

How-To



I, Zombie Ed Martinez

A professional movie, TV, and theater makeup artist offers

practical advice on getting great results creating a zombie character, with tools and techniques that you can learn to do.

Many costumers want to create zombies because zombies are really popular right now. The problem is that most costumers are not professional makeup or prosthetics artists, but they still want to do a good job with zombies and have a lot of fun. I'd like to do is talk about what costumers can do to get zombies right.

There are some simple, basic things that anyone who wants to do good zombies should know and understand. First of all, when you create a character, this is going to be you as a zombie. Approach it as a whole character. It's not just you from the neck up. As a costumer, you should also be concerned with what you wear from the neck down.

Think of where you're going to use your creation. If it's a Halloween costume, and you're going to people's homes to have dinner and sit on their furniture, that's something to consider. If you're going to a zombie crawl or a zombie walk, or

something outdoors in public, you're not as concerned about getting blood on your friend's carpet, so you can be more messy.

Some people who think about being a zombie don't think it through very well, and they concern themselves from the neck up. They paint their face blue, throw a lot of blood around, and think they're done. You can certainly do that, but as someone who takes a pride in what you do, you might want to put a little more thought into it.

Ask yourself, were you doing a job or an activity when you became a zombie?

Consider that you can be a particular type of zombie, and get creative. You can be a football player zombie, a mailman zombie, a cheerleader or a zombie bride. Choose something distinctive, interesting, not just your average tee-shirt and jeans and normal clothes zombie.

The people who look boring as zombies are the ones who you don't even notice in a crowd; they just blend into the background. If you're going to be a really great zombie, you want to be a bit "stand-outish" to be a little more interesting. Go to



Boring zombies blend into the background, while really great zombies stand out from the crowd.

a thrift store, or look in your refuse costume collection, in your old trunks for costumes you don't use any more. Pick something that can be destroyed. Be creative. For example, start with an old suit, or an old prom dress. At the thrift store, you can buy an old Santa Clause costume for \$5, or something career related like nurse's scrubs. Take that home, and start working on it well in advance of the day that you're going to need it.

Start by distressing it. There are lots of ways to distress fabric. For example, take sand paper, and files and rasps, and rub the fabric. An old cheese grater works well to rough up fabric. Put it in the laundry several times. Make it fade, use bleach or tea stain it. You don't want it to look like you just bought it yesterday and shredded it up a little. Make it look worn and well-used, so the wear and tear has some quality and character to it, and that it didn't just take ten minutes to do blood stains and shredding.

Now you have your costume, your suit, your Santa Clause costume, or whatever it is



Zombie Santa finds himself fresh out of elves.
Photo courtesy of [UnReality Magazine](#).

that you're going to be. You've distressed it and put some holes in it, and now, you're starting to think that you have a big hole that's going to show your normal human skin through it. What can you do to make that look better? Here are a couple of tricks to try.

First, you go to [Spirit Halloween](#) stores, or one of the theater supply stores, or on-line and purchase a small quantity of liquid latex. Then you can make patches of "zombie skin" to place on the back-sides of some of the holes you've created in the fabric. Either hot-glue or stitch them in so they're a part of the costume.

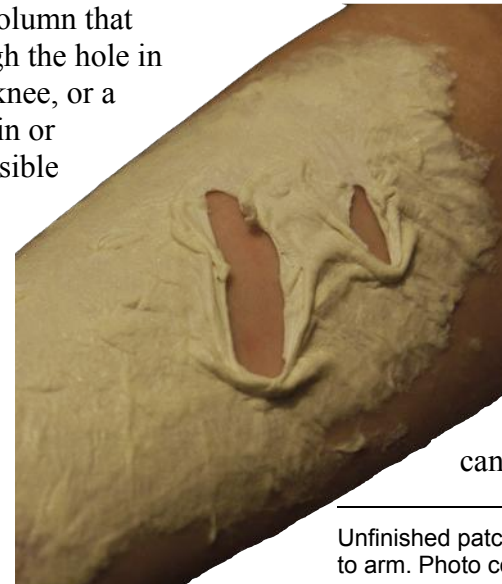
For example, you could create a spinal column that sticks out through the hole in your back, or a knee, or a piece of your shin or forearm that's visible through the suit jacket. You could also glue

those pieces onto your skin with spirit gum or other skin-safe adhesive and the hole would float over the spot. Effectively, that would become an appliance.

