Feature

Working with a Masquerade Photographer

Richard Man*

The masquerade photographer is an unsung hero whose skill and craftsmanship is a labor of love. Here is some good advice for masquerade directors, Green Room managers, and photographers.

As I have served as the official photographer for number of major conventions, including Worldcons and Costume-Cons, here are some of my thoughts on the subject. I hope that they might be of use to Masquerade Directors, Green Room managers, and photographers.

The number one thing to remember is that the photographs will be the primary lasting historical documentation of a convention masquerade. While a masquerade show may have a major impact on the convention attendees, after the lights are turned off and everyone leaves, years from the show the only real record of the masquerade and the participant entries will be the photographs (and possibly some video footage of the stage presentations, shot under whatever not-necessarily-ideal lighting and circumstances may have been available.)

The official photographer is attempting to produce an optimal visual record of the costume designs and work which the masquerade entrants have brought to the event. Therefore, to state the obvious, the most important clientele for the masquerade photographer are the costumers; not the masquerade directors, not the convention chair, but the costumers themselves. The job of the con-runners, then, is to make sure that the photographer has the resources to put the

Richard Man photographing Jennifer Wylie as River Song, "The Impossible Astronaut" at Costume-Con 30 in 2006. Photo: Philip Gust.

costumes and costumers in the best light *(*ahem, sorry - photographer's joke*)*.

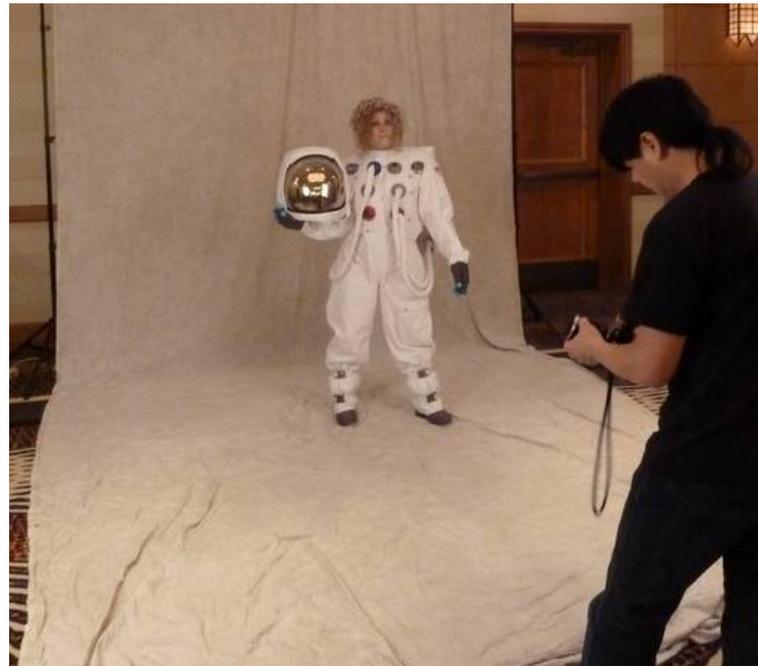### For Masquerade-Runners

The convention staffer that the photographer works with most closely is the Green Room manager. If you are the Masquerade Director, make sure that your Green Room manager knows that they also need to handle the photographer, in addition to managing the costumers. If you are a photographer, make sure that the Green Room manager is aware of all of your needs. Obviously some of these issues (e.g. the space allocation) should be addressed well before the masquerade event.

Checklist

Here is a checklist of things to think about:

- Is there sufficient space for the photographer? I personally need at least ~20 feet by 20 feet. Make sure there is space for traffic flow.
- Make sure there is at least one power outlet, and if needed, provide extension cord and outlets, gaffe tape, safety pins, paper and pens. I personally carry all those things myself so all I need is a power outlet, but other photographers may not have them.

- Give the photographer the run list. Generally I try to photograph more or less in the run list order, but I do not hold to it strictly. Sometimes it's impractical anyway as the costumers may not be ready.
- The Green Room manager should have a volunteer to manage the costumer queue and make sure that they also have the run list and that all costumers have been photographed.

Have the volunteer check off the list as the entries are photographed. The important thing is this: the photographer photographs and someone else does whatever else is needed.

