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Clothes make the musical

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STAR LEDGER STAFF

NEW YORK — Swashbuckling eight times a week causes plenty of wear and tear on a puffy shirt.

"Lots of battles and dancing is hard enough, but all the quick changes the actors make can destroy clothes even faster," says Martin Pakledinaz, costume designer for the new musical "The Pirate Queen." "So all these things are built to be incredibly durable."

Musicals are a specialty for the 27-year Broadway veteran, who owns Tony Awards for "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and the last "Kiss Me, Kate." Opera and dance assignments — notably a long-term association

with choreographer Mark Morris — also keep the designer's sunny Garment District office jumping. Right now, Pakledinaz's desk is heaped with sketches for more than 275 period costumes required for "The Pirate Queen."

Beginning previews next month, the spectacular about real-life Grace O'Malley, a 16th-century Irish chieftain who faced off with Queen Elizabeth, boasts a score by "Les Misérables" makers Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg. Lavishly mounted by "Riverdance" moguls Moya Doherty and John McColgan, the story switches between rural Ireland and Elizabeth's elegant court in England.

Although Pakledinaz has never before created Shakespearean-era dress, designing the relatively primitive Irish garb presented the greater challenge. "There is very little visual history," he notes. "The hardest journey for me was finding something that suited all the dancing and looked great on them — and not just like bad Viking."

Grounding the Irish garb in "colors of the land, like stone and sea,"

the designer devised soft, natural lines to contrast with the "tortured, outrageous ways" English court dress was historically shaped. He employed intense colors for Elizabeth's royal finery to set her off against the black, silver and gray attire of her officials.

Because the choreography is based on vigorous Irish step dancing — many of the show's troupers are "Riverdance" alums — Pakledinaz spent much time developing footwear suitable for athletic movement as well as historic looks. He came up with sexy, lace-up boots that provide sturdy ankle support and sport Fiberglas taps on their soles "so they can make that sound against the wood people expect."

Those hundreds of fast changes are achieved by fastening costumes with inch-wide snaps known backstage as "poppers."

"I think at least 50 percent of making a musical is mechanics," remarks Pakledinaz. "When they are really working at their best, they're beautiful machines and you don't know how. That's us making sure we keep all of the gears hidden."



WILLIAM PERLMAN/THE STAR LEDGER

Costume designer Martin Pakledinaz works on drawings for "The Pirate Queen" in his Manhattan studio.



JOAN MARCUS

Actress Linda Balgord sports colorful Elizabethan finery in "The Pirate Queen."