



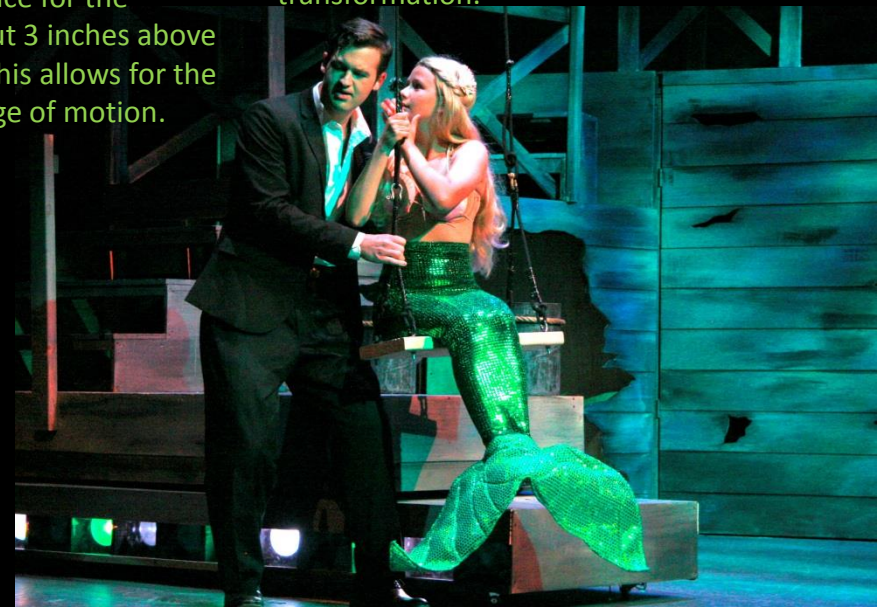
Big Fish is a Broadway musical featuring music and lyrics by Andrew Lippa and book by John August. It is based on the novel by Daniel Wallace and the film directed by Tim Burton. This musical contains various larger than life characters in fast paced musical montages. In the summer of 2016 at Stagedoor Manor in Loch Sheldrake, NY I was given this show to design and build in 2 ½ weeks. This show presents various design challenges including: dancing elephants, circus acts, witches, a giant, and a mermaid that has to go from fins to feet in two measures of a song. Our production's mermaid sat on a swing that came in from stage right, kicked off her tail, walked across the outstretched hands of the other performers and joined the ensemble for their opening dance number. The tail is easily added back on for the final scenes before she quick changes again for the funeral.

FROM FINS TO FEET: A QUICK-CHANGE MERMAID TAIL CHRISTINA JOHNSON

After various design meetings with the production team, the director, Rob Scharlow and I decided that I would build an entirely new tail to create our own sparkling mermaid. Due to the time constraints and the 200+ costume looks needed for the show I started by draping a light stretch fabric on the actress to create the actual skirt. Initially we had to test the length of the opening with her choreography and I have found the best place for the opening to start is about 3 inches above the back of the knee. This allows for the actress to have full range of motion.

The style of the tail fin itself is up to the designer. I chose to go with a traditional green color, utilizing sequin fabric to emulate scales. The center foot pouch works best in a shape the mimics the natural shape of pointed feet. The fin should be visually proportionate to your actor. The skirt has a CB seam with a zipper closure at the top and the bottom opening fastens with snap tape. Snap tape provides enough give for an easy transition with very little sound.

By having the actress wear nude jazz shoes it allows for the foot straps on the inside to slide off the feet when needed as well as giving the illusion of her feet being bare after the transformation.



