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## Opaque, Transparent or Translucent? Tips for Making the Best Fabric Choice for Stage Draperies

### When buying custom made stage draperies or backdrops what type of fabric should I choose and when? Opaque, Transparent..... Or Translucent?

This IS a great question – and if you are in the market for stage drapes it is likely one of the first decisions you will need to make. Many factors should be considered when selecting your flame retardant fabric for your stage drapes or backdrops – and the best place to start is “where is the drape going and how do I intend to use it?”

Here are some tips and tricks for selecting the best flame retardant fabric for your stage, theatre or event, as well as some key product fabric names to put in the mix for each category. When shopping for quotes you will find that not all suppliers of fabric have the same product names. You'll find our fabric products and uses provided here on our [eswatches page](#).

Here's the basics on the three big types of fabrics (opaque, translucent and transparent) and the fabrics' select characteristics. Let's start with some definitions, real life examples of textile uses, and then look some of the more popular fabric choices in the industry today.

#### OPAQUE:

o·paque  
 adjective

1. not able to be seen through; not transparent.

So let's start with the heavy weight of the industry – the OPAQUE fabrics that allow absolutely NO light thru them. To determine if you have an opaque fabric set it against a window and if you can't see any light passing thru it then it is indeed opaque. Opaque materials have uses in theatre and special events where you have a need to completely mask a light source, or to hide and any and all activity or action going on behind the drape.

*An example* – an upstage masking drape on a theatre stage where there is an artist walkway or passage way behind it. You may have some low lever lighting back there for the cast to move safely – and you won't want to see the light or the people as they cross from stage left to stage right behind the drape.

*A second example* – portable dressing room spaces or artist rest zones.... Such as pipe and drape setups in an arena that are designed to provide privacy. You won't want everyone seeing the shadows thru the drape if there are people changing in there – you want privacy for the artist and certainly don't need to encourage any peeping – so again – an opaque material would be the right choice here.

*Lastly* – a main stage grand drape in a traditional theatre installation needs to be opaque. When the drape is closed and in audience view – you don't want to see any set changes taking place on stage – so the drape needs to be opaque. *Bear in mind however – you can make a drape opaque by LINING it with a second fabric..... so don't eliminate a cloth choice just because it is not opaque in and of itself.* If budget permits then a lining will indeed do the trick.

Here are some fabrics that are OPAQUE:

**22oz Encore Velour** – a newer staging fabric that combines the luxurious look of velour with inherent flame resistance and is 100% Avora Polyester. This fabric is a little more expensive however it does not need to be re-treated for flame retardance. This is an excellent choice for rental and stock draperies and comes in a wide selection of colors. If you wanted to use a similar fabric for a pipe and base situation you might think about the lighter weight 15oz Encore.

**13oz Apollo Velour** – this is a lighter weight opaque fabric that combines the luxurious look of velour with inherent flame resistance and is 100% Polyester. This would be good when considering an opaque stage curtain. This fabric is a perfect when you want to mask your stage at a lower cost. This fabric comes in a wide selection of colors.



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**Roadura** – This is a medium weight ready to use water resistant self-lined fabric that is completely opaque and is made of Denier Polyester with coating. The face of the fabric is a semi slick black and the backside is a bright white. This fabric is very easy to wipe clean when needed.

And an OPAQUE LINING option: **Ranger Lining Cloth** – this is a medium weight cloth that is a good choice for use when lining draperies. This fabric comes in beige and black.

**TRANSLUCENT:**

trans·lu·cent  
 adjective

1. (of a substance) allowing light, but not detailed images, to pass through; semitransparent.

TRANSLUCENT fabrics are very often lighter to the touch and fall into the silky and soft categories. Usually medium to light weight these more translucent materials are typically polyesters, poly blends or nylons however there are some finely milled cottons that are also translucent. Translucency is important in scenarios such as these:

- 1) you plan to “back light” the drapery and you want the drapes to glow with the lighting effects from behind
- 2) you are going to create a silhouette effect with artists or props..... in these scenarios we put a person behind the translucent drapes and then light them from behind – what the audience will see is in fact the shadow or silhouette of the action. This is a dramatic effect often used at the start of concerts.
- 3) you won’t have any backlight at all to contend with – in this case it really isn’t an issue if a fabric is a medium or light weight or if it is translucent – if you are always using front light – and have no concern that back lighting will impact the effect then you have many fabrics to choose from
- 4) you plan to rear project video onto the backdrop or drapery – for a “poor mans” projection screen we often see translucent fabrics used for rear (and of course front) projection. It is an affordable way to get a large surface to project video or images onto from behind.



Some TRANSLUCENT fabrics we represent that are popular in the drapery marketplace are:

**Poly Silk** – This fabric is a light weight 100% Polyester that comes in black, white and silver. This fabric comes at a width of 120” – 126” and is perfect for light weight translucent kabuki drops.

