

Running a “Small” Masquerade

Fashion is the science of appearances, and it inspires one with the desire to seem rather than to be.

Edwin Hubbell Chapin (frequently misattributed to Michel de Montaigne)

Organizing a small costume competition comes with a unique set of challenges, not the least of which may be limited resources and space. In this article we’ll describe some of the approaches we have found that make the event fun for the contestants, enjoyable for the audience and judges, and less stressful for you and your staff.

Our approach can be summarized thusly:

1. Start with the ICG Fairness guidelines.
2. Adapt them to create rules appropriate to your venue / event
3. Publish your rules, schedule and forms early
4. Build a good judging panel
5. Make yourself accessible in advance to answer questions
6. Have a mandatory contestant meeting.
7. Plan the *entire* show.
8. Keep the stage tech simple
9. Have some extra music available
10. Take advantage of technology: have a computer and printer on hand and use them!
11. Take good care of the contestants.
12. Start on time, finish on time, have a good time .

Start with the ICG Fairness guidelines

“There is no such thing as a small masquerade, only small-minded masquerade directors...”

Andrew Trembley, CC21 F&SF Masquerade Director

Admittedly, as one of the authors I may be biased, but I believe the recently revised ICG Guidelines for Fairness in Costume Competition (available at www.costume.org) are the first place to start when planning a masquerade or costume competition of any kind. They are the distillation of an enormous amount of experience on the part of a sizable pool of costumers and competition directors. If you walk away with nothing else from them, try to remember these two points: 1) The division system is designed to give less experienced costumers a “safe” place to compete away from more experienced contestants; it is NOT a series of ranks one must earn, and 2) it is ok to recognize that there may be personal issues between a particular judge and contestant, as long as measures are taken to ensure that those issues do not interfere with fair judging.

Adapt them to create rules appropriate to your venue and event

"...secondly, you must be a pirate for the Pirate's Code to apply, and you're not. And thirdly, the Code is more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules. Welcome aboard the Black Pearl, Miss Turner."

Captain Barbosa, [Pirates of the Caribbean: The Black Pearl \(2003\)](#)

Start with the guidelines, and use them to build a set of rules that fit your contest. Keep the rules simple, and make sure they cover:

1. Who is eligible to enter and who is ineligible to enter.
2. Any theme restrictions you may have.
3. How your divisions/categories are set up
4. Your decency rules
5. Your "don't make a mess" and prop-handling rules
6. Your safety rules
7. Your time limit rules
8. Other requirements (contestant meeting, for instance)
9. The Masquerade Director is Ghod rule.

Note -- you may not need 3 divisions, a beginner and an advanced division may be sufficient. If you start with 3 divisions, reserve the right to collapse 2 of them together. I recommend always having a separate Young Fan division for costumes built *by* the YFs.

If your event has a membership (badge) requirement, encourage the registrars to put numbers on the badges; that way you can record the badge numbers of contestants.

If you have a limited theme (for instance, some anime contests don't want to see Star Wars or Harry Potter costumes on stage) be sure to specify that!

If your event encourages skits or performance-art entries, set your time limits appropriately – (but remember that, in my experience, more than two minutes of bad amateur theatricals may drive your audience out of the house!)

Publish your rules, schedule and forms early

"Badges? We ain't got no badges. We don't need no badges. I don't have to show you any stinking badges!"

--Gold Hat, as played by Alfonso Bedoya, "[The Treasure of the Sierra Madre](#)" (1948)

Don't expect that the costumers are going to seek you out... Publicity, Publicity, Publicity!

This one is pretty self-evident. If your event has a website, put them on it. If it doesn't, but has a YahooGroup, put a copy in the Files section. If it has a LiveJournal, find a place to store a copy on the web and link to it in an entry. I recommend writing up your rules and forms and then creating an Adobe Acrobat (PDF) file that can be stored, emailed, downloaded, etc intact. If you know how to make it a fillable form, so contestants can fill in the blanks and print the completed form, go for it. Make it a complete package, with introduction, rules, hints and forms. Including your judges instructions will let contestants see exactly what you've told judges to look for.

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You can see samples of rules and forms that Andy Trembley and I have written for Anime Los Angeles, Baycon 2007, and Westercon 60 at <http://www.twistedimage.com/costume/articles/masqforms>

Among the points to make clear is the fact that in the event cheating is discovered, awards can and will be revoked.

