



Contestants 'King of the Force' pose together onstage during the 41st Annual Comic-Con Masquerade costume competition. — AP photos



Dorothy Thickett performing as 'Victorian Leafeon'.

Comic-Con cosplay could turn into Hollywood costuming career



Contestant Alyssa Morales performs as 'Happy Happy HitGirl'.

For now, it may be just a hobby, but for the costumed fans at the Comic-Con pop culture expo this past weekend, dressing up can be a first step toward an entertainment career. Costume play - or cosplay - has become a huge component of Comic-Con. Thousands of fans, and some celebrities, too, elaborately disguise themselves as their favorite characters from comic books, movies, TV, video games and anime. Taking photos of the coolest cosplayers is part of the convention experience.

Craftsmanship award

Celebrities can enjoy the festival in anonymity by wearing a mask like so many other fans - just like Daniel Radcliffe did when he secretly dressed as Spider-Man last year. Jessica Chastain considered a mask as a means to invisibly attend Comic-Con's finale event - Saturday night's Masquerade Ball. Part costume contest, part stage show, contestants embody their characters for up to 21/2 minutes in front of an audience of more than 4,000. The judges are Hollywood and Broadway professionals, and many entrants are entertainment hopefuls.

"I would love to make a career out of this," said self-taught artist Jose Davalos, 20, who traveled from Jalisco, Mexico, to show off his "Hades from Disney's 'Hercules'" costume, which featured a screen-worthy, hand-sculpted silicone mask. "My main goal is to be able to be on a movie or maybe work for Disney making things," said Davalos, who won a craftsmanship award for his work. Costume designer Joe Kucharski, who moderated a Costume Designers Guild panel and served as a judge of the Masquerade Ball, said the event is a realistic showcase for emerging artists.

"I would hire somebody based on their work (here)," he said. Costume design pros say the skills cosplayers need to create their characters are often the same ones professionals use to help make TV and film characters come to life. "A lot of things that people are doing at Comic-Con are actually what's being done professionally," said Jared Marantz, who helped create the superhero suits for "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice." "People here are making fake armor out of foam. Well, professionals do that all the time." Scooti Harper, who hand-stitched every stripe on her Victorian corset-and-bustle gown, said she hopes to become "a seamstress in the costume industry."

Winning sketch

"That's the ultimate goal for me," said the 26-year-old, who belonged to the "Women of the Haunted Mansion" ensemble that won best in show at the ball. The Masquerade is also a place for aspiring directors: Katie Forman, 29, who conceived of and directed the

winning sketch, said she was driven by the performance aspect of the event and brought friends talented in fashion on board.

Dorothy Thickett won a prize from UCLA's Copley Center for the Study of Costume Design for her Victorian take on Pokémon's Leafeon character. The 20-year-old University of Calgary computer science student said she came to California for a "double-con trip," showing off her outfit in contests at Comic-Con and the Anime Expo in Los Angeles earlier this month.

Future in costuming

"I always try to enter competitions wherever I can because I love showing off my work," she said. "I love talking to the people backstage, talking to the judges and getting feedback." Thickett studies fashion design online and dreams of a future in costuming. "I'm hoping that eventually I can turn this into a career, but I always do want something to fall back on which, is why I still want to try to continue with my computer science (degree)," she said.

Comic-Con helped make Oksana Nedavniaya's Hollywood dreams come true. Fresh out of college, the aspiring concept artist met "Chronicles of Narnia" costume designer Isis Mussenden, a guest at a Costume Designers Guild panel. The recent graduate approached Mussenden and offered her portfolio, then went off to enjoy the convention. "She contacted me three days later and said, 'Do you remember me?'" Nedavniaya recalled. "They were about to start pre-production on 'Prince Caspian' ... and she asked me if I wanted to illustrate for her. That was my big break." — AP



Contestants 'The Ghostbusterettes' perform on stage.



Contestant Amber Bates performs as 'Poison Ivy'.



Contestant Kaylyn Drott performs as 'Princess Anna of Arendelle'.



Contestant 'Bumblebee' waves to the crowd.



Contestants 'The Women of the Haunted Mansion' perform onstage.



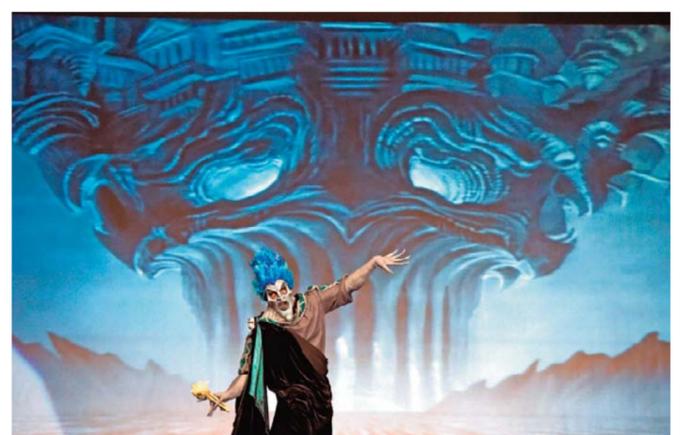
Contestant Danini 'Cait Sith' Bon performs as 'La Muerte'.



Contestant Anthony Bustillo performs as 'Herobrine from Minecraft'.



Contestant Meisha Monk performs as 'Warrior Arcanine from Pokemon'.



Contestant Jose Davalos performs as 'Hades from Hercules'.