

# Interview



## Team MacDermott *Dana and Bruce MacDermott*

*This award-winning dynamic costuming duo discusses working together both on and off the masquerade stage, and some of the unique aspects of costuming as a team.*

Bruce and Dana MacDermott are two of the most widely known and respected members of the costuming community. *VC* recently interviewed them in front of a convention audience at Worldcon 76 in San Jose California about their work as a team, how their individual talents play together, and their involvement as part of larger masquerade entries.

### **Tell us about your individual backgrounds in costuming.**

**Dana:** I have an MFA in costume design, and have been a professional theatrical costume designer and craftsman. I enjoy the weird, twisted and fantastic, which is obvious to anyone who has seen the costumes Bruce and I create.

I do like doing research, but am not particularly interested in designing historical costumes. My sewing skills are only adequate. I do the crafts and designing, and gunking. I take a very subordinate role with sewing; I get Bruce to tell me what to do.

**Bruce:** I came to costuming late. My father was “first fandom” and took me to a few conventions, but I really didn’t get deeply into costuming until after I met Dana. Before that, I mostly did photography.

### **How did you two meet and start working together?**



Bruce and Dana MacDermott, ConJose, 2002.  
Photo: Richard Man

**Bruce:** We met at a pool party because I was invited as a guest of somebody else. She tossed out a line from “Beyond the Fringe” and I knew the answer, and she was like...

**Dana:** “Oh, that’s interesting!”

**Bruce:** And that was it. We ended up having a conversation just before 1:00, because there was a ball clock on the mantle. A ball clock picks up a ball every minute and drops it, and it rolls down a track. It starts collecting them, and at 12:59 the last ball will fall. All the balls have to get rid of themselves because all the balls have been collecting for the hours and minutes. And then at 1:00 you have only the one left, and it’s just a momentary thing and we had a conversation over that.

### **Do you usually costume as a couple?**

**Bruce:** We starting out just costuming Dana. Then we did Jaron, and then it wasn’t until we did “Your Ancestors” at Costume-Con 6...

**Dana:** Over 30 years ago!

**Bruce:** We didn’t arrive expecting to enter these costumes that we made for a Renfair, but somebody said that we have to enter them in the historical masquerade.



Your Ancestors (Uffington England, Early Elizabethan), Costume-Con 6, 1998. Photo: David Bickford.

**Dana:** It was rather spontaneous if not forced. Our reaction was, “you’ve got to be kidding!”

**How is couple’s costuming different from individual or group costuming?** (1:30)

**Bruce:** You have to figure out the dynamic of what you each bring to the pair, that’s the biggest thing. For us, it was that I can’t hand-sew but I can machine sew. She’s a concept person, I’m a “if you show me something I-can make it” person but I don’t necessarily have the ideas. That was the dynamic that we presented.

**Dana:** There are the obvious advantages like, if you’re fitting something to somebody, you’ve got two people and you don’t have to do it on yourself. You lean over and wonder why that hem is off, for example.

**Bruce:** Even when she was measuring the kids when she was doing the Circus Fire costumes, I had the chart and she’d go through the numbers and I’d be writing them all down. That was very helpful to save time. But if you’re trying to come up with new stuff, the team dynamic really is what skill sets do each bring to it. If you’re both meticulous sewers, then that’s going to end up being the kinds of costumes you’ll produce. You probably won’t be producing large stuff, for example, because then you’d have to get someone else with that skill set to make that happen.

**Dana:** That’s also one of the things we always looked for when we’ve worked with groups, and we’ve done a lot of work with

groups. Everybody you bring in has a different skill set that allows you to do more.

**How does the dynamic change from costuming as a couple to costuming as a couple embedded in a larger group?** (5:30)

**Bruce:** We were embedded as a couple in a larger group pretty early on, at Costume-Con 9 in “Off the Wall”. That was only 27 years ago. It pulled the entire group together. Each one of us had skills.

**Dana:** Very different skills!

**Bruce:** We had a lot of engineers involved. We had to cast the eggs out of fiberglass, so that was a learning process.

**Dana:** They were actually formed rather than cast. We created them over a form we had created.

**Bruce:** We just loved the concept of an Erté egg because Erté is always slender “Deco”, so Dana is the Erté egg. I’m in the middle as the Yves St. Laurent egg with the



Off the Wall, Costume-Con 9, 1991. Photos: John Upton



Conference of Sentient Species, ConJose, 2002.

blue bow tie and YSL stamped everywhere. This was Humpty-Dumpty as designed by various well-known artists and designers.

