Costumer Designer Help Students Find “Their Voice”
by Janette Ballard

If clothes make the man, as Shakespeare had penned, then costumes make the actor. Costume designers like Janice Benning Lacek, assistant professor in the department of theatre, use research, artistry and collaboration to help transform an actor into a character.

Lacek has been designing professionally for nearly 30 years. As a theatre major at a small liberal arts college, she was involved in every aspect of production, and often found herself working in costume design. It wasn’t until several years later, when she realized that acting was not really for her, that she found her “voice” in costumes.

“I tell my students when you design costumes, you get to play all the parts, and you don’t have to memorize lines!” Lacek said. “I also tell them to listen, go to rehearsal, and watch.”

Costume designers read the scripts very carefully, often many times, to glean information about the characters, action or play. Then they conduct extensive research: historical, visual and fashion—everything they need to learn about the world of the play and the clothes in it.

“We create renderings of all the characters and select the colors and materials they will be made out of,” said Lacek. “We share this preliminary work with the rest of the design team—director, scenery, lighting and sound designers—and collaborate on the overall planning for the environment for the play.”

“Once the play begins rehearsing, we work closely with the shop to see that costumes are built and/or acquired according to the plans, and shop for garments if it’s a contemporary piece,” she said. “We attend all the fittings with the actors and collaborate very closely with them to support what they are developing in rehearsal. Finally, we attend dress rehearsals and make adjustments if needed. Opening night: our job is done!”

Lacek points out that designing costumes is fundamentally different from designing fashion. “The true artwork is when it all comes together: the costumed character onstage in performance, under light, in front of the audience. Only then is it complete.”

Lacek has an MFA in Costume Design from the University of California - San Diego at La Jolla. She has worked across the U.S. and internationally for theatre, opera, dance and occasional film. Prior to joining DU in September 2016, she was on the faculty at the University of Memphis.

She has more than 26 William Shakespeare productions under her belt, and is currently designing for *Pericles*, directed by theatre department chair Rick Barbour and to be performed in
the Byron Theatre in February. Lacek cites her Shakespeare work as some of the most meaningful.

“I’ve done a lot of Shakespeare; it just doesn’t get old for me, especially when the actors have the classical chops,” she said. “I’ve never really fallen out of love with the immediacy and energy of live stage performance – and how it’s not something you can do alone. That’s the best part.”

She said she also enjoys working with students on projects and collaborating like peers, and especially loves being in the room when a student finds “their voice.”