

Cheryl Hall: The inside story on costumes

Dallas studio crafts Chick-fil-A cows, Barney and 19 left ears

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Irene Corey Design Associates is a master of incognito.

You've probably never heard of this low-profile costume studio that doesn't even have a sign on its door. But you've undoubtedly seen its handiwork, painstakingly produced over the last 23 years for advertising, corporate promotions and children's entertainment.

Barney the Dinosaur and his TV friends, the Chick-fil-A cows and Half Price Book's Bookworm were brought to bigger-than-life, three-dimensional proportions here. Oh, and we mustn't forget Mr. Telephone, a costume worn in the mid-1980s by comedian Martin Mull for a long-distance telephone company.

While most costuming is mass-produced overseas, ICDA is one of the few American studios where human fingers are the machines of choice.

Irene Corey and her niece, Suzanne Lockridge, founded the studio in 1983, each kicking \$1,000 into a joint checking account.

Ms. Corey, retired at 80 and frail from Parkinson's disease, still has a discerning eye.

"Isn't this hand-stitching marvelous?" she says as she gently fondles the ruffled dorsal fin of a fantasy fish that's about to be shipped to the Wiggles Live USA tour.

Ms. Lockridge, 55, considers her aunt her mentor and confidant. She's also her next of kin, since Ms. Lockridge lost both parents before she graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in fine arts in 1979.

"I trust her intuition and tell her everything," says Ms. Lockridge. "We will be partners forever."

The studio on Junius Street employs three full-time and two part-time professional costumers. Costumes cost from \$4,000 to \$15,000 and are expected to generate nearly \$500,000 in revenue in 2006, says Ms. Lockridge, who's now the sole proprietor.

This year, the studio will turn out more than 60 characters, including 19 left ears for the Chicago ad agency that handles the U.S. Cellular account.

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BARBARA
DAVIDSON/DMN
Irene Corey and niece
Suzanne Lockridge started
Irene Corey Design
Associates, which recently
created costumes for the
Wiggles. 'We will be
partners forever,' Ms.
Lockridge says.

John Leroux, owner of Experient Marketing LLC, says the 5-foot-tall walking ear mascots were such a success in the Windy City that U.S. Cellular is taking its "Talk Your Ear Off" campaign to markets across the country.

Mr. Leroux hired Ms. Lockridge's studio even though her bid was twice as expensive as the runner-up's. Her quality was that much better, he says. "They're by far the best costume shop I've ever worked with."

There is considerable know-how and engineering in these costumes. The person inside has to be able to breathe, see and move.

"We always mount a little battery-operated fan into the brim of the hard hat inside to cool the face," says Ms. Lockridge.

"But it's still hot. They can only be in the costume for 20 to 30 minutes before they need to get out and take a break. It takes a special type of person to be inside these things."

Making her mark

Ms. Corey has an international reputation for being an innovator in makeup, costumes and staging for the theater. She developed her expertise in the 1960s as the co-founder of a repertory company that trotted the globe for 20 years. Her two books are still used as university textbooks.

The Children's Theatre Foundation of America will award Dallas' grande dame of costumes its 2006 Medallion next weekend in Bethesda, Md. She's being credited with "literally changing the face of theater" by developing animal face makeup that didn't need prosthetics.

For example, the Lion's face in the *Wizard of Oz* was mostly bulky attachments covered by makeup, Ms. Corey explains during a recent visit to the studio.

"Coming from a painting background, I said, 'Why do you have to glue stuff on? Why don't you just paint it on?' " Ms. Corey says. "I went to the zoo, sketched the animals to get the features right and then used human faces as canvasses."

Robyn Flatt, director of the Dallas Children's Theater, says: "Irene Corey is an original, amazing artist in just every way you can imagine. We're all very fortunate to have had the chance to know and work with her."

Born in Oskaloosa, Iowa, young Irene Lockridge lived on a farm and went to a one-room school until the sixth grade, when her family moved to Houston.

At 10, she traded a metal box of Prang watercolors for a tube of Blue Waltz lipstick. "It was a turning point for me."

So were the high heels she spotted on a high school girl who lived on the next farm.

"I thought they were the most amazing thing ever invented, but I didn't have enough money for a pair," says Ms. Corey. "So I went to the workshop, got a piece of hard pine and nailed it to the back of my shoes. Voilà, high heels! You have to solve problems as they come along."

Years later, during her repertory years, Ms. Corey needed a way to glue fabric together after she realized

that Elmer's didn't hold up to perspiration or laundering. She put a plastic sack between layers of cloth and ironed them together.

Springing to life

Her doting niece apparently inherited Ms. Corey's ability to figure out quick solutions.

Mr. Telephone – a PVC frame covered with soft bedding foam and red stretch Lycra fabric – was the design duo's first project for the Richards Group.

"We finished it the day before the shoot," Ms. Lockridge recalls. "Stan Richards takes one look at it and says, 'You know, it would be a whole lot funnier if the receiver was on his head instead of resting behind his shoulders on the telephone hook.'

"Overnight, we created that," she says, pointing to a photo of Mr. Mull wearing the outrageous suit.

Greg Gibson, now director of broadcast at the Richards Group, says the Dallas-based agency didn't have much time or money when it turned to the fledgling costume company.

"We liked the idea of small shop that would give a tremendous amount of care and attention to the project because it was one that they'd probably live or die on. Mr. Telephone definitely put Irene and Suzanne on the map for us."

In 1988, when the Lyons Group wanted to bring Barney to life, a half-dozen creative types from the Richardson-based entertainment company descended on the studio.

They collaborated with Ms. Corey and Ms. Lockridge to conceive the nearly 7-foot, 40-pound purple dino costume. A smaller green Baby Bop and a yellow BJ were similarly birthed a few years later.

"Counting all the purple ones, the yellow ones and the green ones, we made 101 dinosaurs," Ms. Lockridge says.

These were high-end costumes that cost \$15,000 to \$30,000 a pop, so the dinosaur troupe provided much-needed cash flow. But it turned into a bit of a nightmare.

"Barney nearly killed us," Ms. Lockridge says flatly. "We expanded to build 32 dinosaurs in one year. The next year, they only wanted one. So I had to very quickly downsize.

"Barney created cash flow, but he had no loyalty to me."

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