The advantage of attaching them to the costume by sewing them on or using hot glue is that when you take it off, you can just hang it on the rack, and you don't have to go through the process of gluing appliances on yourself each time you wear it. You just have to worry about your hands and your face.

Another important thing, kind of a taboo when creating zombies, is ending the makeup at the wrist or neck, because when you move, the clothing shifts and you see this horrible normal human flesh peeking out beneath it, and it ruins the illusion. Don't stop painting at the edge of your wrists or neck: go at least five or six inches beyond where your clothing stops, so that if your clothing shifts, you don't reveal a patch of un-made-up skin.

The thought process of coming up with a character and its backstory is important. That way, if you're out in public at a zombie walk or at a party, and someone starts up a conversation with you (even though zombies aren't supposed to talk), you can talk about a wound or a



Unfinished patch of pre-made 'zombie skin' applied to arm. Photo courtesy of [MaaaaaaY](#) on [Flickr](#).

severed arm and tell them how that happened. Or maybe you can tell them why you're a Santa Clause zombie. Be an actor, come up with a character and a backstory, and use that to inform the design of your zombie makeup and clothing.

Now let's talk about the makeup for the face and hands. My advice for beginners is, don't make it too complex and difficult. To do a really complex zombie means making appliances and going through the whole process of making body prosthetics by molding a section of your body. I'm not going to cover that here because it's way too complex for our purposes. We're covering the basics for beginners.

If you wanted to have a wound or scar, all of those things are available online or at a Spirit Halloween-type store. They come in varying degrees of quality, made out of various materials and are priced accordingly. One type is made out of "slip-cast" latex, which is the same kind you find in liquid form at a theatrical or Halloween supply store. It's just painted into a mold, and when it dries, it's powdered and removed, and painted, and this creates an appliance.

You can learn to do simple ones yourself with liquid latex, using cotton and tissue painted on glass or something non-porous, like a plate. You can mix in things like cornmeal or cracker crumbs, or cereal like Rice Krispies or crushed up corn flakes, and things like that to add texture.

Basically, you paint down layers of liquid latex, then apply cotton or tissues, and

then more latex. Use q-tips or your fingers to apply liquid latex because it will ruin a brush. To one of the layers of wet latex you can apply the cracker crumbs or crushed cereals. Then you brush more latex over that to seal it in. Use a blow drier to dry the layers as you go. Then you peel your appliance off by powdering with baby powder underneath it as you lift it up. Powder keeps it from sticking to itself. You'll end up with a flexible, bumpy, rotted skin texture that you can paint or make up to use as zombie skin.

Then you can glue it on your skin using skin safe adhesive like spirit gum, or glue it as a patch behind the holes in your costume like we discussed earlier. It's a cheap, easy to make, down-and-dirty no-mold appliance that's just directly build up technique.

Some of the better commercial pieces are made of foam latex and are unpainted. You'd paint it up yourself, and apply it to the skin with glues, and then blend it in and put fake blood on it and that sort of thing. You can be as elaborate as you choose.



Inexpensive bare ribs prosthetics. Image courtesy [Buy Scary Halloween Costumes](#).

As far as the making up the skin, to do a very effective, good zombie I recommend a few basic colors of water-based cake makeup. I prefer the Kryolan brands, which I get from a [Kryolan](#) theatrical makeup store in San Francisco. In Los Angeles, there's also [Berman Industries](#) and [Naime's](#). Ben Nye and Mehron also make water based makeups that work very well. You can also buy from these suppliers a product called rubber mask grease paint, which can be used to paint appliances. Appliances can also be painted with acrylic paint.

