

Virtual Soapbox



Just One Word: Plastics

Lisa Zagone*

A professional theatrical costume maker talks about several types of plastics she likes to use for props and costumes.

Mr. McGuire: I want to say one word to you. Just one word.

Benjamin: Yes, sir.

Mr. McGuire: Are you listening?

Benjamin: Yes, I am.

Mr. McGuire: Plastics.

Benjamin: Exactly how do you mean?

Mr. McGuire: There's a great future in plastics. Think about it.

Years ago, working in theatrical props and costumes, if a script called for a mask, armor, a giant animal head, headdress, crown or other sculptural items, the first thing we would break out was glue and newsprint for papier mache, or worse yet, plaster gauze. Messy, tedious, hours, days or even weeks were spent waiting for glue to dry, layering to build up strength, and then fearfully warning actors about the delicacy of the object.

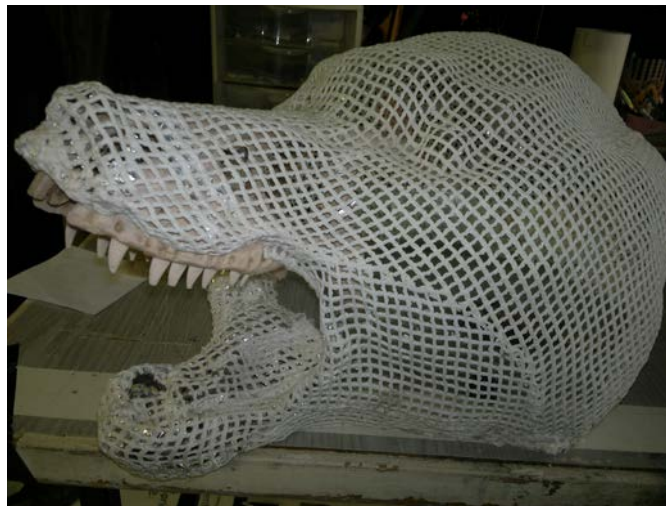
These days, we have something so much faster, so much more efficient,

resilient and gloriously actor-proof. We are spoiled for choice when it comes to the world of plastics.

Here are three of my favorite plastics and synthetic materials for costume and props making.

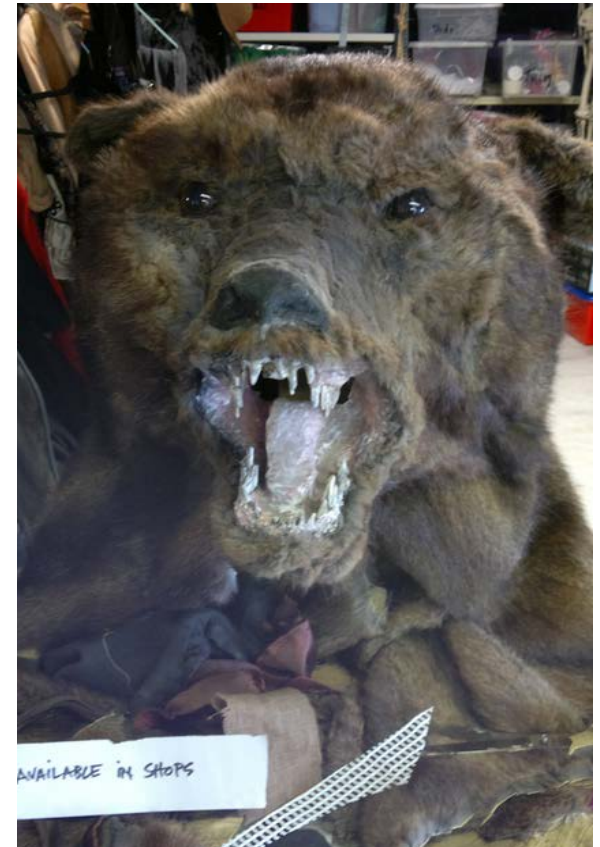


Above: Varaform comes in several sizes of mesh. **Below:** Bear's head structure made using Varaform. **Right:** Finished bear's for *A Winter's Tale*. Images: Lisa Zagone.



Varaform

Varaform is an open weave mesh that looks similar to buckram. It is a cotton fabric, impregnated with low-temperature thermoplastic, allowing it to be formed with heat. It comes in coarse, medium and fine mesh sizes. I have used this to make masks, animal heads, hats and many other theatrical props and costumes. It is generally sold by the yard.





Dog's head made of Varaform. Images: Lisa Zagone.



I use it by first sculpting a form out of clay, and then melting the sheet of Varaform over it using a heat gun. It can also be used over a wooden hat block. When the softened



Mascot head, 7 Dwarves, made using Varaform. Image: Lisa Zagone.

material slumps, I use my hands to press it firmly against the form. In moments, the Varaform has cooled and hardened enough to pull it off the mold.

Because it is an open weave, it is easy to cover with fabric using a needle and thread. It also helps, in the case of a mascot head, that there is better flow of air and light inside the mask head.

Worbla

Worbla is another amazing material, similar to Varaform in that it is thermo-plastic. Worbla comes in sheet form, can easily be cut with scissors meaning it is

possible to layer or sculpt in various texture and fine detail.

Worbla has a lower melting point than Varaform, so it is easy to work by hand. Worbla comes in many different colors and thicknesses. They even produce a crystal clear sheet Worbla, which is invaluable for making transparent creations.



Headdress for The Nightingale and the Rose, made using Worbla. Images: Lisa Zagone.





Mask for *Unscripted* made using Worbla. Images: Lisa Zagone.



Plastazote Foam

This is a closed cell polyethylene foam. It is not like upholstery foam, as the closed cell structure is not sponge-like. It is similar to yoga mat material; remarkably smooth, and strangely satisfying to cut through with scissors or a craft knife.

It generally comes in sheet form, with various thicknesses, although the type I usually prefer is about 3/8" thick. I love this foam for its resilience and ultra-lightweight buoyancy. It can be adhered to itself using contact adhesive. It is easily paintable with acrylics, although I usually add some latex rubber to the paint in order to make it flexible.

Lisa Zagone earned her Masters of Fine Art, and Bachelor of Art in Fine Art with emphasis in Textiles from San Francisco State University. There, she focused primarily on creating "wearable art" and sculptural installation for performance. She is now located in Cork, Ireland, where she has been running her costume and design studio for the last 14 years. Most of her work is for theater/stage, including design for Animal Farm (CIT/CSM 2016), Faust (Everyman 2015), Der Vampyr - ITTA nomination for Best Opera Production (Everyman 2014), Orpheus (Everyman 2013) and Pagliacci ITTA nomination for Best Costume Design - Winner of ITTA Best Opera Production (Everyman 2012). She has also done a lot of cosplay work for the last few years. Visit her "Dressed As A.." [exhibit website](#).



Devil Wings, made of Plastazote Foam. Image: Lisa Zagone.