

What Makes for A Great Masquerade Entry

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You don't need to be a singing, dancing comedy genius to create a strong entry for a costume contest. You just need to keep a few basic guidelines in mind.

This Isn't A Talent Show

I've seen too many costumers sigh wistfully that they *want* to enter a contest, but they're not "talented" enough. There is a perception that a masquerade entry has to be a song-and-dance routine, or hilariously witty in order to qualify for the show and that is *not* true. If you're talented enough to make your costume, you're talented enough to bring it on stage.

Let's start with what makes a good entry, and then what makes a *great* entry.

Components of a Good Masquerade Entry

Rehearsal and Poise

You don't want to stand in the middle of the stage, quivering like an aspen from stage fright, do you? You want to walk on that stage like the world is your oyster. So you need to rehearse. If your event offers a rehearsal time for you to practice on their stage, then take them up on it. But don't count on getting that time – some conventions can't tie up their stage for both a rehearsal and a show – so practice at home, on the hotel grounds, wherever you can go that gives you the room. Keep in mind the adage "Amateurs practice until they get it right. Professionals practice until they can't get it wrong."

Movement

This is almost a subset of poise, but not quite. If you stand in the middle of the stage, or just walk across it from one side to the other, you're doing your costume a disservice. The audience wants to see the entire thing – and they don't want to see it go by so quickly that it's a blur. Plan your movements so that all of your costume will be visible to the audience and move about half as quickly as you think you need to. Nerves always make us move faster, so remember to slow it down. If all other inspiration fails you, cover the stage in a big figure 8. That'll show the audience – and the judges! – what they want to see.

Brevity

While nerves can make us move faster than we should on stage, some entries can go on for too long.

As a rule, a single-person presentation should be 45 – 60 seconds, and a group entry between 90 seconds and two minutes – unless it's a large group pulling off a

complicated number. Find the stopwatch app on your cellphone and time yourself during practice. Look for areas where you can tighten things up or drop unnecessary elements. The audience is here to see some costumes, not watch a talent show (that's another event, down the hall). Also check to see if there are time limits on presentations for each competition and then stick to them.

Popular Appeal

If your costume requires that the audience be familiar with a specific episode of a cult series that's only available online, you might want to rethink your entry – or find a convention aimed specifically at fans who are more likely to get your reference. Consider the lowest common denominator in the audience. Think about the theme of the convention (is it SF media, or is it steampunk, or anime? etc.) and how much your costume fits with that theme. It's a safe bet that everyone in the crowd knows about Harry Potter and Star Trek. Dadaist animation from the 1950s? Not so much. (But the guys at DadaCon will eat it up!)

Good Tech

While some costume contests allow live sound, most of them encourage or even require the use of pre-recorded sound, whether it's music and/or dialogue. Give yourself plenty of time to pick your music or record your speech. You don't want to be doing it on your cellphone the night before the event. If you're recording any speech, do several takes. Talk slower. Write different variants of the speech and play them back to pick the one that sounds best – instead of reading it on paper. Have a friend listen to it and give you feedback. Is it comprehensible? Does it sound reasonably clear? Once you've settled on your track, use it while rehearsing at home, so that your timing will be spot on.

Be sure to follow whatever guidelines are in place for getting your sound to the right people in time for the event. Do you have to bring it on CD or a USB drive? Must it be an MP3 file or another format? Do you have to present it at a tech rehearsal, or can you turn it in somewhere else? The answers to all these questions should be in the convention's program book and/or on their website. If they aren't, don't hesitate to ask the appropriate staff.

Make Use of the MC

Many contests will allow you to provide a short piece of verbiage to be read by the Master of Ceremonies as you enter the stage (or while you're on it). This can be extremely helpful in providing context for a costume. For example "Kim is wearing their interpretation of Pkssf, a character from *The Bazzst Codex*, a graphic novel set in an alternative world where dolphins evolved to be the dominant life form." And *now* the audience understands why there's an anthropomorphic cetacean on the stage.

