

Feature



“Lord of the Wings” Teaches Costuming at a High School

Parry Morton

A Viking and Renaissance Faire costumer piques a local high school drama class' interest in costuming by teaching them to build faerie wings for a production of “A Midsummer Night's Dream.”

I've been involved in costuming for many years, mainly in connection with Renaissance Faires. I'm best known as “Sven the Viking,” and I've created several hand-crafted Viking costumes for myself and others over the years. People always enjoy seeing these costumes wherever we go. (See “A Helmet for the Well-Dressed Valkyrie” [vol 11 issue 4, 2013, pages 12-16](#))

My other persona at Renaissance Faires is as the “Forest King,” attended by a group of forest creatures including several wood faeries. I've always been fascinated by faeries and the folk traditions that surround them, including descriptions of their physical appearance and their costumes. That naturally lead to my interest in creating faerie wings and teaching others how to make them, especially young people who always enjoy wearing them so much.

My friend, John Siler, was the drama instructor at Payson High School in Payson, Arizona. Whenever he needed help with productions or wanted someone to talk to his classes on technical or production topics, he often called on me. I was always happy to lend a hand with set construction or makeup, or to teach the students specific things like costumes or character development. When John retired, his wife Kathy took over as drama instructor and I continued to work with her.

In 2014, the drama department decided to put on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the high school production, and Kathy asked if I could come in and teach her students to make faerie wings. This was a great opportunity for me to work with bright, enthusiastic young people, and to use wings as a way to get them excited about costuming.

At first, I was only going to help with a few pairs, but when the others in the cast heard we were making wings, almost all of them wanted to make them too, eleven in all,

even a couple of the boys! That's when we realized that this could get expensive. After discussing it, Kathy and I ended up splitting the cost to make enough wings to go around. As is typical of many schools, there was no budget for everyone who wanted wings to have them. However, Kathy and I felt that getting kids interested in the play and in costuming was worth the investment.



Parry Morton as the "Forest King" with four generations and seasons as his faerie court.

The first step was for each student to design her or his own wings based on their character, their height, and their personal preferences. We handed out sheets of paper that provided a body outline to guide them. (I learned later that these are called croquis.)

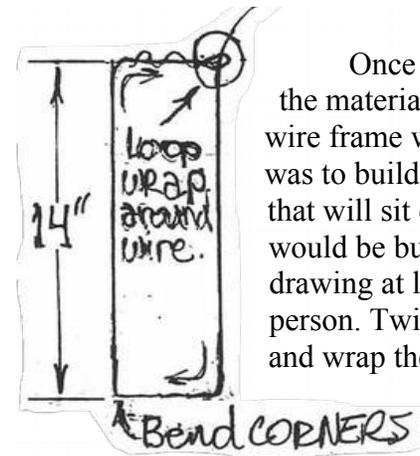


Design of faerie costume and wings, drawn on a croquis.

I was impressed at how quickly they worked. All their sketches were done by end of the first day, colors and all. It usually takes a week to get kids to follow through with something like this. That first day, they also gave me the nickname of "The Lord of the Wings." This was going to be a fun group to work with.

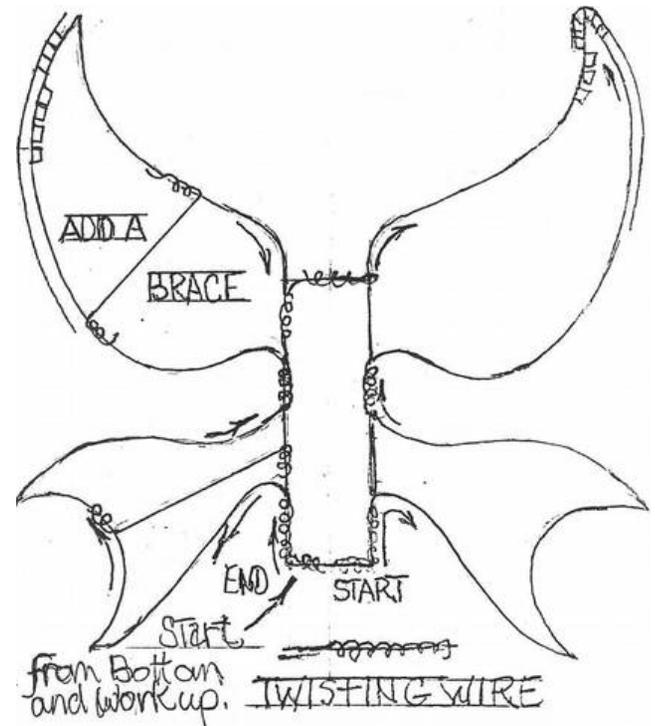
Once I knew what the shapes and colors were, it was time to head to the Ace Hardware store in Payson to buy the materials. The wings I teach are made of wire bent to shape, covered with plastic film, and held to the body with cloth webbing straps and clips. The person at Ace gave me a good deal because it was for a local school.

