade@sdcccon.com) for more information. Note there are a limited number of such badges available, and a limited number of contestant slots.

There will be a Waiting List to fill spots arising from cancellations (travel plans change, etc.) and entry forms submitted after we've filled up will be put on a Waiting List. Those on the list will be notified if a spot opens up. You may also sign up on the Waiting List at the Masquerade Desk at the convention on Thursday and Friday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Unfortunately, due to the limit on number of entries we can accommodate so that the backstage is not overcrowded and the show doesn't run overly long, we must turn some costumes away. Therefore, to fairly give spots to contestants most deserving of them, we will evaluate photos during the week of July 7 (or earlier, if photos showing the completed costume are received) using a 3-person jury, to ascertain if an entry has sufficient original craftsmanship and quality.

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Masquerade rules go online eight months in advance.

Then, there are those costumers that just show up at the convention Masquerade Desk with no advance communication at all, and if they meet the criteria of the rules they can be given a spot on the waiting list...if space remains. Thus, we do get many fresh, new costumers in the event, as well as experienced repeat contestants. About half,



Conference attendee stops by the Masquerade desk.

in fact, tend to be first-timers, and some do quite well. That's the good aspect.

The bad aspect, which is not really all that bad, is that we spend a lot of time explaining to some people how a Masquerade works, despite the rather complete info online. We also spend a lot of time explaining to people who stop by the Masquerade Desk or who write in

ahead of time that, no, it is NOT a masked ball, that there is no band, and that purchased costumes are not allowed in the show but that you can wear whatever you want in the audience.

For those who sign up late, however, odds are not good. To fit into a reasonable amount of time and not overcrowd the backstage rooms, our limit is 35 to 40 entries, adjusted depending on how many large group entries there are, so that we end up with about 120 bodies in costume (plus their helpers, set pieces, etc.). A decade or so ago, when the presentations were not as elaborate and groups not as large, I'd let in 50 entries. One year, at the urging of the convention administration, I experimented with 60. After that, my staff threatened to quit if I ever did that again, and rightly so, as it nearly killed all of us.



Total number of entries must be adjusted for the number and size of larger groups.

I had to learn the lesson of how to courteously say “no” a lot after that. I really hate to turn away good costumes, especially because I remember what it was like to be desperate for them. I also used to be in costume groups myself, and know well the work involved. But like everything at a convention of this size, it’s about capacities being maxed out. Contestants I would have killed to have in a Westercon Masquerade I have to decline once we’ve run out of space and time in the show. It is disheartening and frustrating.

You may be surprised to learn that I am also forced to turn away some contestant prizes. Who would decline donated prizes, you might ask?

A number of companies and organizations come forth each year to offer prizes, some as merchandise, some as cash, gift certificates, and tours, and some as combinations of those. Most prizes are in the \$300-\$500 value range, some as high as \$1,000 cash. Some of these sponsors donate because they honestly love costuming, some do it to support what is perhaps the last “fan-centered” event at this mega-convention, and some that contact me are just seeking to promote themselves and offering items of only very modest value and narrow interest.

The prizes selected supplement the convention trophies bestowed by our panel of guest judges, and it is always great to see as many of the contestants as possible rewarded for their hard work, expenses, and talent in creating costumes. However, giving

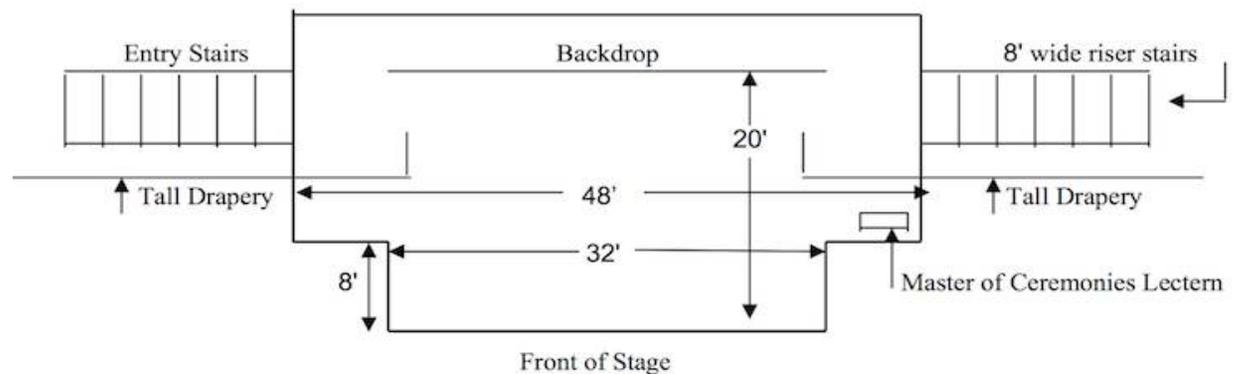
out awards takes time on stage, and uses other resources too, and no wants the show to run past midnight. With a start time of 8:30pm, and the objective to wind up the show not long past 11:30pm, a few minutes here and there as company representatives come on stage, talk about their company or product, then summon forth the winner and bestow the prizes, adds up. So, with regret, I have to say “thank you, but no” to some otherwise fine people with good intentions, once we seem to have lined up about as many as we can handle.

