

Panel Discussion

Follow-up questions from moderator Kevin Roche and the audience resulted in lively a discussion among panel members on several topics.

Designing is Harder Than It Looks

All the panelists remarked on the fact that the design process is much harder than it looks.

Christy: I'd done some costume design in college, but most of my experience with the design process was in translating designs into finished costumes. There's a certain freedom in "just designing" but I knew that, at least in theory, someone was going to have to make it, and someone was going to have to wear it.

Chris: I've done a lot of costuming based on text more than pictures, so this wasn't too different from what I did for my Vorkosigan costumes. But it was really hard designing for materials that aren't fabric. I'm much more comfortable with tailored garments, and none of our designs had much sewing.

Kathe: Designing from these books was more difficult than I expected. It required careful reading and re-reading to find the hidden clues about the various garments. Burroughs does not often provide "she walked into the room wearing ..." descriptions. They are rare throughout the entire 11 volume series, so you need to find clues buried in the action sequences, such as "He raised a jewel-encrusted bit of the girl's

magnificent trappings to his lips" or "Each was clothed in the wondrously wrought harness of his station and his house." It lends itself to whatever you choose to make of it.

Phil: Most of our costumes are recreations of movie and TV sci-fi and fantasy costumes, so we're building on someone else's designs. Research was especially important for this project. Kathe found an article in ERBzine (see <http://www.erbzine.com/mag4/0438.html>), for example that discussed basic Barsoomian fashion for men. The author ran into many of the same contradictions we did, and tried to summarize and extrapolate from descriptions in the complete series of books. We didn't agree with many of his conclusions, but his summary was very helpful and saved us lots of time.

Mette & Bryan: We also do mostly recreations, and our original costumes have been much less sketched up and thought over in advance than was required for this project. We felt like costuming beginners in some ways, and it was hard work at times. Not knowing the material added an additional level of difficulty. We are so glad we did it though, as it was a highly satisfying process!

The Design Process was Liberating

Several panelists commented on the fact that the design process, separate from costume construction, was liberating.

Kathe: It was liberating to design something and not have to worry about how it would look on me or whether I had the skill to bring off the construction. I could assume the character is tall enough, young enough, etc. to carry off whatever design I give it so long as the needs of the story were met, and someone else can worry about making it.

Mette: I highly agree with Kathe here. One of our designs I referred to as "The one I would wear, if I could get away with it, which I can't". Several of the garments would have to defy gravity in annoying ways, even as the actor/actress moves during filming. If I had to construct and maintain the outfit, I'd probably go crazy.

Bryan: I enjoyed the process of imagining what the Green Martian race would look like, and bonded with Tars in ways I wouldn't normally do with a recreated character. His straps and armor were of my own personal taste, and so I got to express myself more than I normally would in a costume.

Christy: In the "real world" I'd want an idea of who the studio was thinking of casting, but in this exercise I could imagine any body type I wanted in the costume.

Real-World vs. Fantasy Design

There was a lively discussion about designing based on "real-world" considerations vs. a "fantasy world" free of physical constraints.

Phil: We decided to take physical considerations into account when we designed our costumes, to help fill in what Burroughs did not describe. For example, Kathe commented that riding a giant Thoat would be pretty rough on the legs, and that both cowboys and Indians in the American West wore chaps to protect their legs. So I decided to give Tars Tarkas a kind of layered leather chaps in my design. The books never mentioned chaps, but the books are very sparse in their clothing descriptions. After Kathe's comments, it seemed logical to include them.

Dana: Keep in mind, though, that we're not necessarily costuming for a physical world. Barsoom is a *fantasy* world, and it's just as correct to ignore physical constraints like needing protection to ride Thoats. After all, Burroughs ignored any number of physical considerations, such as the fact that most of Mars is freezing rather than warm, or that humans can breath in the thin Martian atmosphere, or that they can jump fifty feet. It's all right to design costumes that just look interesting as long as they are believable in the world Burroughs created.

Bryan: I spent a lot of time designing the Green Martian anatomy, even creating a 2-foot maquette of Tars Tarkas (photo at right). I thought a lot about how the arms would practically be placed in order to actually function rather than just being two dangling appendages at the waist. This

affected the design of the Thark warrior garb to a high degree.

Christy : Designing for the Green Martians was as much about the character design as it was about the costumes. How they were built was going to really change how they were dressed. We had to reassess even basic ideas about how clothing stays on the body while preserving freedom of movement.



How Naked Can You Get?

The hot topic each team had to address was nakedness. Burroughs described most of the Martians, and at times even John Carter, as being "naked". When designing costumes for a PG-13 rated movie or for general public display, the question is: what is "naked", and how naked can or should you get?

Mette: I spent a lot of my design time in thinking about how to make the characters appear naked, without it being naughty enough to give it an R or even X rating. In addition to studio concerns about earnings, you don't want your lead actors

running away screaming after seeing their costumes, nor do you want unnecessary wardrobe malfunctions throughout production. I decided to solve the problem by keeping the skin to clothing ratio high, yet having organic strappings strategically swirl around the naughty bits as if by random. I also used a lot of strong colors to make the scant costume draw attention and make it appear as more clothing than it actually is.

Phil: I was most influence by the Bill Theiss' approach to nakedness in designing women's costumes for the original *Star Trek* series. He wanted his costumes to pass the network censors, while making the audience worry that something might slip at any moment, and by showing bare skin in unexpected places. I'd love to try my hand at designing and building something like that some day -- if I could find a willing volunteer...



Kathe: There is some indication from people who knew him at the time that Burroughs deliberately said his characters were unclothed as a sensational tactic, while



demonstrably describing garments on them during some of the sequences. We had some idea already of Civil War/Gold Rush era clothing and Sally Norton gave us a quick survey of Twenties and Thirties garments, particularly a fashion style that was actually called “naked” during what I think of as

the Jean Harlow era (photo at left). I played with that idea for some of the women’s garments by using transparent layers and choosing colors that were closer to flesh tones for some of their garments.

We could have put more skin out on the designs than we did, but my practical side kept intervening – “we can’t have his legs bare if he’s riding all the time”. Dana pointed out (see the earlier [Real World vs. Vantasy Design](#) discussion) that indeed we could have, and she is right. We could have done *anything* since a fantasy world is not constrained by reality.

Christy: Occasionally Chris and I would look at a part of a design we’d drawn, love it to pieces but realize how absolutely naked it would be on a moving body and say, “the rest is a problem for the cinematographer!” or “now it’s the lighting designer’s problem!” We kept returning to a

lovely flashback scene in “The Mummy” where an important character walks, nearly naked, through several frames. The lighting and cinematography make it clear that, yes, she is mostly naked, and yet you don’t see much, if anything, “naughty”.

I wanted our designs to really evoke a feeling of “nudity” like a classical statue, not “nekkid” like a peep show. Sometimes spending too much work on designing fig leaves calls more attention to the nakedness than bare skin would. This was much easier on the female characters than the male characters because our western eyes are used to scantily clad women, but men’s everyday clothing tends to be much more modest. We really worked to make the men’s harness shapes draw focus up towards the chest and shoulders. Otherwise, it would look too much like “Chippendale’s Martian Review!”