Note: Your typical MC usually a joker and has a great sense of humor – otherwise they wouldn't be MC'ing, so feel free to have a little fun with this opportunity.

Workmanship

Even if you don't intend to undergo workmanship judging, make sure you've covered the basics. A costume that trails loose threads, or shows frayed trims, or just plain doesn't fit well is not going to impress the audience.

Remember: workmanship judging is usually optional. You don't have to undergo it if you don't want to. That said, here are some of the things that they look at, as workmanship judges: overall fit, accuracy to the source material (if there is any), creative use of materials, difficulty of materials used, how embellishment were tackled, appropriateness of foundation garments (if applicable), seam finishing.

The Difference Between “Good” and “Great”

Originality

Not just in your costume, but in how you present it. Be sure to abide by any rules of your venue, of course. No throwing things at the audience without clearing it with the masquerade director, for instance. If you're planning acrobatics, check that you have enough space and work with the crew to arrange spotters, if needed. (That example is a subset of “Don't Surprise The Director”)

Humor

People like good jokes, and dreadful puns. And the judges *are* people, too! A laugh will always help win over an audience.

Performance

Although a performance can help bring a multi-person entry together, a costume contest is *not* a talent show. Yes, I'm repeating myself, because it's important. That said, if a bit of dance will enhance your costume's presentation, and you happen to be a dancer, then go for it. When in doubt, ask yourself “Will this make my costume more memorable?” If the answer isn't a firm yes, reconsider your ideas.

The Things That Will Get You Thrown Out

All of the scenarios described below have all happened at least once in the convention scene – Director

Breaking “The Peanut Butter Rule”

Years ago, someone thought it would be hilarious to use peanut butter as an integral part of their costume. Yes, really. Almost immediately, peanut butter was *everywhere*,

including on the stage where it created a slip hazard for everyone who followed that entry. Even worse, peanut butter got smeared onto other contestant's costumes, whereupon the peanut oil left permanent stains. I'm still amazed the joker wasn't murdered backstage. Your costume should never incorporate anything that is going to create a hazardous environment or damage someone else's work. Never

"No costume is NO COSTUME"

Unless you're participating in a very specific kind of show, keep your costume and presentation PG-rated. Yes, back in the 1970s, WorldCon allowed partial nudity in their costume contest, but those days are long gone. Save the exposed nipples (or more!) for the burlesque troupe across town.

Ignoring Personal Boundaries

Sometimes, these events can get a little cramped backstage. If you decide this is a great chance to leer down someone's cleavage, or get a little *too* close to that guy in the 300 costume, you're going to get thrown out. This also applies to boundaries necessary for mental health. If someone declares that they're going *over there* and please leave them alone, then you had better respect that.

Ignoring the Convention's Policies

Some conventions have a no-weapons policy. Some have a no-photos-without-explicit-consent policy. You are not the special snowflake for whom an exception will be granted, so don't try it.

Surprising the Masquerade Director

You can surprise the *audience* all you like – within the established rules, of course. But masquerade directors do NOT like surprises. If you ever have any doubt about an aspect of your entry, talk to them before you go on stage. Long before. Email them before the convention, if necessary.

BONUS SECTION – Is Yours A Hall Costume or Stage Costume?

Before you start worrying about what to do on stage, ask yourself "Is the stage the best venue for my costume?"

If your costume features intricate hand embroidery or other elements that are best admired close-up, then you might want to consider walking the halls with it, where folks can come as close as you're willing to let them in order to admire. On the other hand, if you've made yourself a Hawkgirl costume with functional 8ft-wide wings, then the stage is where you belong! It might seem like a no-brainer to you, but it's a surprisingly common error. Use the venue that will maximize your costume's strengths.

The only exception to the hall/stage divide is if you intend to undergo workmanship judging. Such judging is when you *can* show off the hand embroidery or other details too fine to see from the stage and if, on top of that, you're willing to brave the stage, go for it.

And there's nothing to say that you can't do both! Premier your snazzy new costume at the show, then walk the halls with it, afterwards – space permitting, of course.