As it happens, however, plenty of times there’s a “Sorry, no” that comes at ME, instead. Some of those instances, you might say, are ironic.

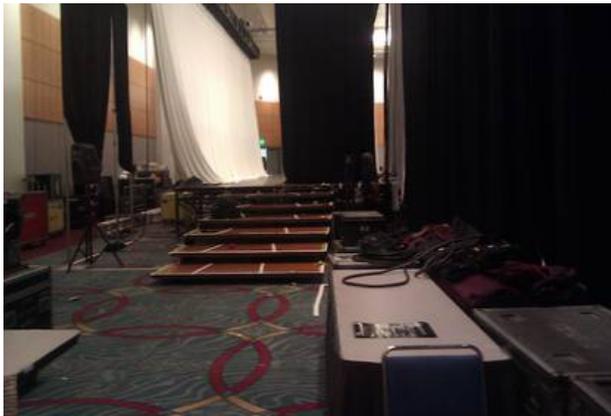
Yes, the large stage, built in the convention center’s best ballroom especially to Masquerade specs, with state-of-the art lighting effects, movie-theater level sound, multiple giant high-definition projection screens, and four high-definition cameras, may be the dream of any Masquerade Coordinator. That convention administration

should allocate the money needed for this is much appreciated. When I have requested technology upgrades, they happen. When I proposed that expensive custom medallions be created for winners so that groups (which many of our entries tend to be) can each take something home with them, like Olympic teams, rather than several people sharing a single trophy, they agreed. When I asked that winners get free memberships, there was no argument. (Of course, when we have a generous sponsor covering some of the cost of the show, such as HBO as it has been for the past few years, that helps!)

But no matter how often I ask for the critically important early access to the ballroom for setting up the Masquerade, it is another story. The ballroom doesn’t become “ours” until 90 minutes or so... with luck, two hours.... before the audience comes in! “Sorry Martin, we can’t give it to you before then.” How can that be, you may wonder? How can anyone possibly get the room and personnel ready in time?



Drawing of Masquerade stage with dimension and layout information made available to contestants in advance.



Ballroom 20 stage being build for SDCC use. Note extra-wide riser-steps backstage, on each side for contestants to travel to stage level. These and other back-stage photos are presented for the first time for this article.

Before I address that, let me give an example of what Masquerade Coordinators really need to put on a smooth show. When I was given the honor of the 2006 WorldCon Masquerade to run, and before that I was technical director for the 1996 WorldCon Masquerade, the show venue for both was the large Anaheim Arena, and we were granted the venue for all day Saturday. All contestants could run through their presentations on stage with their music and lighting cues, seating could be roped off, all tech checked, the video crew could practice their moves and focusing and so on. This was great! Some other conventions provide that sort of venue access too, of course, especially at conventions like Costume-Con, where Masquerades are seen as the major event.

Alas, once you have 130,000 attendees maxing out the building's capacity, you have logistical challenges other cons don't have.

You've heard the old joke about how to carry four tons of canaries in a truck that can only hold two tons: the answer is to keep half them flying. That's not a bad comparison to this convention. For it to not be shut down by the Fire Marshall for serious overcrowding, about half the attendees have to be seated at any one time. For every hour that the

ballroom is empty that creates 4,000 more people in the already crowded corridors, exhibit hall, etc. Thus, the Programming head has to keep the room filled as long as possible before surrendering it to Masquerade use.