**Dana:** But this was very much a group dynamic. The basic idea of that is to take a universally understood image and how we think different designers would have done it. It took a while to come up with the Humpty-Dumpty, because we didn't want something that was male or female.

**Bruce:** The egg was fiberglass. We did a mold out of styrofoam that we coated with epoxy so we could put the fiberglass over that. There were 12 half eggs. The only problem was that we didn't know to coat the Styrofoam. Once we did that, and put foil over the top as well, it was fine.

**Dana:** This is another example of us choosing to use techniques or materials that

we never used before. The eggs were when we first learned to fiberglass.

**Bruce:** The materials available now didn't exist back when we made these. We did clay positives and cast them. We used resins, fiberglass, celastic... we had to make everything ourselves. There was no 3D printing. Many of the older materials are not even available now.

**Bruce:** So there were a lot of things we had to do as a team within the larger group.

**Dana:** It's the larger pool of skills that I mentioned.

**Bruce:** With "Sentient Species" (above) we were involved in making pretty much all of those costumes, except that we also had Jay and Denisen Hartlove because they were participants.

**Dana:** Denison was our Human.

**Bruce:** I don't know why they thought humans were sentient, but that's another issue. So that was mostly happening in our living room, except that we had to go up and find Jaron and Samantha. We had to fit them because she was on his back and we had to come up with a way of supporting her. That was pretty complex.

**Dana:** We participated in a "Iron Costumer" group event that was actually the halftime entertainment for the historical masquerade at Costume-Con 21 in Chicago.

**Bruce:** Kevin Roche wanted to do something inspired by the "Iron Chef" TV



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Iron Man Costumer, Costume-Con 21, 2003. Photo: Peter Sills

show, but just for entertainment. We mostly just put together the head pieces on it.

But even if you get back to “Waiting for a Miracle” at ConFrancisco in 1993, which Fr. John Blaker was involved with, about the Spinner’s idea that God speaks to them through The Grateful Dead lead Jerry Garcia’s guitar. What happens if that went to the stars and other places? It depicts a



Lady Mir'hrim - Danas, LA Con II, 2006

future religion lead by an 8 ft tall 4-armed pope with with 4 acolytes.

**Dana:** We combined iconography of the Catholic church and the Grateful Dead.

**Bruce:** We had John at the seminary, and we went running through the library at midnight one night, and looking through all the vestments, and we were going, “so that’s how it’s made!”.

**It sounds like you are always doing something new in your costuming projects.**

**Dana:** I am always trying to do something I have never done before. I live on the steep part of the learning curve, which is both frustrating and exciting. I figure about the time I finish a project, I have a reasonable idea as to how I should have been doing it.

**If one of you wanted to go out as a single, would that be a problem?**

**Dana:** We actually haven’t done anything individually but hall costumes since we began costuming together, because of the divided skill sets. I’m the theatre person, so the idea of the presentation generally comes out of my head, but doing a hall costume is a different thing, and we have done those as individuals for both of us.

**Bruce:** Here is a photo (left) of the first individual costume we did for Dana, but



Beneath Alien Waves, NolaCon, 1988.

we weren’t going on stage. We did Westercon 1983 in San Jose because it was nearby and we came up with the four-breasted cat lady, but I can’t remember now how we came up with it. The fun part was casting things, and you learn a lot. And people who were there remember the elevators where everyone was trying to figure out which ones were real.

**Dana:** Of course the answer is upper left and lower right. Which was a lie.

**Bruce:** And we’re not gonna tell. We also did it a year later at LA Con II.

**How do you divide the work on your costumes?**

**Bruce:** Until Dana ran her finger through the sewing machine and broke the needle, she was doing a lot of the sewing. “Beneath Alien Waves” (above) is an example in 1988.

**Dana:** I was doing all the elastic thread in the bobbins and you can't really see what you are doing.

**Bruce:** I primarily do the meticulous sewing stuff, but not the hand sewing, since I can't hold the needle. I hand that off to someone else. Which is one of the advantages of working with a group. I remember being in the room the whole time at CostumeCon 14 making Dana's costume for the Historical Masquerade and passing the parts off to someone else to put on all the edging by hand.

**How do you handle the inevitable disagreements or artistic differences, especially working for a long time together on more elaborate costumes (11:58)**

**Dana:** Sometimes we argue it out forever, but sometimes we solve problems by talking about it, usually over the breakfast table. What if we do this? What if we do that?