**Stretch Cambio** – This is a medium weight Polyester / Spandex fabric that comes in white and black. This is an excellent fabric for creating stretch shapes.

**Textura** – This is a light weight 100% Polyester fabric that is Inherently Flame Retardant. It is very versatile and used in a multitude of applications from stages, special events and trade shows. This fabric comes in a multitude of jewel tone colors.



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**TRANSPARENT:**

trans·par·ent  
 adjective

1. (of a material or article) allowing light to pass through so that objects behind can be distinctly seen.

Flame retardant fabrics that are transparent are a unique lineup of textiles. The most common materials that are used are the “magic fabrics” such as Sharkstooth Scrim, Opera Net, Bobinettet or Gauze. Other materials such as Voile (pronounced Voy-el) is also transparent. I like to compare transparent to sheer – or “very see through”.

There are of course plenty of opportunities to use these transparent materials – in particular the “magic fabrics” such as sharkstooth scrim. What makes this an interesting and popular cloth is that when front lit it will take on the appearance of being opaque – but it is in fact an optical illusion due to the coarse weave of the cotton threads. When you remove the front light from the cloth and light whatever object is on the stage behind the cloth then you will see right through it! And there is the magic. Now you see it now you don't. Traditional theatre productions love scrim and bobinettes for these special effects. The fabrics tend however to be more fragile than their translucent or opaque counterparts – so for a touring environment they aren't as well suited.

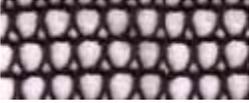
**Sharkstooth Scrim** – This fabric comes in a variety of sizes and fabric content. When lit from the front the fabric has an opaque effect. When objects are lit behind the scrim the fabric has a transparent effect.

Available Colors		
	<b>Sharkstooth Scrim, White</b>	
11' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	25' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	35' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Heavy Weight 3-Thread, White
15.6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	31' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	35' <b>IFR</b> 100% Polyester, White
19'6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	35' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White	39' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, White
	<b>Sharkstooth Scrim, Lt. Grey</b>	
31' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Lt. Grey		
	<b>Sharkstooth Scrim, Black</b>	
11' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	25' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	35' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Heavy Weight 3-Thread, Black
15.6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	31' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	35' <b>IFR</b> 100% Polyester, Black
19'6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	35' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Black	39' <b>FR</b> Black
	<b>Sharkstooth Scrim, Lt. Blue</b>	
15.6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Lt. Blue	31' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Lt. Blue	
19'6" <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Lt. Blue	35' <b>FR</b> 100% Cotton, Lt. Blue	



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**Bobinette** – This fabric comes in black and white and in several different weaves, it becomes transparent when lit from behind.

Available Colors and Weaves	
	<b>Bobinette - Hexagonal Weave "A"</b>
10' FR Weave A, 100% Cotton, Black	30' FR Weave A, 100% Cotton, Black
10' FR Weave A, 100% Cotton, White	30' FR Weave A, 100% Cotton, White
	<b>Bobinette - Hexagonal Weave "B"</b>
31' FR Weave B, 100% Cotton, Black	39'4" FR Weave B, 100% Cotton, Black
31' FR Weave B, 100% Cotton, White	39'4" FR Weave B, 100% Cotton, White
	<b>Bobinette - Hexagonal Weave "C"</b>
29'6" FR Weave C, 100% Cotton, Black	29'6" FR Weave C, 100% Cotton, White

**Voile** – This fabric is a medium weight sheer and is 100% Polyester. The whites are Inherently Flame Retardant and the colors are Flame Retardant. This fabric comes in a wide variety of colors.

**IN SUMMARY**

Now that you have some exposure to the key product fabric names and their basic characteristics, you should have an easier time when it comes time to selecting the right fabric for your next stage drapery or event. If you remember to think about what your objective is first – then your fabric choice and whether you want an opaque, translucent or transparent fabric, and which select style of drapery will naturally follow.

**About Sew What? Inc.**

Sew What? Inc., located in Rancho Dominguez, California, is a well-known stage and theatrical drapery manufacturer known for its dramatic theatrical drapes and fabrics used in major rock concerts, top fashion shows and other artistic staged venues. For information, contact Sew What? Inc. at (310) 639-6000, or email [inquiries@sewwhatinc.com](mailto:inquiries@sewwhatinc.com).

**About Rent What? Inc.**

Rent What? Inc. is committed to providing an ultimate experience in drapery rental products and customer service. The company is widely regarded for its basic pricing schedules, innovative damage waiver policy and fast and friendly service. For information, contact Rent What? Inc. at (310) 639-6000 or visit [www.rentwhatinc.com](http://www.rentwhatinc.com).