While fully sympathetic to our needs, the Program head is helpless. As you can guess, this makes it highly challenging for testing the lighting, sound, and video equipment, roping off chairs, coordinating ushers, changing the backdrop from the logo-curtain to one we can project on, setting the M.C. lectern, and just getting the room clean of a day's worth of garbage (to maximize programming, and keep those canaries flying, rooms are not cleared nor cleaned between programs).



Ballroom 20 just before doors open for Masquerade audience to enter.

It takes at least 30 minutes to get 4,000 people into the room and seated, meaning to start at 8:30pm, we aim to let them in before 8:00pm. The tech crew also has to have a dinner break somewhere in there. At smaller conventions, volunteers often can work the light and sound boards, but for a con this size, the very elaborate boards have to be operated by the audio visual company, MSI, although they do so under our direction. They do a great job, truly, especially considering they are surely exhausted after working continuous long days with more audio and visual demands than probably any other gathering they encounter.

So yes, while the contestants are in their backstage rooms getting dressed, made up, glued into their armor or getting their judging photos taken, it's a crazy race in the ballroom to turn it from a panel room for groups of talking heads and movie previews to a proper performance theatre. Saved seating for judges, company representatives, press, disabled (of which there are a lot), and so on, is mostly all planned out ahead of time but still takes time to mark and rope off.

As a reward for the audience members that have spent much of their Saturday in line, we mark off fully one half of the front of the room for them, so they can sit right up front, even closer than some of the VIP seating. This ironically means we have to protect the regular audience seating FROM the VIP people who try to sit there, rather than the other way around, as in most



View from the green room practice stage. The ballroom stage is in use all day, so contestants practice on this stage of the same dimensions (but lower height). A video screen on this stage in the evening allows contestants to watch the Masquerade in progress.

theaters. We barely finish readying the ballroom most years, and this past year we had to start 10 minutes late, (and starting on time is very important to me), but we always have movie trailers on hand to keep the audience occupied.

Fortunately, while the Programming division can't give more ballroom time to the Masquerade, we have backstage rooms all Saturday long to section off as costume construction areas, dressing rooms, judging rooms, and a practice stage of the same dimensions as the one in the ballroom so that contestants can rehearse how they are using their performance space, accompanied by their music track.

It is, of course, not the same thing as a proper rehearsal in the big room, with lighting cues and

so on, but with our lighting director there to talk to we manage the best we can to prepare contestants and ourselves for making their presentations be all they hope them to be. That IS, after all, the only compensation the Masquerade team and I have for all our hard work: for the show to go well, magic to happen on stage, contestants all happy and many smiles created for all in attendance. Oh, and no one hurt!

Of course, the show is not just about the contestants. It also exists to entertain the audience, and ours is not just any audience. Thereby lays yet another irony of the event....

Our audience is so enthused, so devoted to fan costuming, that they form a Masquerade line first thing Saturday morning, as soon as the doors of the convention open, hundreds of them waiting for hours. We give out seating tickets at



Lines for the Masquerade form early and grow all day long.



Masters of Ceremonies Kaja and Phil Foglio encourage the audience to call out entry numbers during the show.

noon to encourage them to leave, and a fair number do get out of line, but many still remain even afterwards, wanting to be assured front section seating for the show. I have asked them: why miss so much of the con's most flashy day, just for good seating for the Masquerade? We have four giant HD screens, after all! But they just reply they love the show, and it's the main reason they come to the con.

The line grows huge again later, and then fills the 4,000 seat ballroom. Other audience goes to watch in the three overflow venues, totaling about 6,500 people eager to see the costume creations. The city newspaper calls the event one of the highlights of the convention. Yet, ironically, some among that crowd of masquerade fans have the reputation for being among the least polite audience in the fan world.

It is an unfortunate bit of ancient history for the convention that in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the Masquerade was not the smoothest running of events. Back then, I was just a regular attendee, and I can attest that wrong music was sometimes played, cues were missed, the show sometimes started very late, and some of the costumes fell short of crowd-pleasing. These were the days of badly recorded audio-cassettes, spandex over-used as hero wear, and lots of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* "Time Warp" renditions.

This brought forth a somewhat rowdy aspect to the audience that perhaps still echoes a bit today. They are very much improved, but still very honest in their reactions. When they love your costume, they will cheer and do a standing ovation, and when they deem you are on stage overly long, a few unkind comments can arise.



Photo-Op room backstage where contestants are photographed after they appear on the stage, by those with coveted photo passes.



