

Feature



That's Distressing! *William Kennedy*

Distressing is a very powerful but overlooked costume special effect. This article shows how to make a costume look terrible!

Have you ever watched a film or a live performance and wondered how, the costumer made a costume look aged, tarred, dirty, worn, and lived in? This article will cover some of the basic techniques of distressing clothing to fit a theme. Textures in distressing can range from worn and old, all the way to moldy, nasty and undead.

Meet Zombie Bob

Today's subject is Zombie Bob. In his mortal life, Bob spent most of his days as a librarian at a local university and became interested in the occult. However, he died tragically and is doomed to roam the earth for eternity feasting on the flesh of the living. (OK: that's our working backstory. I know - plot holes.)

Tools and Supplies: Acrylic paint (earth tone colors and red for blood), Instant coffee, a lighter or small butane torch

Foam paintbrushes, lots of tea bags for a tea bath, sand paper, bottled water, and rubber cement.

This costume is used at Haunted Overload in Lee, NH. It was also the recipient of the Best In Show prize in the Lunacon 2013 masquerade. Zombie Bob is quite versatile as he can be frightening as well as hilarious. Now stop distressing about getting your brains eaten and lets start distressing the materials.



Distressing can be a simple clean process, or it can be long drawn out and messy one. Personally, I prefer the latter of the two. Keep in mind; you should cover your work surface with a protective tarp. For Zombie Bob, I used various earth tone colors of acrylic paint, a carpet knife (named Jeff the God of Biscuits), a cheese grater, scissors, a butane lighter, hot glue and a big glass of wine (for me not the costume).

Feet first

Let's start with the shoes. As a dapper zombie gentleman, he preferred luxurious dress shoes. Well, after being in them for 50 years dead, they have suffered in quality, but look at the durability! Using a cheese grater (don't run and grab your cherished grater – get a cheap one at a thrift shop) and sand paper, we begin by roughing up the surface of the shoes.

Then, using a sharp razor, create tears in the leather by cutting against the grain. If you observe, the cuts in the shoes appear quite extensive, however they hold structural integrity. This is important to keep in mind. Distressing can go too far and make the garment useless.

Zombie Bob loves to break out in dance – can you guess which one? These shoes still need to support the actor.



Above: Before and after shoe distressing treatment.
Below: Using a sharp razor to slash the leather.

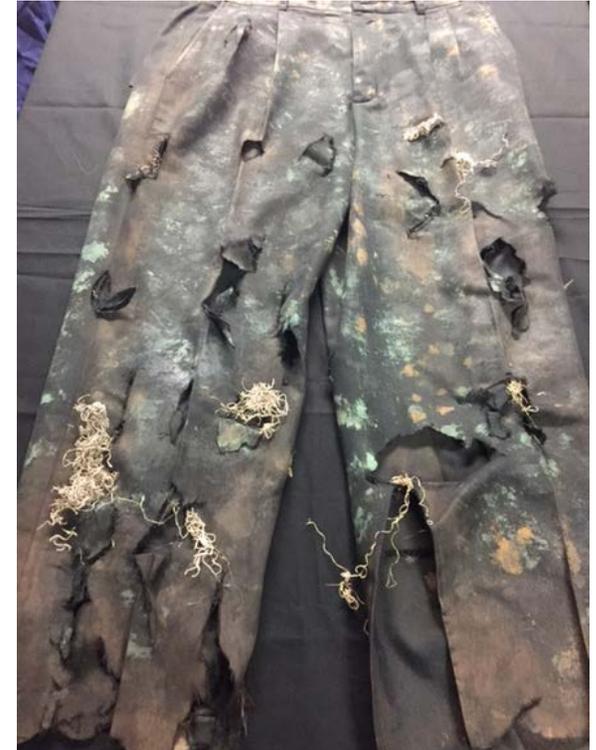


When you have reached a desired level of distress, break out your earth-tone acrylic paints. Using a foam brush, mix some coffee grinds with the paint for added texture. For shoes, do not water down the paint. Lightly apply various dark earth tone colors and some light tones. The goal is to simulate dirt and texture. You can add dirt to your heart's content. I also mixed up a combination of rubber cement, dark acrylic and coffee grounds and painted it on the shoes to create mud.

Clothes make the man, even the undead

When choosing a size of pants ensure that they fit properly in the waist. Don't worry about length as you are going to shred them. As you see, these are Zombie Bob's pants. To begin, we use a razor (I'm using Jeff the God of Biscuits) without going overboard. The technique creates a look of worn material and not scissor cuts. Using the edge of the razor, rub the fabric back and forth to create a frayed look to the hanging shrouds. Notice that I also cut many of them in the opposite direction, allowing for free hanging shrouds. You can also use a lighter and lightly burn around edges of holes, which creates a wonderful texture.

The next step is to take your earth tone colors and create a palette with them, slightly watering them down. Using a foam brush, a sea sponge and rags, begin making the pants look muddy and worn. As you can see from the photos, blending the colors really makes a difference. Incorporate the



Above: Razor cuts give pants worn, frayed look.
Below: Using lighter to burn around edge of holes.





Close up of pants shows how heat scorching and blending colors really make a difference.

ground coffee into the paint for texture. You don't have to cover the entire garment; leave a few untouched patches. Sometimes less is more.

Helpful hints: Beware of revealing holes. Pants can be tricky, and one should watch out for accidental exhibitionism. Ask Zombie Bob why he ensured that he has on fun underwear. Also distress the pockets but keep them functional. I mean, we need a cell phone in our pocket to tweet about how people can see your undies after ("I think the zombie is sporting a thong!").