Build a good judging panel

"Numerical judging systems only get between the and their expert opinions and experience"

Andrew Trembley, Anime Los Angeles 2005 Masquerade Director

A good judging panel will have a mixture of experience and interests. For small masquerades, Andy and I generally prefer about 5 judges, 3 for onstage (presentation) judging and 2 for workmanship. We also like to have one member of each group be a new judge – someone whose costuming has impressed us but who has not judged before. This gives you the advantage of their fresh viewpoint and serves as well to expand the pool of experienced judges. The goal is to achieve a panel in which the different judges biases balance out to yield fair consideration for all entries.

If you are required to include one or more of a convention's guests of honor as judges, get a chance to discuss in advance their feelings about judging. Some guests take it quite seriously and are excellent judges, others do it because it's expected of them but worry about hurting fan's feelings. In the latter case, *add* them to your judging panel, but simply to ask them to come up with a Judge's Choice award for the costume that most appealed to them – for any reason. Have the remainder of the panel be prepared to do the rest of the judging.

The other critical member of your judging panel is the judges clerk. It's their job to shuffle paperwork, record awards, and keep the judging panel focused and on track to complete deliberations in a timely fashion. During the show, they can act as timekeeper if there is a time limit, and the Masquerade Director (you) can inform them in advance of any special considerations arranged for particular entries. If the judges have a question requiring a ruling from the MD, the clerk can come get you while the judges keep deliberating.

"Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid."

Han Solo (as played by Harrison Ford), Star Wars, 1977

On the subject of judging, we recommend against any sort of numerical scoring system. You've picked your judges for their expert opinions; let them exercise them! I like the system Adrian Butterfield taught me:

- Sort the entries into "Yes", "No", and "Maybe" piles.
- See if Best in Show and Best of Division winners are easily agreed upon.
- Come up with the award names for the rest of the Yes pile.
- Go through the Maybe pile and see which of those get awards, and name them.
- Announce results.

Make yourself accessible in advance to answer questions

Make sure everybody knows what the hell is happening, preferably in advance.

Dana MacDermott

- Have a dedicated email address for questions.
- Start a Frequently Asked Questions list -- when good questions come in, add them and their answers to your published information.

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- Websites and LiveJournal communities are very good for this. If your event has web forums, be sure to join them and answer questions there.
- Join Cosplay.com and watch the forums there for questions about your contest.
- If someone writes you via postal mail, be sure to reply!

The more places you watch for questions and the more promptly you respond, the easier life will be when your actual show rolls around.

Have a mandatory contestant meeting

"I have heard with admiring submission the experience of the lady who declared that the sense of being perfectly well dressed gives a feeling of inward tranquility which religion is powerless to bestow."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

At a small event, you probably will not be able to have a tech rehearsal. See if you can get an hour for a meeting in the room with the stage in it. Every entry must have at least one representative at the meeting, and the end of the meeting is the drop-dead deadline for handing in contest forms. At the start of the meeting, introduce yourself, any of the judging panel members who can attend, your AV/tech person, the head of your green room staff, and whoever will be checking contestants in at the green room.

This meeting is your chance to take roll of your entries, hand out your contestant/backstage passes, explain the traffic flow that entries will be going through during the contest, and encourage them to ask any and all questions. If you have the room with the stage, make time for everyone to walk up the steps, walk across the stage and down the exit steps.

By taking an hour in the afternoon, you can have your contestants spend significantly less time waiting to go on stage in the green room. This makes life more pleasant for everyone.

The meeting should end 3-4 hours before the call for your judges, so you can plan the flow of your show and get all the scripts ready.

Plan the entire show.

"Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes."

[Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

"Dead air" is your enemy when trying to entertain an audience. If you approach your contest and the events leading up to and after it as one collected theatrical presentation, you'll end up with a happier audience, contestants, and management.

After your contestant meeting, you can pick the run order for your contestants. Generally speaking, put the Young Fans first. If you have a large exhibition-only piece, place it last so your judges can begin deliberations before the audience realizes they are gone. The rest of run-order design is question of moving the entries around to balance the show: separate multiple versions of the same costume if you have any, mix up the skill divisions, mix up humorous/serious, etc. The easiest way I've found to do it is print the title, division and number of members onto small pieces of paper and shuffle them around on the floor until I'm satisfied with the arrangement.

It's very important to keep track of your judges, so your show is not delayed by a frantic canvassing of local watering holes in search of an errant panelist. A judges' dinner about 90 minutes before the Green Room opens makes sure that you have them all on hand, lets them meet each other before they have to deliberate together, and lets you discuss your wishes regarding judging and awards in advance of the competition. Your workmanship judges will likely go directly from dinner to the contestants waiting in the Green Room.

Arrange staggered check-in for your Green Room. Entries requiring workmanship judging should arrive earlier. Entries with small children should have the latest practical check-in time.