*Photos Courtesy of Konnie Kittrell and Stagedoor Manor

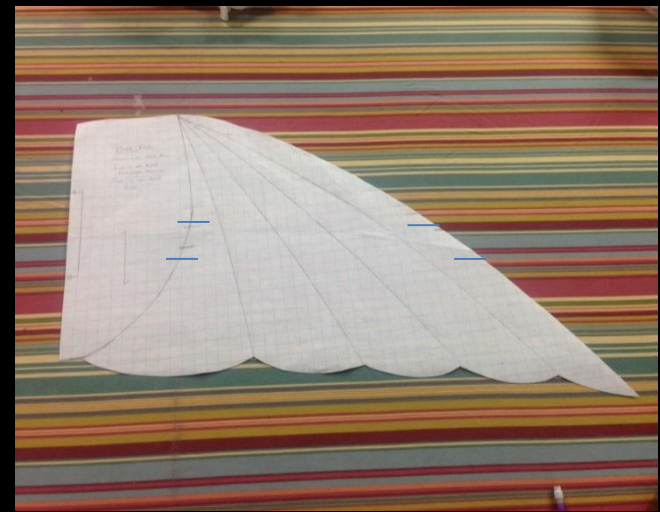
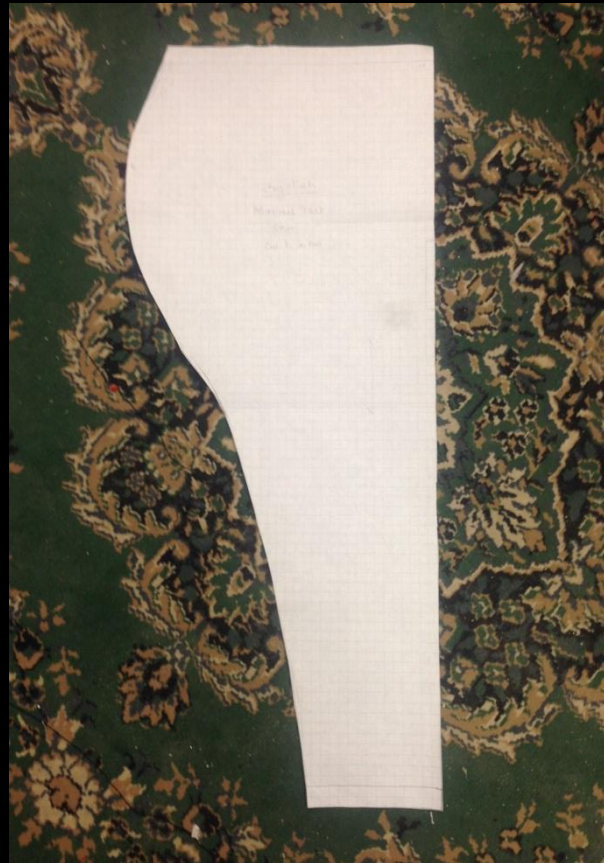


Measurements needed:

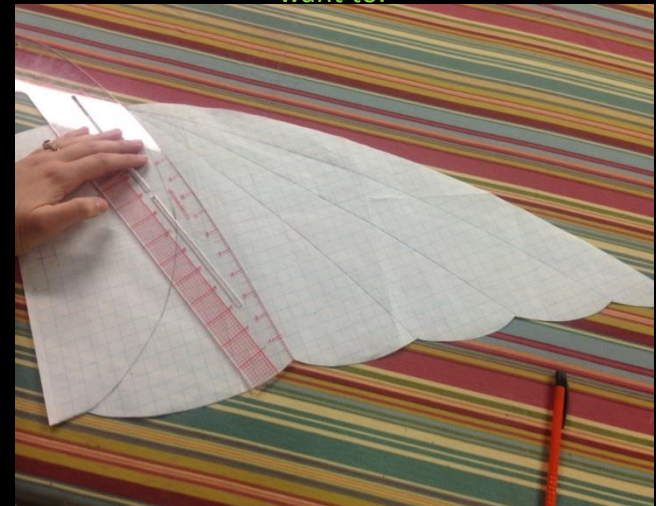
- Ankle to tip of big toe with foot pointed
- Across the tops of arches of both feet when side by side
- Circumference of ankles
- Circumference of foot at center of arch (to create foot holds)
- Distance from toe to center of arch (placement of footholds within the pouch)
- Waist
- Fullest hip
- Waist to above knee (back)
- Waist to ankle

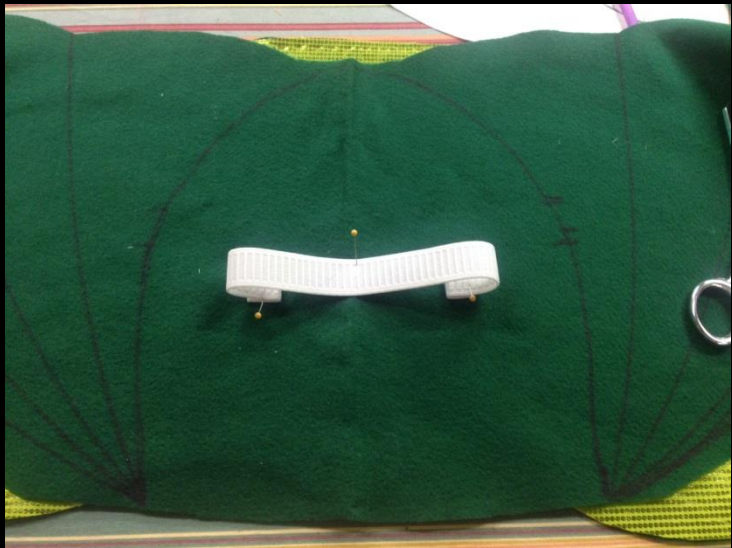
Materials Used:

- 3-4 yards of stretch fabric (depends on tail size)
- 17 1/2" white snap tape dyed to match stretch fabric
- 1-2 yards of headliner or felt
- 3 yds. of white rayon covered millinery wire #19
- 10" green zipper
- Skirt hook and eye
- 2.5 yards 1" non-roll elastic
- matching thread



Fin shape can be customized but the foot pouch in the center is based on how much room your actor needs for their feet including a slope towards the ankle so as not to end up with a sizeable gap between skirt and fin. A small opening needs to be left for the wire to be fed through the layers across the tops of the feet. The wire also allows you to curl the fins if you want to.