Special ribbon for admission to photo-op room.

Perhaps they can't be blamed too much, as most all of them have spent much of Saturday and the days beforehand existing in very crowded, noisy, high-energy conditions in fandom's largest exhibit hall and seeing their favorite celebrities on stage, not to mention all that waiting in lines. Some need to blow off a little extra steam, I suppose, and our Masters of Ceremonies cleverly provide a bit of audience participation (by letting them call out entry numbers) to help with that.

Back when I started working the show those many years ago, I wanted to try and tame that audience a little. I knew the

contestants certainly deserved it, and by that time I had been a contestant in a couple of the shows and at other cons myself. I initiated always fading to black between each entry, in part to add drama to each presentation, and in part because audiences tend to quiet down in the dark. Also added to engage the audience was using changing patterns projected on a rear screen (sometimes an actual cyclorama when one could be rented). Who wanted to look at the same background for three hours? Nobody, I figured.

In those days, projection patterns were *gobos*, cut metal disks that light shown through. We had city silhouettes for Batman entries, forrests for mythical things, galaxies for Star Wars entries, abstract designs for original entries, and so on. When we got our first gobo rotator one year, I remember thinking that was very spiff! But what was cool then is immensely overshadowed by the technology of today, and for the past couple of years the “changing backdrop” has evolved from what started as a way to keep the audience engaged to a means of the contestants creating an even more enhanced impact on stage.

Our current equipment allows for virtually any photo to be projected on the back curtain, and contestants are encouraged in communications I have with them before the convention to supply us with a photo to project behind. Many take advantage of this to great effect, and for those that don’t provide one, we usually pick one out for

them. We can also project short animated sequences as well. “Queen Amidala” can now stand in her throne room, *Game of Thrones* dragons can prance before a giant dancing fire, and so on.

Costume Name	Contestant	# in group
1) Elsa the Snow Queen	Amber & Diane Bates	1
2) The Perfect Storm	Joanne, Petite Icon, Skypar & Little Z	4
3) Jaws	Just Wana Have Fun Plyessa Morales	1
4) Un Frozen	Maximilian, Alex & Jon King	2
5) Deadshot vs. Deathstroke	Lucas & Joe Queen	2
6) Iron Man vs. Whiplash	Ali Abolhosson, Taylor Garcia Shawn Abolhosson, Alison Magical	3
7) Thor & Loki	Norah Hobgood, Trinitel Bill	2
8) Fan girl in Marvel Land	Diana R Wilson	1
9) 1880's Black Widow	Kimberly Vasquez	1
10) Aliens	Mike Moore, Carlos Heron John Heffner	3
11) No Good Deed	Bryce Hamilton-Bittenfeld	1
12) Aurora's Midsummer's Night Dream	Chad Evert, Don Schmidt, Koshy K, Andy D, Joseph D, Soggy W	6
13) Margarety Tyrell wedding dress	Nicole Shrimpton	1
14) Christine Superior Katherine, Order of our Maryhad Lady	Rebecca Ryan	1
15) Dance with Dragons	Jason Jelling, Lindsey Bladen, Richard Swinden	3
16) The Evil Queen (Come Upon A Time)	Nancy Fradette	1
17) Twelve	The Time Lords: Phil, Katie, etc.	12+
18) Girl Powers	Shyra Borch	1
19) Kaiden from Metal Gear	Andrew Valenzuela	1
20) Arkham Asylum Batman	Allan Lavigne	3
21) The Legend of Zelda	Ricki Martinez Martelo	1
22) The Final Battle	edgar, Marjoral, Jerry, -nalis	2+
23) The Holy Grail	Shawn	
24) When Fan Works		

Masquerade run order list taped to green room wall.

It’s not easy, as it requires a lot of emails between contestants, myself, my assistants and the MSI lighting guy to coordinate, and the equipment is pricy, but I happen to love the look. From the reactions received, all seem to agree it’s a great innovation to the show. Another technical ingredient for making the show more polished is superimposing contestant titles and “worn by, created by” credits up on the screens for each costume entry as they head off the stage.

Of course, when you have a big, rather elaborate stage event, it doesn’t come without the price of a lot of work to make it happen. Everything has to be specified far in advance: the set up of each and every room weeks before the con starts, security coordination needed with multiple companies, food & beverage orders set, water service requested, line control plans made, Fire Marshall’s blessings given, lists for all the lighting and sound equipment needed, ticket distribution arranged, plus handling of VIPs, countless requests from press and would-be press, coordinating with the organizations and companies bringing prizes, and so on, plus assuring that everyone who needs access gets it.