**Bruce:** And we developed a phrase, "it's not a snail". We were doing Jaron in his snail shell for "Beneath Alien Waves" and I was trying to make a snail shell, a real honest-to-goodness anatomical one, and it wasn't working – but Dana kept telling me "But it's not a snail it's some other creature". She got me out of that one.

**Dana:** It's much easier for me to let go of something in detail because I'm often working with materials that have their own idea of what they want to do and you have to reach a compromise with the material.



Deja Thoris and John Carter. Drawings from "Visions of Barsoom" exhibit at BayCon 2009.

Some of them seem to have a mind of their own. Some time you have to go with it and say okay. He wants me to draw pictures, but I hate having to make detailed decisions.

**Bruce:** The thing is, I need to interpret what she's doing and I need to have that communicated so that I can create the reality of it. Basically, we argue our way through many things in life, so doing costuming isn't that far off (laughs). I'm a detail person and she's a broad strokes person and I'm always seeking details, that's where the dynamic occurs.

**Dana:** That's fair to a large extent, but there are some things like the "Sgt. Pepper" lab coat you're wearing.

I CAN draw if I'm looking at something else, but fresh out of my head, I'm not very good at it. To draw details when I'm not familiar with the materials that will be used is something I have trouble with. I don't like to lock things down in that way. That's also why I don't like to do recreations. I don't like a situation where its either right or wrong.

For example, I drew a set of designs of characters in the Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter of Mars series (left) for an exhibit and panel called "Costuming by the Book: Visions of Barsoom" at BayCon in 2009. (see [VC vol. 7 issue 3, 2009](#)). These designs were based on the descriptions of the characters from the book. They were done several years before the movie came out, so we were left to design from our own imaginations.

**Some of your costumes represent what may be considered an "underclass." Is that an area that you enjoy to explore?**

**Bruce:** This photo (next page) is from an entry in the Costume-Con 27 sci-fi masquerade called "Santa the Grey" from 2009. Those are the last costumes we ever made together.

**Dana:** At least our last competition costumes.

**However, there was one exception that is very upper-class: "Le Masque de**



Santa the Grey, Costume-Con 27, 2009.

**Roi.” Is that the exception that proves the rule?**

**Bruce:** Le Masque de Roi (right) were theatrical costumes we were making from the renderings that were available of an actual event.

**Dana:** We found the historical drawings and built costumes based on them with a sense of theatrical interpretation. It looks right from a distance, but the materials are certainly not at all what they would have used.

**Bruce:** We had to take photographs from books in the Stanford Library and some were just black and white drawings so

we didn’t even know what the colors should be.

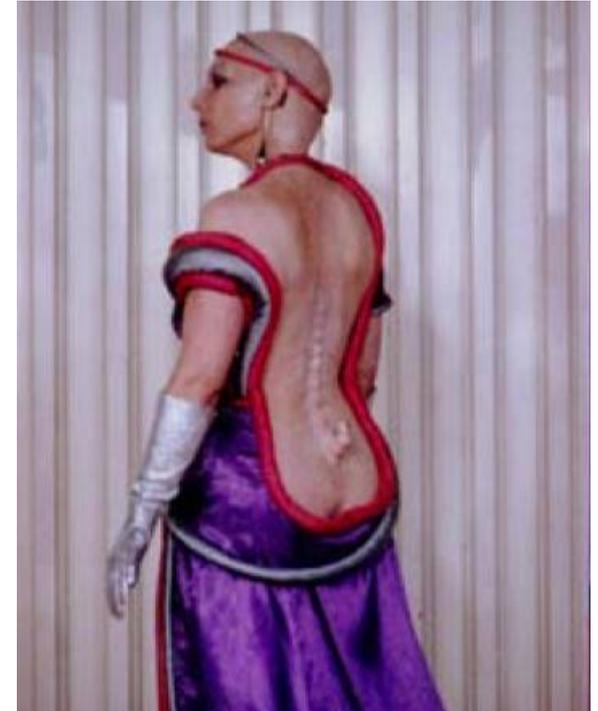
**Dana:** Mostly we tend towards non-human costuming. That’s where we have the most fun, by getting away from the human shape.