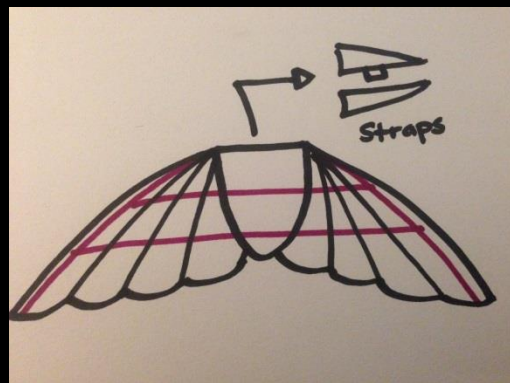


Once you have cut 2 fins from each fabric you will need to attach the elastic foot loops to the top felt piece. I chose the placement to match up with the arch of the foot for added stability. To decrease bulk I used a single piece of elastic instead of two.

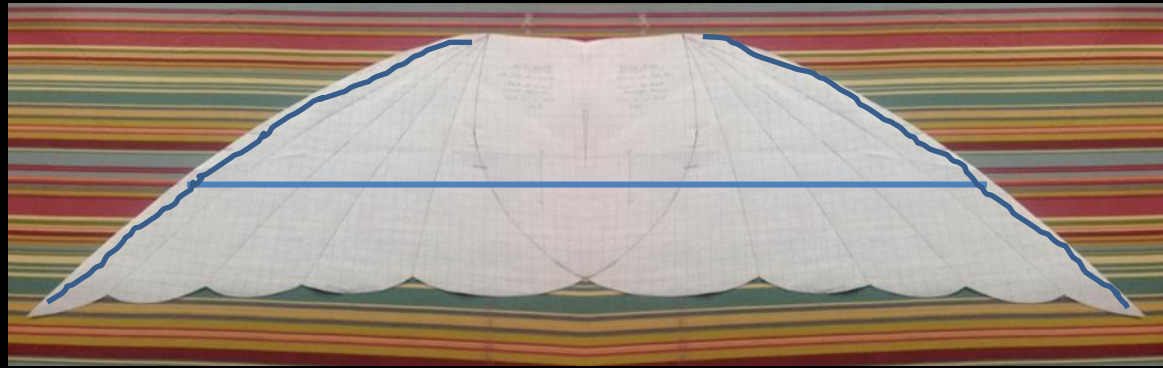


After the loops are attached flat line the felt pieces to the fashion fabric pieces. Thread mark your style lines as well as the openings for the wire. (I used tailor tacks to mark the openings so as not to get mixed up while stitching) Bag out your pieces with a 1/2" seam allowance, backstitching before and after the marked openings. Do not stitch completely across the top seam at the opening that will meet the skirt, i.e. leave the opening for the feet.

Feed millinery wire into sides of the tail fin. Make sure to turn the ends under to avoid rips or injury. Then proceed to feed another piece of wire across the top in between the layers, connecting to both side wires. Once the wire is secure you can start to top stitch around the edges (locking the side wires in place) and on all style lines (having a longer stitch length ensures that you can stitch over the horizontal wire, I used 3.5). I turned the opening sides under and top stitched them as well to create a cohesive look. A secondary support wire can be added horizontally if the tail is too heavy.

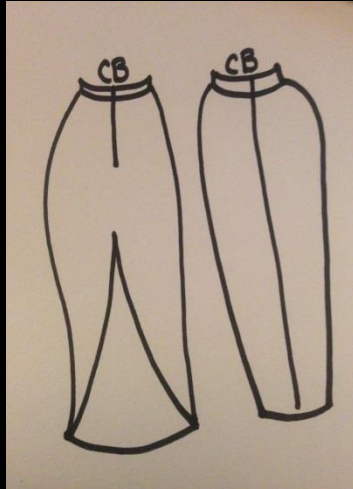


Wire Placement Diagrams





The hem of the skirt can be altered into various style lines. For the second tail I wanted more of a pegged (inverted triangle) silhouette which was easier to match for the funeral scene. I also made this choice to further emulate the tail even after the fins are gone. For the original design the front dipped to a point. You can adjust the height of the foot pouch to hide a shorter hem.



For the waistband I did a 1" band with grosgrain for support. There is only one CB seam because I wanted to eliminate as many seams as possible to try to get a more realistic look. Stretch fabric conforms nicely to the body and the added tension allows the snap tape to open easily once the actress steps her feet apart to hip width.

There are many ways to make this tail your own which makes it a lot of fun to design. For a show like Big Fish you need items that are functional and lend themselves to creating the imaginative world of Edward Bloom. This tail is comfortable to wear, easy to take on and off, and can go from fins to feet onstage in far less than a minute.



Photos from first fitting in fashion fabric