You can purchase your blood from Spirit Halloween stores or specialty makeup suppliers as mentioned above, but you can also make the blood by looking online for one of the many formulas available. Usually, they're using clear Karo syrup as the base, plus food coloring. This is derivative of the [Dick Smith formula](#) that he invented in the era of movies like *The Godfather* and *The Exorcist*, and others. Ever since he invented the formula with Karo syrup, that's pretty much the formula everyone uses. It is sticky and messy, but there are less messy alternatives today.

For example, you can use acrylic paint for the blood on your fabrics, so you can have dried dark red stains all over your clothes that won't come off on other things. In addition, gelatin blood goes on wet but when it's dry it still looks like it's wet. Gelatin is heated to melting and applied and if used safely and carefully it can be applied

it to your face or your fabric. When dry, it's not wet to the touch and won't transfer onto clothing. You can find gelatin blood online.

I've been doing zombie make up for a really long time. My first feature film over twenty years ago was a zombie film called *The Dead Pit*. The kind of zombie makeup we did then and are still doing today is reminiscent of what we call the [George Romero](#) style zombie. The skin is distinctively different in color than flesh tones. A lot of zombies today, in more recent films like *Twenty-Eight Days Later* are usually so fresh that they're still fairly human looking, fairly flesh-toned. They're not pale, and white, and grey, and blue like the George Romero movies. The original *Night of the Living Dead*, even though it was in black-and-white, set the style and tone for what my favorite zombies look like.



From Ed Martinez's first zombie movie, *The Dead Pit*.

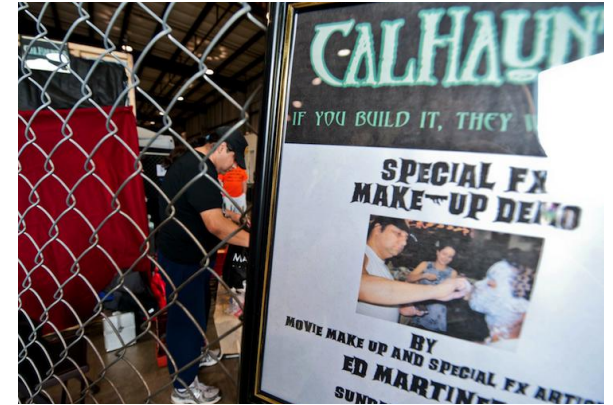
At the 2011 Maker Fair in San Mateo, California, I did a special effects makeup demo with the California Hunters Society ([CalHaunts](#)). I'd like to talk a little bit about what I did there to achieve that really dead, rotting look on one person's face and body.

I usually use opaque, water-based Kryolan cake makeup called AquaColor. I usually use just a hand full of colors, like a cake of white, a cake of black, a blue or a grey, but choice of color just depends on how fast I'm working. One of the things I do is use a lot of sponges for applying the white base, as well as for texturing, especially if I'm moving fast.



I've done jobs where we literally had over a hundred people to do with a small team of five or six people in a few hours. What I've learned to do is set up an assembly line where the 5 or 6 artists each has a make up station. The zombie actor would move from one station to the next getting various things done, appliances put on, color applied to hands and arms, etc.

First, I base out the skin to look dead. Using a standard white sponge, I moisten the sponge, squeeze out a lot of the water, swirl



around the sponge on the white cake, and start sponging on fairly quickly onto the skin. The actors keep his or her eyes and mouths closed, and I just blend it up into the hairline so that there is no area of normal human flesh showing. I get the make up all the way down the neck, the back of the neck, the ears, inside the ears, everything. That way they look dead. You don't want it to look solid "clown" white, but slightly translucent so a little of their skin tone shows through. At a certain point after you die, all the blood leaves your face and extremities and you look chalky-grey.

The next thing I do is take a ½ in wide soft-bristle, squared-off brush, and dip that into the water and then into the black or blue-grey cake makeup, and do shadowing. I do their eye sockets like a skull, and their lips as if they are cracked and rotting. Often, my assistant will have already based out the arms and the hands, depending on how much skin will be seen. We check all the odd areas like the back of the neck and behind the ears.

Then I'll go in with the black face powder, which Kryolan also sells, with a powder brush. I use it go over the ear holes and the shadow areas of the ears, the eye sockets, and the nasal-labia folds. (I tap the brush after dipping it in powder to remove excess, be careful a little goes a long way). Sometimes I have them grimace or growl so I can see where all the folds of their face are, and I'll just hit some lines of accent or shadow around those areas, as well as the temples, and inside the nostrils.