And speaking of access, as you may have heard, it has become quite challenging to even get a badge to the convention! For a couple of years the fast sell-outs of the convention had their dampening effect upon the Masquerade, as group entries could no longer assume that all their members would get badges. Some didn’t even try to devise costumes because they figured it wasn’t possible to get badges, and the show shrank a little in size and scope.

The fix to this was to give special online codes to those contestants and their helpers accepted into the Masquerade, so that they could buy badges even though the con was sold out, and, to award free memberships to those who won one in the judge-bestowed categories.

It took a bit for the word to get out, and although the days of 15 to 20-person groups seem to be gone, this year we had a few groups of 12 and thereabouts. Of course, to coordinate those precious badge-buying codes passed to contestants means, again, lots of mails, and for some advance photos are required first.

And when all those mails and phone calls are mostly past, and the convention starts up, the challenges don't get any easier.

Those staffing the Masquerade Desk from Thursday to Saturday are kept very busy, checking-in pre-approved contestants and their music and reference materials and reminding them when the Orientation is, checking in the many photographers that have reserved space in the Photo-Op room, and like everything else, this list fills up fast. Of course, there are lots of general questions about the Masquerade, and a thousand questions that have nothing to do with it at all as an endless river of attendees pass by, spotting our people with our staff badges, and stepping up to ask all sorts of things, which we answer as best we can.

One type of person who always comes by each year is the press person requesting

special backstage access for his or her story, or who wants to interview one of us. The



Contestants pose for photos before morning orientation.

con draws lots of press, from all over the country and all over the world, and they would like to obtain a good story, of course. They usually promise us lots of extra exposure for our event, and while their interest in the show is flattering, they end up quite surprised when we politely decline this opportunity for fame and wish them well.

We have to. While we plan and prepare all we can, it's very hard to look after all the contestants and the other 1,000 factors and handle journalists and photographers too; not when we have people changing clothes, fixing costumes, staff putting out little "fires," etc. Like a military team or ship headed into battle, "embedded reporters" are a not a benefit to the operation. We've granted one or two exceptions for special access, but those have been rare.



Contestant shows off costume before morning orientation.

And with all that, challenges that are never the same each year are just starting...

There's often many impressive set pieces, large props, and oversized costumes in the event, big enough that is an awesome feat in itself that the contestants are able to transport them (some do rent U-Hauls). Everyone loves spectacle, whether the large item is a giant transformer, a life-size TARDiS, or giant winged dragons. I love it! But at times I can feel that surely any other convention venue is easier than this one to get the items inside and upstairs.

Firstly, with all the excitement outside the center it's tricky just to get a vehicle near to it. Some contestants are able to hand-carry their items to the center Thursday and Friday, and we lock up what they have into one of our secure storage rooms. Some carry them in Saturday. But for the items too big for that, contestants and their vehicles must be allowed into the loading dock area by the very attentive security people, not possible unless we've put the contestant's name on an access list the day before.

Then items have to be taken up two levels via freight elevator and though a couple of public areas before getting to where Masquerade items are

stored. And, that transit must also be supervised by one of the Masquerade staff, which means a lot of back and forth walking and elevator travel, especially on Saturday, for my staffer John Ruff handling it.

If all goes well by Saturday late morning, nearly all contestants who have registered have shown up, and for those that have cancelled we've filled in their spots from the waiting list. Happily, many of the new as well as returning contestants attend the Saturday morning orientation, where they are briefed on what to expect for the show itself, and some sign up for practice time. They chat with my tech director Paige Satter so she fully understands what they have requested on their tech forms. There is ALWAYS one contestant that doesn't turn in their Tech form, Judging form, and Master of Ceremonies forms on time, or their music on time, and we have to call them and wait: it never fails. It's always a dilemma when to be forgiving and when to



Contestant photographs on boards in the judges' room are taken backstage before the Masquerade for reference.

hold fast to announced deadlines, since much depends on how smoothly things are going by then.

