

The Art of Looking Real: Creative's Conversation with Cari Smith, *Dear Evan Hansen* Costume Designer

By Elizabeth Montgomery



Dear *Evan Hansen* costume designer, Cari Smith, talks through costuming a modern-dress show, the character whose playlist she had on repeat, and how to honor an iconic striped polo.

Q: How challenging was it to find the right shirt for Evan?



Smith: In the first production meeting, I asked Michelle, "So do we use the polo??"

Both of us agreed it was so iconic that the audiences would be disappointed if it didn't appear. So the search began. It was so iconic that the Broadway run had *Evan Hansen*-branded polos. But they were discontinued and the only ones I could find were smalls. So I kept searching. Polo had something similar, new but needing 4 for two show days and understudies, but they were way out of our budget at \$120 a piece.

So I searched on. Finally I found all of them on eBay; all were different but still the iconic *Evan*.

We, Mason and I, agreed on our favorite and that's what you see on stage today.

Q: What makes Dear Evan Hansen unique from a costume design perspective?

Smith: Most of my shows have been large cast period or fantasy pieces with heavy builds, meaning we make the costumes from scratch. Hansen has a small cast and is contemporary and much more shoppable. The show's scope allows me to develop the characters more deeply. They are complicated people all with good intentions, who are messy and complex. Creating figurative closets for each person was my first goal. What would they have in their closet? What's their favorite color? What is their favorite clothing piece? What music would they listen to? And because we travel with these people on a full emotional journey, what would they choose based on how they felt that day? Is it heavy? Do they need comfort? Do they need to hide or mask who they really are?

Q: What's something audiences might be surprised to learn about the costume design process for this production?

Smith: 1. I have a full music playlist for Conner. I listened to his "soundtrack" anytime I worked on the show.

2. I love intense color. But the grief that both families face in show, only lent me space to develop subtle color choices for the characters. All except Alana and Jared!! They let me have some fun with color.

3. Because Evan rarely changes, everyone's costumes are based around Evan. Evan's wearing light blue...no one else is. Evan is wearing khakis...no one else is.

Q: What do the costumes tell us about the characters?

Smith: I love an Easter egg. Here are some...

- Conner's shirt is a character from a very dark Anime, Berzerk.
- Hatty, who plays Zoe, who is a guitarist, wears a thrifted Nashville shirt and Hatty actually came from Nashville.
- Alana shifts from wearing a bold and quirky black sheep sweater to wearing an ultra hip look with a Howard University t-shirt, (Madison, a Howard grad, is wearing her personal shirt.)
- Jared - I bought so many shirts. Yay for an understudy track so I could use them all. They are sarcastic and very personal to his character. At the end you see Jared, also at university, in the iconic Animal House "College" shirt and blue overshirt, to show maturity and Evan's influence.
- Heidi, Evan's mom, proud of her struggle, wears a custom printed community college shirt after her refusal of a college fund for Evan. In the finale, we also see her moving on from nursing, wearing office attire as a paralegal but still in the same color as her scrubs.

- With the Murphys, we see an emotional journey of healing. Moments of healing can be seen in Cynthia with yellows, Larry greens and Zoe from darker burgundys to lighter florals.



Q: Evan's cast is also an iconic accessory. How did that factor into your design and planning?

Smith: Evan's design also included a grey hoodie for emotional vulnerability. A hoodie that has to go over the cast very quickly. We found that was impossible so our technicians in the costume shop put a hidden zipper to expand the sleeve. Unzip and voila, it goes over the cast. Mason also has to tie his own tie with the cast on so we gave him a rehearsal cast and tie to practice with. Our costume technicians also created a cast that Evan can remove during intermission and reuse daily. It has a false cover so Conner can sign his name every performance.