Now the person is paled-out white like they're dead, the areas of the face have all



been shadowed in black. You could add a little blood in the hairline or the corners of the mouth, nostrils, or ears and stop there. But if you want to be a little more elaborate, you can add a whole bunch of interesting textures with sponges.

I use all kinds of sponge textures, like the kind you use to wash dishes, and cut them up to make 1-in by 2-in squares with rounded edges and big pores on it. I'll dip those into thinned grey or blue-grey and hit the white areas with the sponge to create all these cool textures that look like rot. You have to be judicious and do it in only a few areas. Sea sponges, which you can buy at craft stores are also great. I keep several

charged with different colors and bounce those around on the person to create different patterns and textures.

When you're done with all that, I recommend sealing the make up with a sealer – even hairspray will work for this purpose. Give the whole face and head several liberal coats. Let dry before adding any blood.

For a really great touch, try fake teeth. You can get great zombie teeth online from a company called Dental Distortions. They have movie quality teeth for a very reasonable price. But, if you don't want to



go that route, a simple alternative is using tooth enamels, which you can purchase from Kryolan or any major theatrical supply house. It's an alcohol-based liquid stain. First you wipe the teeth with a tissue to dry them, then brush on the tooth stain. It dries very quickly. I like the color "tobacco stain," a kind of dirty-brown color. I sometimes use a blow drier or fan the teeth to ensure they're dry. The stain will come off easily you drink or eat food so I tell the actor to avoid it.

After the tobacco color, I apply black tooth stain to the edges with a jagged pattern to make it look like the teeth have been shattered or broken. When you see the zombie growl, they look way better than if their teeth are normal white color, and its far easier than artificial teeth. The stain comes right off when you brush your teeth.

One other hint is to add a couple of drops of blue, red, and green food coloring to mouthwash to create a blackish-purple color, and rinse the mouth with the colored wash and let the food coloring stain the inside of the mouth, gums, and tongue. If you do this before the tooth enamel, you get this ugly blackish-purple stain inside the mouth and the horrible, rotted teeth that really completes the look.

As a final step, I use hair gel on their head, get it all messed up and sticking out like bed-head, and sometimes add a little blood dripping down onto their ear. It looks like they've had their head smashed or

Use tooth enamels to create a rotting mouth.



something because their hair is all jagged and stiff, and it's a simple, easy quick fix for the hair problem. Of course, if you're a fireman zombie, you wear a fire helmet or other appropriate gear and don't have to worry about your hair.

You finally have all the makeup and your costume on and you've ready to step out. Now you have to *act* the part, be in character, and be a zombie. One thing George Romero said to people when he was teaching them to play zombies in his movies is, don't everybody act the same. He didn't want to see fifty zombies all dragging one foot, or all with their arms outstretched in front of



them like Frankenstein. Do something of your own. Think about how you got the wound that killed you and play to that.

In the movie *Shaun of the Dead*, one character is telling her friends how to make a good convincing zombie to slip through a bunch of real zombies. The girl told them to be, "vacant, with just a hint of sadness." So my final piece of advice is to stare off vacantly with a touch of sadness – unless you're attacking! Because what is the most important feature of any zombie? The mouth and teeth; do not overlook this important area. When you open your mouth to attack, you want to look convincing!

Ed Martinez has taught for many years at the Academy of Cosmetic Arts in Los Gatos, California, and has held many seminars and workshops in addition to teaching at the Academy of Art University San Francisco. One of his early films was the zombie classic "The Dead Pit." He has worked on award-winning music videos, commercials, television shows, and feature films. Projects include "Amityville: A New Generation," "Retardead," "Animal Planet's Hero Animals," and the vampire film "The Damned" (see [IMDb](http://IMDb.com)). He specializes in instructing students on wounds, burns, lacerations and other casualty simulations in addition to old age and prosthetic makeup. He also teaches a special final class on fantasy looks, airbrush body painting, and special effects.