Jeffery Phipps, costume designer for ECU Playhouse and Summer Theatre, has the enormous responsibility of creating the authentic look and feel of both dress and personal appearance reflective of the Scotland that existed a 1000 years ago. This is, of course, no small undertaking. A great deal of time and energy goes into the preliminary research from where ideas for costumes and characters emerge. Then the designer must go on to sketch his designs, and from there oversees their construction. And so we venture into the ECU Playhouse’s “Underworld” for a chat with its king.

The first thing that struck Jeffery about this play was the supernatural which plays a an enormous part in the production. Also we have insight into the great decisions that people in the play must make. Not simple decisions such as, what is one going to have for dinner, but rather “Once I make this decision it will create a path that I must follow.” In other words, what’s done is done and there is no turning back. These characters are all very powerful; there is nothing wishy-washy about them. All of these characters have very strong personalities.

A recurring element in MacBeth is blood. The director wanted the designer to create the ever-present feeling of forebodingness. In this time period people attained their power through blood letting. So the idea of bloodshed is illustrated in the costumes as well as other design areas. Dried blood, specifically, is a recurring visual element. Jeffery has decided to let this idea drive most of his design work. He even goes so far as to use blood red rice paper to draw his costume designs.

The designer’s ultimate goal is to make the character seem more real for the audience and the actor. Mr. Phipps took a trip to England over Christmas and was able to do some great period research. For example, did you know that it was common for most people to own one set of clothes? Only the nobility could afford more than that. People also wore several layers of clothes in order to keep warm in the cold and harsh climate generally associated with Scotland, and bathing was not a common practice. Once or twice a year was enough. Jeffery is taking great pains to create this feel for the audience so that they may better understand this dark period of death and decay.