

Designing for Period Plays: Challenges and Opportunities for the Costumier of Androcles and the Lion

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Abstract

The pleasurable spectacle in theatrical performances is one to behold by audiences. Undoubtedly, the cast and crew have to work assiduously to achieve this. Admittedly, designers play key roles in realizing the visual panorama in theatrical productions. It is the responsibility of theatrical designers to interpret the playwright's literal ideas into visual concrete form. Among these designers is the costume designer who is responsible for designing and constructing costumes and also see to it that actors are properly costumed to reflect the mood of the production. However, opportunities and challenges of costumiers especially as they relate to period plays are in most cases swept under the carpet. This paper therefore brings to light, some opportunities and challenges in costuming the period play, *Androcles and the Lion*.

Keywords: costume, theatre, period play, costumier

1. Introduction

Theatrical performances cannot take place without designers who interpret playwrights' ideas into visual concrete form. These designers include the lighting designer, scenic designer, sound designer and the costume designer who play key roles in defining the actor on stage. The designer whose duties are directly associated with the actor is the costumier. He/she designs and constructs the intended costumes.

To be able to fully comprehend what costume design is, it is imperative to be acquainted with the terms that make up the concept.

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These are ‘costume’ and ‘design’. Contemplating the concept of costume, Barton (1963:23) notes that “it is the outward and visible sign of the inner spirit which informs any given period and nationality”. By Barton’s delineation, it is clear that the external and discernible sign of an individual is influenced by his or her inner spirit. To this end, the internal character traits of an individual are made manifest through the costumes he wears. Additionally, Barton’s view on costume equally touches on the uniqueness of every period. This is because every period is characterized by certain traits that make it distinct from the other. The kind of costume worn in each civilization is peculiar to its nationals as it differentiates them from others. Another point worth considering from Barton’s elucidation is the communicative role that costumes assume in a non-verbal form. This implies that the costume an actor wears on stage portrays his or her inner spirit, which is made manifest to the outer world. It communicates, therefore, to the audience the mood of the actor. To this end, costumes serve as one of the non-verbal ways of communicating to the audience. Kurland (2004:2), confirms this when he asserts that “costumes are not mere garments. They are visual tools used to release the soul of a character – a way to lift a character off the page into a three dimensional world”. Kurland’s position here brings to the fore that through the use of costumes, the psychological intent of the actor is revealed to the audience. To this effect, actors must be costumed appropriately in order to send information about who they are and the role they play for audiences to be aware of. It is in view of this that Arnold, (2001: 411) espouses that “the character definition expressed through costume must support rather than impede the actor’s work”.

Kaiser agrees with Kurland (1985:184) in her book, *The Social Psychology of Clothing and Personal Adornment* that “costumes are more tangible and visible than any other forms of human behavior”. Kaiser’s enlightenment here, indicates that the intangibility of an individual’s behaviour, to a larger extent, becomes more tangible through the costumes he/she wears, thus the costume serves as a tangible aspect of his/her behaviour. It is in this light that this essay finds Cunningham’s (1984:50) assertion very important when she states that “costumes convey factual information such as the play’s period and culture, the character’s social status, and the garment’s construction as well as affective information such as the scene’s mood, character’s personality, and the play’s essence”. This is because over the years mankind has non-verbally communicated to the society through the costumes they wear.

Adding their view to what costume is, Anderson and Anderson (1999:18) espouse that “anything worn on stage is a costume, whether it be layers of clothing or nothing at all. A costume is technically defined as dress in general, including underpinnings, accessories, hairstyle and makeup”. Anderson and Anderson’s view on costume is quite broad as it gives a wider spectrum which virtually embraces the components of what constitute costumes in general. The definition encompasses all forms of items worn on the body and used as forms of body decorations. The strength of costumes is a subject of greater concern to costumiers. Hunnisett (1986) writes that “costumes worn in any staged event must be strong, durable garments that are able to withstand extensive wearing and multiple cleaning”.