Keep the stage tech simple

Never believe them when they tell you your tech crew will magically appear on the day of the event.

Kate Morgenstern, Masquerade Director, LosCon 24

Your facilities may be an item over which you have very little control. You may or may not have stage risers, or you may have to use the dance floor which will be filled with attendees after the masquerade ends. Find out as early as you can what you'll be dealing with, and if you can, plan the audience seating accordingly. If you don't have risers, staggering the seats from row to row will provide a better view. If you must use the dance floor, perhaps you can seat the audience all around it.

Find out who is running the sound and lights – again, this is a place where you may have to use what is provided, or you may be able to choose your own techs. In either case, talk to them in advance about what you expect, and stress the keep-it-simple concept with them, too!

You can make up for these limitations by recruiting some key people of your own to wrangle the resources you are handed. As Kate says, don't expect the crew to magically appear. You might just need to have your people cueing the "official" tech people as the show runs (especially if your venue turns out to be a union-only location).

For a small masquerade, you don't try to get fancy on the tech:

Go for basic lighting – no follow spots, just enough lighting instruments to fill the stage with good even lighting. If there is a particularly hot spot on the stage, spike it with an easy-to-see marker and make sure your contestants know how to find it.

You may or may not be able to achieve a full blackout in your room due to either technical limitations of your venue or safety requirements. Find out in advance how low you can take the lights and how difficult it is to manage. You may need a gofer/stagehand by the room light switches to achieve blackout ... Do you have enough volunteers to do that?

Plan similarly for music – basic capabilities with decent sound. If your sound guy can rip everything to a laptop, it makes things simpler, but if not, set up for CDs. Make it clear in your documents that basic starting and stopping of music is all is available, with the ability to fade the sound out at the end of an entry. If an entry needs fancier sound cues, the contestants must mix the recording themselves in advance and deliver it complete.

When designing your entry forms, limit the lighting cues to when the lights come on (before or after entrance) and when they go out (if at all). Do the same for music cues. Plan your FRED (your standard light and sound cues) and describe it on the form, so your contestants don't waste time describing something you'll already be doing.

Have some extra music available

"Kudos to Marty Gear, who has done all of us a big service by compiling CDs of suitable music and sharing them with masquerade directors and tech crews!"

Byron Connell, Sick Pups, Philcon 2006 and 2006 Masquerade Director.

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It is entirely likely that someone (most often an entry in the Novice division, but not necessarily) will suddenly realize that they have brought no music. If you have a library of tracks available from which they can select, you'll avoid having an audio dead spot in the lineup.

The other use for your extra music is as house music for warmup/filler during the show. If you like, you can actually build in advance a playlist that fits the theme/builds the mood of your event! If you are using a PC/MP3 player to run sound, you can set up those lists in the software. Otherwise, just burn mix tapes or CDs for before/during/after the sections of your show. It doesn't have to be high-tech: mix more music than you need and let it play. If you want to get fancy, have a special set for the final 10 minutes before the show starts to build the mood for the opening and cue your sound person to run it when you give the 10 minute warning.

Take advantage of technology: have a computer and printer on hand and use them!

No matter how small the contest, it will be more work than you expect.

John O'Halloran

John is absolutely right: *certain aspects of running a costume competition do not scale with the size of the contest and require just as much work for a small show as for a large one.* It may seem like overkill, but even for a small competition, having a computer and small inkjet printer on hand will make life much easier if you harness the technology to

- a. use a database for your entries
- b. print scripts and forms for your MC, crew and judges
- c. print certificates
- d. double-check information.

Using a database for masquerade entries will let you print custom scripts and forms for all your crew and judges; it also means that only one person has to read the contestants' handwriting. I've had the best success by having one or two people at the masquerade registration desk taking forms and entering the information while they wait, rather than having contestants enter it themselves. That way you can confirm spelling, pronunciation, etc. as you go through their original form and then show them the completed data entry screen before letting them go. You can use a full-fledged database program*, or even something as simple as a spreadsheet, and then harness the mail-merge abilities of your favorite word processing software to print your forms and scripts. When it comes time to make award certificates, you can use the same technology to print them on the spot!

A couple more high-tech tricks to speed things up:

- Design your certificates in advance, and print them in color with a large blank area for the award info.
- Before the show, have each judge sign a blank white sheet of paper and use a digital camera to capture their signatures. Then do a layout of your certificate and embed the images of the signatures right into that. (Obviously, if you have a scanner, you can do the same thing.)
- When it is time to print the awards, print the award info and the signatures in black and white on the inkjet – that usually goes much, much faster than color printing and you can have them on hand to deliver to the winners!

