EVERYTHING APPEARS CALM. Amid flickering lights, people scramble to find their seats to one of Southern California’s most unique art performances – the Pageant of the Masters. 

As the bright lights fade and the stage lights come on, gasps from the audience are clearly audible, for there – in living, breathing color – is a glorious reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper.

Behind the scenes, though, a different picture emerges as Mary LaVenture (JOUR ’77) and a team of volunteers work meticulously to put the finishing touches on their masterpieces – recreations of some of the world’s greatest art treasures: the ancient Greek statue of Venus de Milo, the Iwo Jima Memorial, and Rome’s Trevi Fountain, to name just a few.

No detail goes unnoticed – from designing the perfect costume and applying layers of paint to the performers to getting that perfect fold in a gown. LaVenture is nothing if not a perfectionist, and it shows in this magnificent recreation of people and props.

The 2000 Cal Poly College of Liberal Arts Alumna of the Year has spent most of her adult life designing and making costumes, first as a Cal Poly student for productions at the Spanos Theatre, then for her own costume supply company and Disney theme parks. And now for the famed Pageant of the Masters, a 75-year tradition that literally brings artwork to life during the months of July and August.

After serving 10 years as headpiece director for the Pageant of the Masters, two years ago LaVenture took on the additional responsibility of costume director. The pageant is part of the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts, which has been wooing and wowing hundreds of thousands of visitors for 75 years.

Her life, she says, is divided into seasons. The fall is spent preparing for the next year’s pageant and getting much-deserved down time to travel and work on outside projects. Building season lasts from January to June. Once the paintings and sculptures are cast for the event, LaVenture starts designing and building costumes and headpieces for up to 200 people.

There’s a great sense of accomplishment in the process, LaVenture said, even though it is somewhat convoluted. LaVenture must take a two-dimensional picture, turn it into a costume and headpiece that fits a three-dimensional person that ultimately looks two-dimensional on the stage.

Her challenges don’t stop once the costumes are built. Dealing with a cast up to 200 people, ranging in age from 4 to 85, can be unpredictable. “People get sick or have car problems,” she said. “But, we’ve dealt with it all and have contingency plans in place.”

The hardest thing, she claims, is finding people who have the skills to work on this kind of stage show. “It’s not regular costume construction,” LaVenture said. “You have to think outside the box – but inside the frame.”

LaVenture still finds time to stay connected to Cal Poly. She and her husband, Ken Turlis, recently endowed the LaVenture-Turlis Scholarship in the College of Liberal Arts and hope to set up more scholarships in the future.

More information on the Festival of Arts and the Pageant of the Masters can be found online at www.foapom.com.