



SENTINEL EXCLUSIVE: DISNEY COSTUMES

A Closer Look Behind The Magic

The weighty job of portraying a character is not for the weak.

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In an age of \$100 million thrill rides, Walt Disney Co. is still trying to perfect one of its oldest and most low-tech forms of entertainment: the costumed character.

Thousands of performers at Disney parks around the world must deal with physically demanding conditions and injuries from their heavy and sweltering hot costumes, overzealous children and other hazards.

Performers at Walt Disney World's four Orlando theme parks reported enough injuries in 2005 to affect more than a third of the local 1,900-person work force that portrays 270 different characters, a Sentinel analysis of injury reports found.

Costumes weighing as much as 47 pounds were blamed for 282 out of 773 injuries, mostly to the neck, shoulder or back, according to reports kept by Disney during 2005, the most recent year available, for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

All told, incidents ranging from a death in 2004 to minor ailments such as skin rashes afflict the performers, who typically work 30-minute sets posing for photographs, signing autographs and interacting with Disney guests as well as acting in shows and parades, records show.

"The only thing I can think of to compare it to is a hockey player," said Donna-Lynne Dalton, a union representative and character performer. "Hockey is one of those sports where you can't just do one thing well. You need balance, strength and flexibility. [As a character performer] you also have to have a special personality. Every day you have an experience that lasts someone's lifetime."

In recent years, Disney recruited a former NASA engineer who specializes in materials and bolstered its character-development department -- which spans four nations on three continents -- with research on how the human body endures heat and weight.

The company also exchanges information with military researchers who examine the effects of heat and heavy loads on soldiers and has adopted some materials and techniques originally developed for the auto industry and space program.

"We've benefited from a lot of work that the government's been doing," said Carol Campbell, vice president of character programs and development for Walt Disney Entertainment. "We've been able to take some of their technology to a new level."

Neck, back strain

The injury reports examined by the Sentinel show several patterns.

A burdensome costume head, typically a weighty part of the gear, was specifically cited in 49 cases, often resulting in neck or back strain. Mickey Mouse, Goofy and Donald Duck heads, among others, were specifically mentioned in the reports.

Children or adults were listed as a cause in 107 injuries, in which they pushed, pulled or otherwise hurt performers in costume.

Some reports cited "excited" guests, characters who were "hit by guest," "jumping" children, "heavy" children and "child pulling on costume." Injuries from those incidents include bruises, sprains and other ailments.

While some of the injuries were minor, the reports show that actors at Disney World were injured badly enough in cases in which the costume was cited as a factor to miss a combined 105 days of work in 2005. Actors were transferred to lighter-duty jobs for a month or longer at least 13 times that year because of costume-related conditions.

In 2004, 38-year-old performer Javier Cruz died after he was hit and run over by a parade float backstage while dressed as Pluto.

That incident raised questions about performers' poor vision while in costume. OSHA, the federal agency that enforces labor rules, fined Disney \$6,300 because employees were in areas they were not supposed to be.

Since Cruz's death, the company made several changes such as retraining those involved in parades and increasing the number of spotters who look out for potential hazards alongside the floats. The observers use radios to communicate with the float driver in the event an emergency stop is needed.

The company tries to reduce injuries and has made strides considering performers work a combined 350,000 shifts or more each year in Orlando, said R.K. Kelley, director of entertainment for park operations.

And about five years ago, Disney started formally soliciting feedback from its actors across the globe on prototype designs. There are also channels for feedback on existing costumes. For example, performers who wore the Sully costume -- the furry blue character from Monsters Inc. -- complained it was uncomfortable. As a result, it was redesigned so the weight of the costume was redistributed.

John Dodson, a union steward who has worked as a performer at Disney for nine years, said some costumes cause more injuries than others because of the weight or mobility constraints.

Winnie the Pooh, for example, started out as a particularly heavy costume.

"The body weighs so much combined with the head pushing down, there were lots of neck and shoulder and back injuries," Dodson said.

As a result, the material used to make Pooh's head was changed to make the costume lighter.

