Costume-Rental Service Returns to Role as Theater’s Favorite Outfitter

TDF, a nonprofit that runs the TKTS discount Broadway ticket booths, is getting ready for a return of professional and community productions

Susanna Frazier, a theater artist visiting the TDF Costume Collection Rental Program, pulls items to rent for a new one-person play on Aug. 12.

By Charles Passy | Photographs by Dorothy Hong for The Wall Street Journal
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When Stephen Cabral sums up the vast collection of theater rental costumes in the warehouse he oversees, he speaks more in terms of what he doesn’t have.

“We don’t do underwear,” he said.

But Mr. Cabral does just about everything else. Need a soft fedora of the style that Rex Harrison favored—say, for a community-theater staging of “My Fair Lady?” No worry. Looking for Jewish prayer shawls, otherwise known as tallit, for a touring production of “Fiddler on the Roof”? There is a whole box of them.

And those are just the accessories. The rest of the warehouse, in the Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens’ Astoria neighborhood, is filled with rack after rack of dresses, suits and even pajamas, all categorized in ways that a costume designer with exacting demands could appreciate. In some cases, costumes are even broken down by era, be it the 19th century or the 1920s.
The 85,000 items in the TDF collection are donations from fashion designers, theatrical companies and regular people who could use the tax deduction.
Mr. Cabral is director of the TDF Costume Collection Rental Program, a longtime service of the New York-based nonprofit organization that supports the theater community locally and nationally in myriad ways. Though TDF might be best known to general public for running the discount-tickets booth in Times Square known as TKTS, those who produce, direct and design shows, be they professionals or amateurs, often cite the costume warehouse as an invaluable resource.

“It’s a very special place,” said Gregg Barnes, the Tony Award-winning Broadway costume designer.

And it is slowly coming back to life, after being closed for five months because of the coronavirus pandemic. While Broadway shows and most theater groups still aren’t active, Mr. Cabral is anticipating the eventual return of demand. Plus, the TDF program, which dates back to the 1970s, provides costumes for film and television productions, which also should be starting up.
American fashion designer Bob Mackie with some of the gowns and outfits he donated to TDF’s collection, in an undated photo.

Photo: David LeShay

Meanwhile, Mr. Cabral keeps busy dealing with donations. The costumes in the collection, all 85,000 of them, are ones that were given to TDF over the years by prominent designers (Bob Mackie has provided several closets’ worth), theater companies and even everyday folks who heard about the place and want to make a contribution (it is tax-deductible). But Mr. Cabral is always ready to add more and rarely turns down an offering.
“Since Covid, I can’t tell you how much we’re getting,” he said. “People are doing a lot of cleaning of closets.”

TDF rents the costumes at fees starting at $50 an outfit for nonprofit theater companies but can climb to as much as $250 for commercial producers. Renters also pay a fee to have the costumes dry-cleaned. The organization says the program is a break-even proposition because of the considerable storage and operational costs involved: At peak times, Mr. Cabral has a staff of as many as six people, though he is currently running the program with just one other employee.
Shoes in the TDF collection, which is based in the basement of Kaufman Astoria Studios in Astoria, N.Y., and outfits movies and TV shows as well as theatrical productions.

For many in the theater world, the costume program is often the go-to place, since it can be expensive and time-consuming to make costumes from scratch, they note. And there is no other rental outfit remotely comparable to TDF’s, at least not in New York, if not the entire Northeast.

Costume designers and theatrical wardrobe managers each have a favorite story of how the TDF program saved them from headaches in their search for the perfect outfit, especially in an era when vintage clothing has become fashionable and thrift-store finds are harder to come by.

For Brenda King, it was a 19th-century Russian-style military uniform she needed for a production of Chekhov’s “The Three Sisters” that she worked on at the University of Colorado.

“It was something they knew they had right off the bat,” said Ms. King, currently costume-shop manager for New Jersey’s Paper Mill Playhouse, which also rents from TDF.
And for Jamie Cacciola-Price, who chairs the drama studio at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, a public high school in Queens, it was a peach-colored, 50s-style maternity dress needed for a staging of the play “Clybourne Park.”

“The stock is ridiculously large,” he said of TDF’s offerings.

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If given the opportunity, what costume would you like to rent? Join the conversation below.

Mr. Cacciola-Price said what’s also exciting for his students is that the costumes from TDF have likely been worn previously by famous actors. It is a point affirmed by Mr. Cabral, who said the outfits of such stars as Denzel Washington, Patti LuPone and Christine Ebersole are interspersed throughout the collection.

But Mr. Cabral added that in many cases the history of the outfits is unknown, which almost adds a certain mystique when an actor puts one on for the first time.

The costumes “don’t speak and tell you who’s worn them,” he said.
Stephen Cabral, director of the TDF costume rental program, said he is getting plenty of donations after the pandemic lockdown, when cleaning out closets was everyone’s favorite hobby.

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