**Dana, you wrote an article for the first issue of VC about wearing costumes as social protest. What inspired you to write about that?**

**Dana:** I barely remember it. Well obviously, it’s really good for drawing attention when you want to make a point. People look at costumes particularly and



Copyright © 1996 Ken Warren  
Les Masque du Roi (1650), Costume-Con 14, 1996. Photo: Ken Warren



Dana MacDermott in Cublings' Pageant, Westercon 39, 1986.

these examples are some I saw somewhere. I think these are actually socio-political statements. We used that idea also in one of our group costumes, “The Cublings’ Pageant” at Westercon 39.

**Bruce:** That one was in reaction to the so-called [Rotsler’s Rules](#) which said that if you wear more than a size 12 leotard, you should not be on stage and we thought “That’s wrong!”

**Dana:** And particularly in a science fiction context. Standards of beauty are cultural.

**Bruce:** So we went out and found icons, from our perspective: my mother,



"Grieving Women" from "Costumes as Social Protest," [VC vol 1, issue 1](#), by Dana MacDermott.

who was in her late seventies – she was a lightship navigator. It was a “beauty pageant” from different worlds, and Rotsler’s World had a null-gravity dancer with a 56 inch waist who weighed about 300 pounds. Dana had a tail and extra fingers and was bald (previous page).

**Dana:** So that was a socio-political statement. I kind of like doing that. It’s kind of like doing a cartoon only building it instead of drawing it. The grieving women costumes were ones I saw during a protest of the Iraq war. It seems to me an effective way to gain attention for a cause.

At the Gay Pride parades, you see a lot of people in costumes and that’s because it is also an expression and it makes a point. And another thing, if you wear a costume to a protest you know who the press will want to interview.

**You’ve been participating in Burning Man since 2001. Tell about that and how it figures into your costuming.**

**Bruce:** Both of our sons convinced us to go. The photo here is us on a tandem bike. Dana doesn’t know how to ride a bike and we didn’t yet have a mutant vehicle to get around on, so this is what we used since you are not allowed to drive your car out there. You also need shade, so these are helmets we made with umbrellas attached to the top. We now have a mutant vehicle and don’t use these any more.



Un-brellas at Burning Man.

**Dana:** They were very unbalancing when it was windy and pulled at you.

**Bruce:** We did do a set of Stargate elders which we’ve taken there since it seemed appropriate. Not sand, but dust.

**Dana:** It is a very different kind of costuming so we don’t really costume for Burning Man, even though a lot of people do, because comfort is the primary concern, and protection.

**Dana, you started judging masquerades pretty early on. Please talk about that experience.**

**Dana:** Back at CostumeCon 6 where we brought “Your Ancestors”, which we planned to wear in the halls, we were convinced to put them on stage. At that same con I had been asked to judge the Science Fiction and Fantasy masquerade. So I actually did both masquerade judging and competition at the same time rather than being onstage first for a long time, which is rather standard.

**Bruce:** We’ve judged at NASFiCs and other cons, but mostly we do “Den Mom” stuff in the Green Room. The only thing we’ve ever run was at CostumeCon 26 where we ran the Future Fashion Folio competition.

**Which costumers have influenced and inspired you?**

**Dana:** As far as designing things, I would say that there were some individual costumes and presentations that influence

me – Animal X’s “Holocaust” (right) was one that I thought, “I wish I had done that!” It was, again, political, but there certainly are others that hit me.

**Bruce:** We really like Jackie Ward’s work, and it really blew us away at the Utah Costume Con when she told us that “Beneath Alien Waves” got her to change paths in her costuming. And of course her work had inspired us.

**Dana:** And certainly “Night on Bald Mountain” and Victoria Ridenour and Adrian Butterfield’s “Midsummer Night’s



“Night on Bald Mountain” and “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, LACon II, 1984, influenced the MacDermotts.



Animal X influenced the MacDermotts, especially her costume, “Holocaust”.

“Dream” at LACon II (left). I liked the visuals and the color choices in “Night on Bald Mountain” and I like color.

**You have two children who have been involved in your costuming. Share your thoughts on family costuming.**

**Dana:** The first costuming I did was on my kid brother. I did his costuming for Hallowe’en for many years and he was very enthusiastic about it. Also kids add scale to a costume. If you are doing aliens as we did, you have smaller people to help you do this. Ours loved that. Before we had a sewing room their friends would come over and see everything while we were working on it.