- Likewise, do not have the official photographer to do judges' photos.
- And if you have someone who wants space to do judges' photos (rather than, for example, simple photos taken "anywhere" in the Green Room), then make sure there is a separate space from the official photo space.
- I like to photograph the winners afterward with their award ribbons or certificates. Ask your photographer about it.
- The Green Room manager should find out from the photographer about where the photographs may be found later (see next section), and announce it to the entrants.
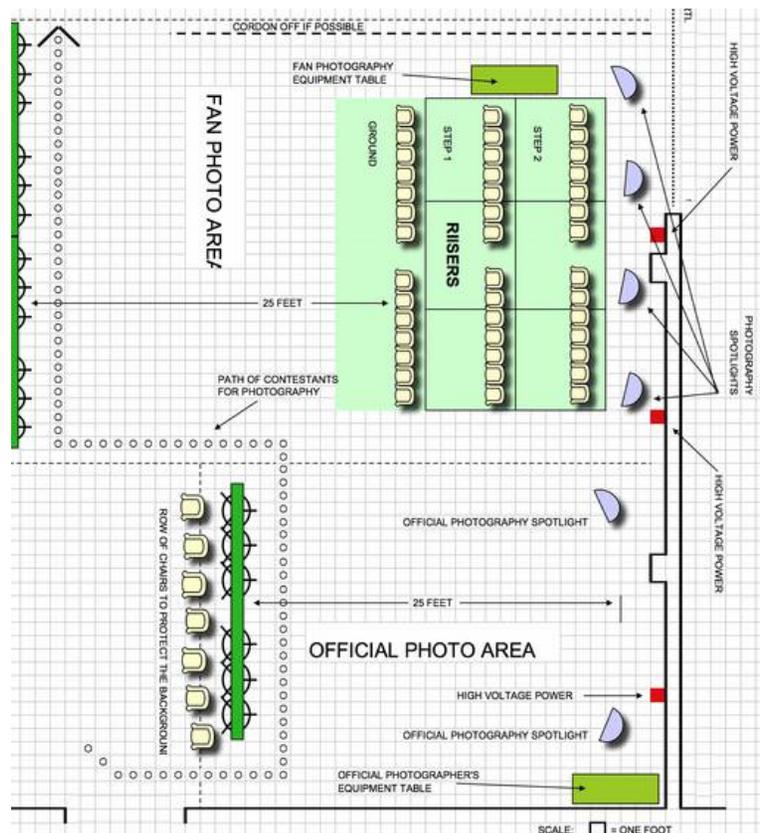
Layout of large fan and professional photography areas at Anticipation, the 67th World Science Fiction Convention. This is not typical for local or regional masquerades Illustration: Byron Connell.

Where Do I Find the Photos?

Lastly, for the masquerade director, communicate your expectations to the photographer about the timeframe in which you expect the photos to become available. Most photographers do in fact have "day jobs", and often the photos may not be available until 2-4 weeks after the event. On the other hand, with wifi and digital cameras, some photographers can manage to upload the photos even before the night is over. The choice should be left entirely up to the photographer.

A common question from the costumers is "Where will I find the photos?" In my opinion, there should be a central place where these photos should be archived. The International Costumers' Guild (ICG) International Costumers' Gallery. is a good start for such an effort, but most Worldcon masquerade photos are not located there.

One issue, of course, is that most photographers want to maintain control of their work, and in the ideal situation, make some print or digital sales - a topic I will address later - and therefore will probably want to host the photos on their own sites. Here's a checklist that may be helpful:

- If you do upload the same day or within a day or two, currently Facebook is a great place to share them, as almost everyone is on Facebook.
- Send copies of the photos to the ICG Archives (icg-archives@costume.org).
- You can also set up an account with the ICG's International Costumers' Gallery and add photos to albums themselves.
- Once you upload your photos to their final destinations, send the links to the masquerade director and encourage them to put the

information on the convention site and send email to the participants.

- Beware of cloud hosting services. Even big sites can bite the dust.

For Photographers

For the photographers, one of the most important things is: **do not upload bad photos.** If someone happens not to look their best at one shot because of lighting, blinking, or for whatever reasons just don't upload the photo.

Second, try to process and upload all photos within 2-3 weeks. I don't do crazy photoshopping, but I still do some post-processing cleanup work.