Basically, there are two things that one notices with regard to the costumes of an actor on stage. These are the style and the colour. The colour of a costume can either enhance or kill a theatrical production. Discussing the role which colour plays in costume therefore, Anderson and Anderson (1999:45) state that,

Colour is a very powerful component of costume design. It makes the strongest initial visual impact and registers on the audience before the other visual elements. Careful colour control provides a strong influence that will lead the audience towards a desired emotional response.

From the above, it can be deduced that the colour of a costume worn by an actor, enhances or helps to project that character’s mood that the actor hopes to achieve. In this respect, the colour of costumes worn by the actor deeply affects the audience’s awareness of the character being created by the costumier. Colours have meaning and their proper interpretation results in achieving a coherent effect with the actor’s role. Colours can influence the mood and enhance the appearance of an actor. Additionally, it can be used to emphasize the bodily features and draw attention to them. The style of costumes on the other hand is also a vital consideration in determining the overall physical, social, economic, psychological and emotional appearance of the actor.

2. The Concept of Design

Carr and Pomeroy (1992) describe design as a word with many depth of meaning. To Lauer (1990:2) “design is a planned arrangement of elements to form a visual pattern”. By Lauer’s explanation, it is apparent that the designer employs elements to aid him or her to achieve his aim of which the output is always in a visual organization. The stylistic representation of the visual feature thus communicates to the audience. This is because communication is the crux of an artwork and that visual representation always conveys a message. In finding out what causes people to design, Lauer points out that the need to solve a problem is what necessitates the designer to design. This assertion is strongly echoed by Carr and Pomeroy (1992) as they affirm that design is a creative planning process that starts by being open and evolves into solving defined problems”. Problem solving thus becomes the salient rationale for designing. To this effect, a costumier who has been given a script to costume is faced with a defined problem and must find means to solve it. It is at this point that the creative ability of the costumier becomes handy. There is no doubt that every costumier needs to be creative in discharging his duty. This is because it is his level of creativity that distinguishes him from others. In achieving such level of creativity, the costumier employs both the elements and principles of design.

Keiser and Garner (2003) define design as “the organization of design elements using design principles to create products that are considered aesthetically pleasing to the observer” (p.177). Two words that are significant to this definition are the principles and the elements of design which are organized in a process such that they become pleasing to the viewer. In the words of Secor (1992), a design process consists of all steps required to create a new product. Those steps include the development of the concept, the construction of the first prototype, and the production of the final product.

There are processes involved in designing. Fiore et.al, (1996) defines design process as “the internal processes of the artist or designer involved in the development of the idea through completion of the aesthetic product” (p.35). Lauer (1990:4) therefore suggests three main processes to be followed to achieve the desired effects. These are ‘thinking, looking and doing’. He is, however, of the view that these activities are not in a chronological order but rather may be overlapped, or performed in any order.

Carroll and Rosson (1985) put this clearer as they note that design is a non-hierarchical process that is neither strictly bottom up nor down. For any problem to be solved, one needs to analyze it before taking a decisive decision that can best solve the identified problem. This condition is not different when it comes to designing. To Lauer,(1990) it is impossible for thinking to be done outside the artistic process and that thinking must start with understanding the problem at hand. The next procedure is “looking”. At this stage the artist needs to get inspiration from the environment he finds himself. This can be drawn from both natural things like trees and animals among others and man made objects that surround us. In a personal interaction with Agyeman Ossei, a Senior Lecturer and a painter at the School of Performing Arts, University of Legon, Ghana, he noted that the rich Ghanaian proverbs serve as a source of inspiration for him in his paintings. What is essential is that as an artist one needs to be very observant with the things surrounding one so as to draw inspiration from them. The “doing” stage is the implementation of all the things the artist has conceptualized. Here, the artist tries to create many roughs as possible that can best solve the identified problem. In the case of costume design, the costumier may practice creating a new costume by experimenting first with paper in the sewing. Thinking through the best type of sample that solves the problem is crucial as thinking, as a process, becomes necessary in the doing stage. Josef Albers as cited by Lauer (1990:12) observes that:

to design is to plan and organize to order and relate and control. In short, it embraces all means opposing disorder and accident. Therefore it signifies a human need and qualifies man’s thinking and doing.