The company's guidelines call for the costume weight not to exceed 25 percent of the average body weight of performers playing that role.

More than mice now

Disney's character business evolved dramatically during the past decade, though it has been integral to the company since founder Walt Disney first envisioned a way to bring animated characters off the screen and into his fantasy world.

Campbell, the character-development vice president, keeps a black and white photograph of the original Mickey and Minnie strolling down Disneyland's Main Street. The photo is dated 1956, a year after the original park opened in California.

When Disney World opened in Orlando in 1971, there were fewer than 100 employees who worked as character performers, Kelley said.

Today Disney World employs about 1,900 character actors, about 40 percent more than just 10 years ago. The performers earn between \$7.60 and \$13.65 an hour with opportunities for extra pay for certain duties, such as driving parade floats.

Disney stands alone as the largest operator of a costumed-character program, with no other entertainment company or sports-mascot firm putting as many people on stage for as many hours.

"They're the Cadillac," said Tracy Jones, product manager for Milwaukee-based character-costume developer Olympus Flag and Banner.

The department has grown along with demand by guests for more interactive experiences with their favorite characters, Kelley said.

It's a phenomenon fueled largely by the release in the 1990s of hit animated films such as Toy Story and the merchandising boom spurred by the craze among young girls to emulate the classic Disney princesses.

But even more significant was the aggressive marketing in the early 1990s of a single retail item: the autograph book.

"As simple as it sounds, that simple piece of merchandise, beyond the picture, now was the defined deliverable that the character had for you -- something you could collect," Kelley said. "That started to create the queuing for the characters."

Characters have an essential presence at nearly every major Disney event, including the unveilings of thrill-ride showpieces such as Animal Kingdom's Everest and Epcot's Mission: Space, which carry reported price tags of up to \$100 million.

"It's extremely important to Disney," Kelley said of the characters. "It's what makes Disney, Disney. We hear that quote over and over and over again."

Cast takes classes

The characters are so important to the company that it conducts interviews or focus groups with tens of thousands of guests each year.

Everything from how a character signs an autograph to how a performer walks and gestures is taught in intensive training sessions.

As the program has grown, Disney has grappled with how to keep injuries at a minimum while also keeping consistency among characters in the way they look and act.

The classes now include sessions that detail how actors should bend down, pick up heavy items (such as the bag that contains their costume) and other ergonomically correct movements.

An instructor-led warm-up class designed by sports-medicine experts at Florida Hospital is included at the beginning of each actor's shift.

On a recent morning in a nondescript building behind Epcot, a group of about a half-dozen actors stretched and twisted to thumping music for about 20 minutes before dressing in their costumes. It was a rare glimpse into how Disney prepares its employees for character work.

"Our goal is to prevent all injuries, and we work at it constantly," said Kelley, the director of entertainment.

While the job is physically demanding with risks for stresses and strains on the body, many character performers say it's worth it, with a chance every day to make a child laugh and create a lasting memory.

"Where else can you do a job where you get that kind of love on a daily basis?" asked Sandy Hawkins, manager of the character program.

Working on comfort

Some costumes are so large that performers, once inside the suits, must be picked up by a forklift and hoisted on top of parade floats.

Campbell, the Disney Entertainment executive, said function has come to rival looks in importance during the design of a costume, which can cost upward of \$100,000.

While costumes can be redesigned to better distribute weight or trim pounds, less progress has been made in the way of keeping performers cool inside the sweltering costumes.

In some cases, Campbell said, the company has used less dense furs or fabrics to allow better ventilation.

"I have never heard of a costume that's been redesigned to make it not as hot," said Dodson, the union steward.

Characters typically work sets of about 30 minutes followed by an equally long break in which they are able to remove the costume and cool down.

Various gadgets such as fans, cooling tubes and ice vests have been tried but for the most part add more weight to the costume than they are worth. The gadgets tend to break, performers say, leaving them carrying additional pounds without any benefit.

During the hottest months of the summer, even ice vests are only a temporary fix.

"When it gets into the dead of summer, it gets so hot you really can't use an ice vest anymore because it melts before you get started," Dodson said.

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