The guests of honor at LACon II were Wendy and Richard Pini of Elfquest and our son wanted to be Rayek. He went onstage, took the character’s pose and glared at the audience and judges. He definitely had the Rayek attitude. What you can’t see from the

photo is that he used some flesh-colored tape on his ring and pinky fingers so he could go around four-fingered. He was probably the only person in costume close to the actual height of any of the characters. He took “Best Elf” and got his photo in an issue of the comic. That was one of the two things that convinced him to become a theatre professional and now he runs his own circus school in Oakland.

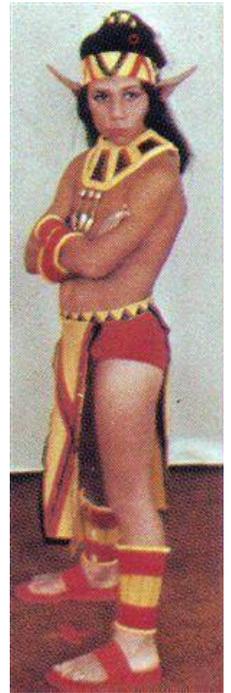


Photo: Dave Clark

**Tell us about the time you two won airline tickets with your costuming.**

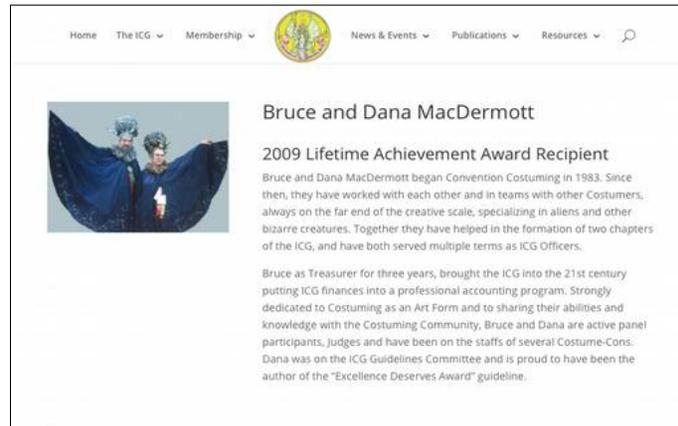
**Bruce:** British Airways did a 25th anniversary of the Concorde tour in major cities of the United States and Canada, where they gave away 50 pairs of round trip tickets to Heathrow. The contest was called “Dress as Your Favorite Alien.” So we just pulled costumes out of the closet. Dana was a Warp Drive Technician. I was an Old Traveler. We each won a pair. Jaron wore Dana’s costume from “Beneath Alien Waves”. Ari, who was living in Seattle borrowed some stuff and made a helmet and his uncle also borrowed some. They each won a pair of tickets as well. A lot of us went to England that year.

**You two received the International Costumer's Guild's highest honor, the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009. What are your thoughts?**

**Dana:** When they gave it to us, I was absolutely stunned. I thought that I had overstepped politically too far to have a chance at that. And I also thought you couldn't possibly get that unless you had run a convention.



"Dress as Your Favorite Alien" British Airways contest winners.



International Costumers' Guild [Lifetime Achievement Award, 2009.](#)

**What are some of the things you have observed that couples who costume have in common that make them successful costuming teams?**

We have surprisingly little experience working with other couples, even though we worked together in a number of group projects. "Off the Wall" is the only example where we worked with couples. But when you get down to the reality of it all, we really have no experience observing how they worked together. We're aware of a number of couples through out our careers who costume as a team, but we have just never had a chance to observe them "in the act" or to know how they managed working together as a team.

**What advice do you have for couples who are just starting to costume as a team, or are be thinking about it?**

**Bruce:** Here is our advice to couples who are just starting out in costuming for

working together as a team, based on our own experience.

- Communication is key.
- Recognize each other's skills.
- Learn from your "mistakes."
- Feel free to learn from others.
- Start early and expect things to go wrong the first attempt.
- Have a good time.

***Bruce MacDermott** was a child-in-tow for SF conventions back in the 1950s and fondly remembers seeing costumes in the era of plastics and mostly naked ladies. During the '70s Bruce spent his time at SF conventions taking photos of Masquerades. He does the work requiring power tools (like sewing machines and drill presses). Bruce served as ICG treasurer, chairs the ICG Finance committee, co-founded the SiW and currently serves as its treasurer.*

***Dana MacDermott** has been doing convention costuming since the early '80's. Dana is responsible for concept and design, hand work and "anything where you get gooey up to the armpits." With an MFA in costume design, she has been a theatrical costume designer with specialties in highly creative costuming, and costume crafts. Dana co-founded SiW, served as chapter president, and was the second editor of VC.*