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Kiralyn Davison  
*University of Kentucky*

Mathew Seckman  
*University of Kentucky*

Daniel Townsend  
*University of Kentucky*

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Creating Kimonos for Madama Butterfly

Bob Haven, assistant professor of costume technology, and three of his student assistants, Daniel Townsend, Kiralyn Davison, and Matt Seckman, participated in a project to outfit the cast of Madama Butterfly for the UK Opera Theatre. Over a period of eight months, we learned the traditional methods of constructing Japanese costumes for the stage. We soon learned that when constructing the 19th century Japanese kimonos, familiarity with Western costume construction was put to the side.

While the 200 pieces that were made for the show appear simple enough, the eight month construction process included learning new patterning and sewing techniques to achieve the look of authentic designs. Because the available research on kimono construction is limited and materials for constructing stage-worthy Japanese costumes is virtually non-existent, the costumers basically started from Professor Haven’s research and then went on to developed their own techniques along the way — finding easier shortcuts that achieved the same design.

The first difference was in the fabric itself. Japanese kimono silk comes in 14 3/4-inch wide strips. The proportion of the classical kimono is achieved by combining four widths of this fabric, one for each side of the body and one for each sleeve. While the majority of the fabric for the production was bought locally, the Western standard is 45-inch wide bolts. To maintain the authentic proportion and design, the costumers added a seam down the back. As with the classical kimono, the garments for this production were constructed of seven rectangles of fabric.

While sewing the kimonos together was a simple step, much hand stitching was needed to align the various layers in preparation for the machine work.

When buying the fabric, bright colors with intricate designs were used for the geishas, while more modest patterns and subdued colors were chosen for older and married women. The length of the sleeve is also indicative of age and station. Geisha would wear very long sleeves as well as large obi bows with long tails. Both the sleeves and the obi bow tails would create graceful and pleasing motion with every movement of the Geisha, no matter how subtle and controlled it might be. Older and married women would wear kimonos with shorter, less flamboyant sleeves presenting a more refined and dignified appearance.

More images can be seen in the on-line version of the journal at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2005.
The next difference in construction is in the pattern. Western costumers will generally use a tissue-paper pattern laid out on the fabric as a guide to cutting. Because kimonos are all cut to the same size, a poster-board template was used for the body and the sleeves — one template for each piece. These templates set the construction points on each kimono. The sewing lines are drawn directly onto the fabric according to a prescribed set of proportions.

In Western construction, a costumer must have a body to measure before any fabric can even be cut. But construction began several months before Butterfly was cast. This was possible only because all kimonos are made to the same length measurement. The fabric was all cut to 69 inches long, and the difference in an actor’s actual height is made up by gathering the extra fabric under the obi, a thick decorative sash that is tied around the waist over the kimono. Even the men’s kimonos were constructed using the same template.

The difference between Western clothing in a production and the kimonos is that costumes are normally washed after each performance. Because the kimono silk is more delicate and does not get washed, kimonos have no openings. A kind of Japanese underwear, were constructed for each outfit. These garments were constructed by Haven’s Costume Construction Classes (TA265) from the 2004 summer and fall terms as a service-learning project. These garments worn under the kimono could be washed often without harming the fabric.

When the production was cast and the costumes finished, Haven organized several “dressing rehearsals” for the cast. The process of dressing in kimonos is extremely different than dressing in Western clothing. Western construction uses buttons, zippers, or hooks, and one person can do it alone. Kimonos have no such closures, and each cast member had a “dressing buddy,” someone to help with his or her costume. Kimonos are designed to have straight lines that produce a columnar silhouette deemed artistically pleasing and what we have come to recognize as the “kimono look.” To diminish the curvy American female figure, actresses had to tie a folded bath towel around their waist over the kimono underwear to create a cylindrical appearance. The kimono is then wrapped around the body, adjusted for length, and held in place by twill ties secured around the waist. The obi also holds the kimono in place and covers all the other cords. It is not tied loose, but rather wrapped very tightly around the waist several times. Although the outfit was tight, many performers said that the obi helped support their breathing while singing. Even their movements in the outfit had to be adjusted; the tightness from their waist down forced them to take small steps when walking, which is also consistent with Japanese style.

Haven is using this experience to write a book about Japanese costume patterning and construction techniques. Many costumers are faced with doing a production of Madama Butterfly at some point in their careers. This book will be an invaluable resource for them when the time comes.