As mentioned in the [Keep the stage tech simple](#) section, using a laptop/mp3 player and software to organize the music is another way to use technology to make running your show simpler and smoother.

**Note: I have developed a database in MS-Access that we've used for a half-dozen contests now (a web-based version is in development for Costume-Con 26), and will be happy to provide copies of it (as-is) if folks request it from me.*

Take Good Care of the Contestants

Good Den Mothers and a Good Green Room are the key to a happy masquerade
Arabella Benson, dancing Alien

Treat you contestants well; if they go away happy (whether they've won or not) you'll have a masquerade next year.
Dana MacDermott

This one probably seems obvious, but it's important – after all, the contestants are the entertainment the audience is waiting to see; without them you have no show!

Make sure your green room has a good supply of water and bendable straws. Have some light, tidy snacks available for them. I like the little goldfish crackers and small pretzels because they are baked, not fried, and thus are less likely to leave greasy smudges.

Make sure there are chairs for the contestants to sit on, and be prepared to move them around for folks who need to perch rather than sit on a chair that's part of a fixed bank of chairs.

Make sure it's ventilated, as well! Bring in a box or standing oscillating fan if necessary.

If you can provide a mirror and some basic repair supplies, it will do much to help your contestants feel ready to go on stage.

The Green Room staff is as important as the supplies. You may not need multiple "dens" in a small masquerade, but you still need people who can stay pleasant and supportive while keeping the chaos somewhat under control. Your Green Room head should set the tone. If it's a hike to the nearest restroom, have someone assigned to act as usher for contestants answering the call of nature.

Have one person at the door with a copy of the contestant list to check people in as they arrive. If someone has to step out to utilize the euphemism, make sure they check out and back in so the Green Room staff knows where they are.

Post at least one copy of the run order in LARGE TYPE where everyone can see it, and when the show begins, your staff can mark off entries as they go.

Have several ushers (each with a copy of the run order) to make sure your entries get to the stage door on time. If it's a long hike, this is one place FRS radios can come in handy. Have another set of ushers to get them through any photo lines and back to the green room if that's where they are going.

If you can't get a video feed of the show into the green room, try to reserve a chunk of the seating for contestants to sit after their stage appearance if they wish to do so.

A note about workflow and traffic: If you are short space or budget, and it's possible to shoot your official photos before the show starts, you can convert that photo pit to the fan photo area during the show.

REMEMBER to thank your contestants before and after the show.

Start on time, finish on time, have a good time

"Actually, this isn't the time for the masquerade director to have a good time. The MD is there to work to assure that the audience and the entrants have a good time!

Have a good time later -- after the show, and your job, is over.

Byron Connell, Sick Pups, Philcon 2006 and 2007 Masquerade Director and CC 24 and 25
Historical Masquerade Director

Be Flexible
Bruce MacDermott

I will disagree slightly with Byron on this point. If I've taken the time to set up the show to the best of my abilities, and have a good crew helping me out, I find running the show itself to be quite enjoyable. However, it can also be very stressful. If you've laid your groundwork properly, any crises that come up can be dealt with as necessary and a minimum of drama.

Starting on time is HUGE. Your contestants won't have to wait in the green room as long, the audience won't be twitchy and bored, and it sets a good tone for the entire show. One legitimate reason to hold the curtain is if something (another event) has delayed the audience's main arrival; if you know they are coming, hold the show a few minutes for them. Make sure the contestants and crew, and those already seated know why you've held the curtain.

After the judging, *don't* hold things up more than 5 minutes or so to finish certificates. Have ribbons or something to hand out on the spot, and deliver the certificates the next day or by mail later. As long as the list of awards is complete and clear (and can be delivered to the convention newsletter/website), present the awards, make your thanks, and let everyone go on with the rest of their evening!

Do remember to thank your judges, your crew, your tech people, the convention for having the good sense to "hire" you, the contestants and the audience. *Don't* be long-winded, and remember to apologize in advance for anyone you forget to mention by name.

Then get the heck outta Dodge. Check on your green room staff to make sure they've been able to get free, and make sure any cleanup you're responsible for is taking place. Deliver the running order and awards lists to the convention communications staff (if any) and then go enjoy the rest of the evening. If you've been successful, you'll probably find a bunch of your contestants out there abuzz with all the things they liked. You'll probably also get an earful or two about what they didn't like. Urge them to come to the masquerade postmortem/followup if there is one and share their comments for the benefit of future events, otherwise take note and pass it on.

Congrats! You've run a small masquerade and nobody died (including yourself)! Are you ready to run another one?