As Saturday afternoon progresses, the ordeal of handing out thousands of tickets is seen to, the music had been put on a computer, the show order that has been mostly set before the con is now fully set, large items are hauled in to assemble, the Masquerade mirrors have been delivered by our Logistics department, and the full backstage crew shows up around 5:00pm. Contestants are checked in, assigned a “den

parent,” and a dressing room. The dressing rooms are created out of lots of thick pipe and drape. The dressing rooms are locked up once the show starts, so contestants are comfortable leaving their street clothes and other items. Especially valuable things are secured in our always-locked storage room.

Two Hollywood makeup artists soon show up, donating their time and materials to help out contestants with their looks. For first-timers, who need their eyes enhanced, a tanner face, help with their wigs, more spirit gum, etc, the makeup artists really help make them feel more secure on stage



Left: Contestants putting on costumes in backstage dressing area. Right: Hollywood makeup artist at makeup station ready to assist.

A photo team starts taking photos of costumes as they become fully dressed to attach to the judging forms, valuables are locked up, the Photo-Op room is set up in a room down the hall to accommodate the 70 photographers, and generally there's a lot of running around long hallways by staff in and out of rooms, aided by headset radios and cell phones.

At times it does somewhat look like frantic chaos, and how I run back and forth as the one to ultimately blame if anything goes wrong probably adds to that appearance, but in actuality things mostly go the way they are supposed to. Most of the staff have been the same for years, they know their jobs, none want to be the reason something goes wrong so they all work hard and are proud to take on the challenge of putting on a show where the contestants are treated well and properly, and I am proud to be associated with them.

Many contestants who have been in other convention masquerades have related stories to me where they were treated poorly, and much appreciate how we treat them. Since most of us have been contestants in the past, I like to think that helps us see things right.

I have to say that one of the most remarkable things for me to witness each year, is to see how much the contestants help each other. Sure, it is a competition, not only for awards of medallions and money and merchandise and prestige, but also for free memberships for next year, but still you see the contestants helping each other in all sorts of ways, lending a tool here, advice there, a helping



Volunteers pitch in to help get a contestant into costume.



Contestant in green room, ready to go on.

hand to lift something or letting someone borrow the sewing machine or iron they brought along, or simply telling one another how great they look.

They become a theater troupe, all working for the same goal, and in a convention that these days may be a bit too much about marketing and promotion and celebrities, most all the contestants are there for the right reason: costuming for fun and costuming's sake.

Occasionally we get a parent who, it seems to us, is putting an overemphasis on their child winning versus them having a good time, but for the most part everyone's on board for what we want the event to be: a fun celebration of the costuming arts. Our "den parents," those staffers in charge of helping the contestants get ready, photographed, and lined up, usually have a friendly competition among themselves as to who will be the most "successful" of the group in the tasks at hand, and after the show it is amusing to hear one of them say "Two of the groups assigned to me were winners!" They beam as if they were proud parents.

After the presentations are done, the judging intermission completed, and all awards given, it



Contestants backstage returning to the green room after their performance. Everyone loves a short walk from the backstage rooms to the stage, but at this convention it's not possible. My request for golf carts are never taken seriously!

takes a couple more hours to clean everything afterwards, put the costume repair kit back together, help contestants clear out their things, sweep the rooms for lost items, and load up all the crates of Masquerade supplies. Usually, the Center is quiet and empty when I clear out in the wee hours of the morning. Outside, attendees have been known to start lining up hours before dawn if the first program Sunday is a big one.

Earlier, on Masquerade Saturday afternoon I was, as usual for that time, swearing to never run a show again,



Staff-eye view from ball room of Masquerade in progress.

but as I later watched it unfold on stage, saw the contestants show off amazing creations and totally clever presentations, heard the audience bestow their applause and laughter at an event they dedicated hours of waiting to see, I decide that yes, all the work is worthwhile.

I am lucky to work with such a great team of people, especially my main assistant Lori Sartain, and to meet so many talented costumers. The world is not in the best shape, and all of

us should do what we can to put more smiles and beauty into it, true? Thanks for reading.

*Martin Jaquish has run the San Diego Comic-Con International Masquerade since 1992, and the WonderCon San Francisco/Anaheim Masquerades since 2004. He's also run Masquerades for the 2006 WorldCon, the 1996 WesterCon, and at assorted smaller conventions. He was Masquerade Tech Director for the 1996 Worldcon and the 1990 and 1999 NASFiCs, and assisted at the very first Costume-Con. Long ago a convention costumer himself, he lives in San Diego and one of these days will retire from Masquerades, really!*



Judges present medallions to major award recipients.