Next comes the shirt

Now for a dapper, bloody zombie shirt. (Hey, we all need to look our best.) The same techniques used in the pants have been employed for the shirt. The trick here is to place the white shirt in a tea bath to age it. I used a large pot filled with water brought to a boil and then removed from heat. I placed several (more like a box of 100) tea bags in the water allowed to steep. I carefully scooped out the teabags and then placed the shirt in the tea, stirring occasionally. When desired color was reached, I removed the garment from the water, and hung it out to dry.



Overall effect of slashing, scraping, and acrylic paints.



Close up of distressing on shirt pocket.

When dry, I chose darker acrylic colors and layered with lighter colors on the shirt to simulate mold, dirt and grime. Using a spray bottle with diluted black paint creates a wonderful mold as does a sea sponge. I found using a sea sponge creates the perfect texture and keeps the paint wet. Then I used watered down red acrylic with a touch of brown. Let's bloody it up. After all Zombie Bob is a messy eater.

As you can see by the exposed pocket (above), something awful happened. Zombie Bob found a lost kitten, and being an ethical undead citizen, he put the kitten in his pocket. (What happened next, the villagers



Closeup of paint and mold effect on distressed shirt.

still discuss... I'll let you use your imagination.) This effect was created with the simple application of hot glue and red paint and some fake fur inside the pocket.

Hints, Using the scraping technique with the razor on the edges of the color creates a fantastic rotted look.

Wait...wait... what was I thinking? Don't forget a tie! No self-respecting zombie who wants equal employment to the living forgets his tie!!



Right: Blood soaked zombie tie.

Putting on the Ritz

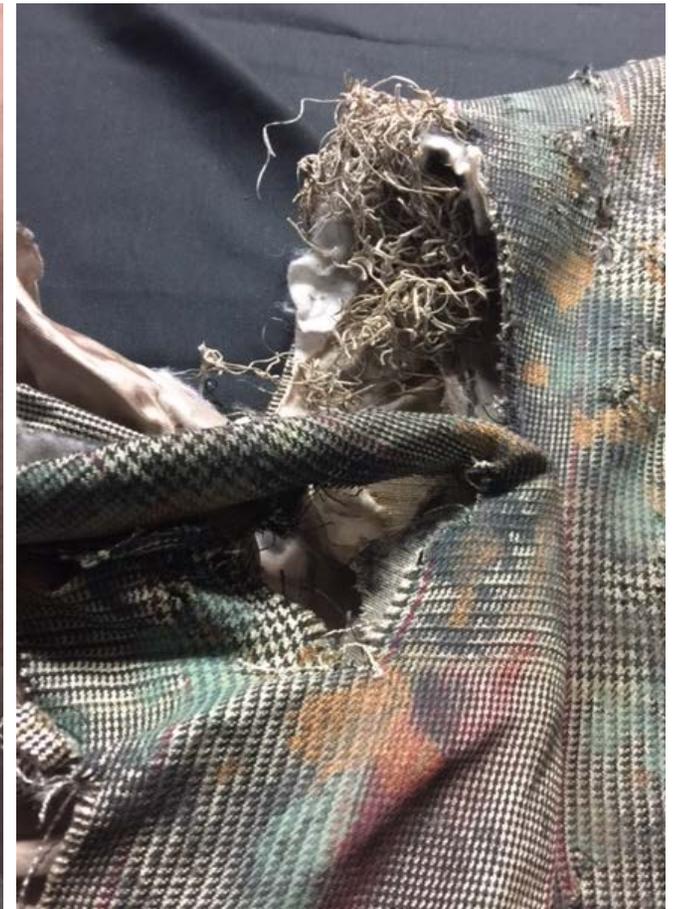
The centerpiece of this costume is this wonderful jacket. I chose one size bigger than what I normally wear, in order to create an emaciated wasting away look....you know...dead! The same technique is used in the pants, shirt, and tie have been employed for the nifty jacket. The trick here is to use darker colors than on the shirt to simulate earth. Observe that the lower portion of the jacket has dark highlights whereas the upper

portion has lighter dirt stains. You can go crazy with these.

Most jackets have many layers of lining. You can distress the outer shell to your heart's content while keeping the jacket's structural integrity. I like ripping and distressing a shoulder so you can see the shirt underneath and further promoting the dead look. I also used a spray bottle to splatter blood and dirt.



Distressing with knife and sandpaper, paint added.



Ripped shoulder seam on coat.

Embellishments

Let your imagination loose: the more detail you add, the more complex the character becomes. Try adding simulated dead animals like a rat, spiders, maggots, a funereal flower such as a Lily.



Embellishments on jacket help make it look even older and more decayed.



Completed jacket distressing.

Final thoughts

Now we have a proper distressed Zombie Bob, who is ready for a night on the town, and by the looks of his totally distressed clothes, it may be time to feed.

Thank you for following along with me. Costuming is an adventure and a wonderful experience. It's a joy to share techniques with fellow costumers and a wonderful way to spread creativity. And let's face it..the world needs Zombies!

William Kennedy began costuming in 2010 and now competes in the Master category. In his professional life, William is a Social Worker with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, working with vulnerable children and families in the state. However, when he is not protecting youth and working with families, William spends his time scaring the "yell" out of them. William has done make up, costume, set designs and builds for various Haunted attractions such as Spooky World Theme Park and is currently an artistic contributor, costume, makeup and actor at Haunted Overload located in Lee, NH. His alter ego, Tickles The Clown, has run for the U.S. Presidency, and can be found at Haunted Overload making grown men cry and picking small children out of his teeth. Truly a delightful individual.



Zombie Bob frightening people at the Haunted Overload.