This next piece of advice is probably going to ruffle some feathers, but another caveat is that masquerade photography *should not be too creative or too clever*. As a photographer, we like to play with different angles of view, lighting setup, "funky" backdrops, different apertures for bokeh, different lens etc. After all, "who wants to take a boring portrait right?!"

In this case, you do.

This IS about creating straightforward portraits, this not the time to experiment with extreme wide angle, moody one-light setups, etc. Those things should be reserved for your personal or commercial work. Sure, a few creative photos here and there is fine, but remember: people want to look at the **costumes**, not "gee, this photographer sure knows how to do some fancy stuff."

Lights and Backdrops

Good lights and good backdrops are the silent heroes of masquerade photography – i.e. they should not be noticeable.

- Avoid using a black backdrop. Too many details can be lost.

- Avoid a wrinkled backdrop or an otherwise distracting background.

- I prefer a light neutral non-white backdrop, as it rarely clashes with any costumes.

- Avoid distracting shadows. The basic symmetrical two lights high above works well - and make sure that your subjects do not stand too close to the backdrop.

- Remember that closer the lights are to the subject, the softer the light quality.

- Personally I like to use a main light with a giant soft box 10 degrees to the side from the front, and a fill light 45 degrees to (my) left side. Your mileage will vary.

The optimal size of the backdrop is "it's never big enough," as there will always be a group with a 6 foot dragon and a 10 foot anime sword, let alone the entire character cast from *The Game of Thrones*. Having said that, at the minimum,10 feet high and 8 feet wide is a good starting point.

"Eddie Left for-Dead" (above) and "Monica and Lauren" (below), Anime Los Angeles, 2016, use plain backgrounds that show off the costumes. Photos from Richard' Man's Transformations:Cosplay project.

Posing the Costumers

Some photographers pose their subjects, some prefer to let the subjects do the posing. There are plenty of books and YouTube tutorials on posing; I advise you to use them. Here are some observations:

- It seems obvious, but make sure all the costume pieces are in their places. Nothing is out of place, or falling off, etc.
- Make sure the costumers remove their badges, and perhaps glasses.
- I usually ask them to strike a couple of poses, possibly related to their skits, or if appropriate, to the characters they are portraying.
- Slight changes in a pose may

"Azreal, Angel of Death" Anime Los Angeles 2016. Photo from Transformations:Cosplay project.

Maral Agnerian, "Moondragon." Costume-Con 31, 2013. Photo from Transformations:Cosplay project.

improve the photos. For example, a raised arm that is a couple inches higher may look more dramatic.

- In large groups, be sure to arrange them so that they can all be seen, and also watch the shadows cast by various people. Also take individual pictures to show off the various costumes by themselves.

Some photographers rapid fire 10s of shots to make sure to get some good photos. I tend to work more deliberately and only take 2 or 3 photos per person, plus any close up shots of costume pieces if needed. It is a personal choice on the photographer's part. However, even if you take a lot of photos, select just a few of the "best ones" rather than uploading all of them.

Making Money

In two words: **"*Forget It*"**. In the "good old days", you could recoup some of the cost by selling prints. Although you ran into the issue that costumers would rather spend any extra money on costume supplies, some sales were possible. Now, everyone carries a camera, typically a smartphone, so it's even harder, or impossible, to convince costumers to purchase prints or buy digital rights. (It's ironic, as this article starts off saying good photography is the only lasting record of costumers and their costumes.) If you want to sell prints, find a hosting site that makes prints on demand, but don't expect to make any meaningful amount.

So, why would you you volunteer to be a masquerade photographer at all? Do it because you love the community, to hone your portraiture skills, or you just want the exposure. While you can't buy food with "exposure," you can take pride that you are doing something awesome, and adding to a legacy.

Richard Man has been the official masquerade photographer for many regional SF&F and anime conventions, Worldcons, and Costume-Cons. He is embarking on two labor of love portrait projects, both on large format 4x5 film. "Transformations:Cosplay" is for portraits of costumers in their costumes and "civilian" attire. "Worldbuilders of SF&F" is for portraits of authors, artists and other creative types in the genre. Visit his website, follow him on Facebook or Instagram: "richardmanphoto," or email him at richard@richardmanphoto.com.