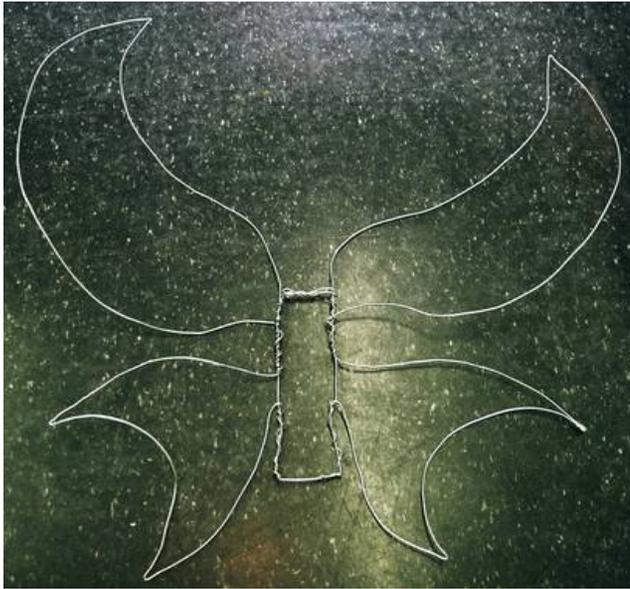
The wing framework is made of 15.2 gauge galvanized wire. A large pair of wings requires no more than 50 ft (15 m). The covering I use is a medium weight semi-rigid clear plastic film. It comes in 4ft wide rolls, and needs to be however tall each wing is plus a foot to be safe. If you use thinner material, it will cause problems when the wind gets hold of your wings. The straps are 1 in cotton webbing, and several parachute clips are used to snap the straps together in front. I also bought cans of several colors of acrylic paint to use with a spray compressor that I brought in to paint the wings.



Once they had the basic pattern and the materials, I taught them to make the wire frame wings and back. The first step was to build a rectangular frame of wire that will sit on the back that the wing would be built on. The height shown in the drawing at left works for an average person. Twist the loop tightly using pliers and wrap the ends around the frame to secure it as shown.

I usually start forming the wings from the bottom of the frame and working up. Using a pair of wings designed by a student, Emily, as an example, the drawing below shows how to bend a length of wire into the required shape, twisting it using pliers or channel locks.





Wire frame for Emily's wings – cross braces not needed.

The photo above shows the wire frame that Emily made from her design. Note that additional cross braces were not needed for these wings because they are not very large.

The next step was to attach the plastic wing covering. Students rolled out the material on the floor and laid the wire frame over it. First they marked the outline of the wing areas, then also marked an outline about 1 inch larger than the wire edge. They cut out along that outer outline.

For the plastic to follow the curve of the wing requires making slits between the outer edge and the wing outline every $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. Then they laid the wire frame back down on the plastic, folded the edge of the plastic over the wing edge, and applied hot glue from a hot glue gun to secure it. Use caution when working with

hot glue as it can cause burns if not handled correctly. One recommendation is to use “low-temperature” hot glue guns meant for craft work. I was available to help them with this tricky part, and to look over their work afterwards and make suggestions. (below)

Once they finished attaching the plastic material to their wire frames, they were ready to paint the wings whatever color their design calls for. I had purchased a variety of colors of acrylic paint that matched the colors in their designs. The students either applied the paints to the material with brushes or other applicators, or I helped them use the spray compressor. The compressor gave them feathered edges when they wanted the clear plastic to show, such as Emily did in the photo, above at right.



Checking over covering before painting the wing.



Emily paints her wings with acrylic paints.

The final step was to measure, cut, and attach the webbing used as shoulder straps to hold the wings on. The students helped each other hold the wings to their backs, and measure from the top of the center rectangular frame, over their shoulders, and down to the bottom of the frame. (below)

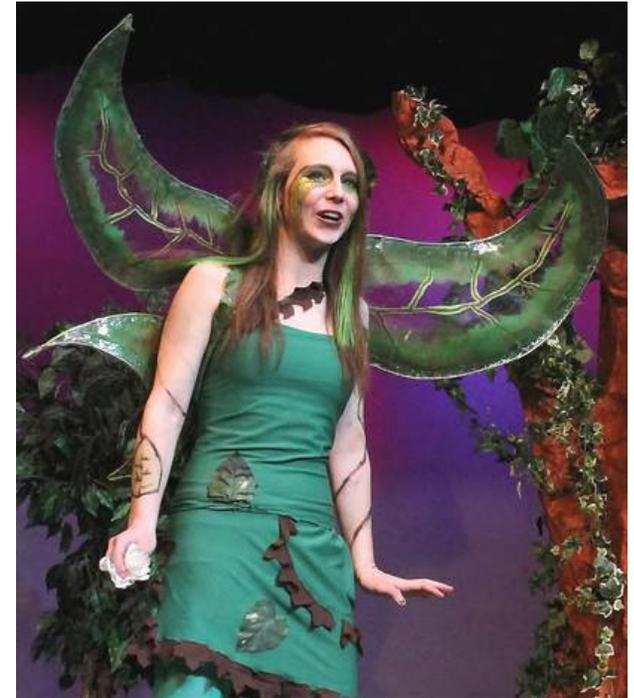


To make the wings easier to take on and off and to adjust, we supplied parachute clips. The students cut shorter lengths of webbing that attached to the top of the frame and to one half of the clip, and a longer lengths of webbing that attached to the bottom of the frame and to the other half of the clip. They left enough extra strap to adjust the length once the clips were closed.

They could attach the ends of the strap to the frame in one of several ways. One was to pin the strap to the frame; another was to sew the strap to the frame. Sewing the strap is more durable, and most of them did that. If they wanted, students could also dye the straps and paint the clips colors that go with their costumes before attaching them. They could also paint or decorate the wire square.

Everyone was thrilled with their wings, and this production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had some of the best looking and happiest fairies ever. As a bonus, they got to keep their wings afterwards. Wings are a great way to introduce students to costuming, and the process of making wings was rewarding both for them and for me.

Parry Morton (*"Sven the Viking"*) studies Viking and Celtic culture, and creates costumes that reflect his cultural heritage. He descends from John Morton of Norway and Sweden, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Parry has portrayed "Sven" for over 25 years at the Arizona Renaissance Festival and various Faerie Festivals, as well as lecturing in schools on Viking history and costumes.



Emily shows off her wings and her faerie costume for the high school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



"Forest King" Parry Morton and a group of students from the production visit Arizona Renaissance Faire in costume.