Indeed Albers’ observation brings to mind the fact that although planning is at the core of the designing process, as the artist plans what to do and tries to execute it, there are instances where some accidents or mistakes are likely to occur. These accidents do not in all situations mar the artwork but rather help in making the work more exciting or very beautiful. In the case of painting for instance, the artist may accidentally spill paint at an unprescribed spot and this will eventually improve on the aesthetic quality of the work than to blight it.

In the words of Anderson and Anderson, (1999: V), costume design is both an art form and a practical craft, a duality that makes the field somewhat difficult to master and equally elusive to explain to others.

The craft cannot be defined in absolute, nor can the costume designer indulge in the complete freedom of expression available to the fine artists.

Anderson and Anderson's opinion reveals that costume design must support the theatrical performance historically and character wise. This is because on the conformist ladder, although the costumier has the freedom to create his costume styles, it must have a reflection with the period in which the play is set.

3. Conceptualizing a Period Play

To be able to understand what a period play is, it is very important to know the terms that make up the concept. These are 'period' and 'play'. The term, "period", according to the *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1970:1057) is "a portion of time, often indefinite, characterized by certain events, processes, conditions, etc." Defining what a "play" is, Holman and Harmon, (1986:376) note that: a play is a literary composition of any length, ordinarily written to be performed by actors who impersonate the characters, speak the dialogue and enact the appropriate action. A play usually, but not always assumes that this enactment will be on a stage before an audience.

A period play is therefore a performance text which has been set in its historic era with the spectacle characterized by visual expressions of that period such as the kind of architecture, costumes among others which are used as the play unfolds.

From the above, Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* is a period play because though written in 1912 it is set in the ancient Roman period.

4. Synopsis of the Play, Androcles and the Lion

The play recounts how a Greek tailor, reputed to be a sorcerer, Androcles, escapes from being persecuted, through the forest with his bothersome wife, Magarea. They come across a wounded lion in pain with a thorn in its right paw. Androcles, a great naturalist and lover of animals, lures the animal and removes the thorn and dances off with the lion as his bothersome wife looks on with a resentful eye. Androcles, however, is arrested with some Christians and are marched to the coliseum by some Roman soldiers. Apart from Androcles, there are Lavinia, Ferrovius and Spintho.

These four, together with the other Christians are to be thrown to the lions or engaged in a fight with well-built gladiators in the coliseum under the directive of the Emperor, Augustus Caesar. Spintho, a coward, is eaten up by the lions when he runs into them in his attempt to escape the dreaded situation that awaits him. The great fighter among the prisoners, Ferrovius, fights the gladiators on behalf of the Christians. To the utmost surprise of Emperor Caesar and spectators, Ferrovius kills all the six gladiators with ease. The Emperor, overwhelmed by the fighting skills displayed by Ferrovius, orders the immediate cessation of the persecution of Christians and grants them their freedom.

However, one Christian has to be given to the lion to pacify the spectators. Androcles willingly offers himself and the lion is released from its cage to eat him up. The lion recognizes Androcles as the one who removed the thorn from its paw and so dances off with him to the surprise of Emperor Caesar and the rest of the spectators.

5. Opportunities in Costuming a Period Play

It is important to note that costume creation for period plays has opportunities and challenges. These form the core of the subsequent discussions in this essay.

A number of opportunities abound in costuming period plays. One such opportunity is that it broadens the cognitive as well as the psychomotor domain of the costumer. Cognitively, it affords the costumer the opportunity to have a deeper understanding of the culture of the society in which the play is set. This is because through the culture of the society, one easily determines their costumes in general. That is to say that each culture is distinctive in its own way. The uniqueness of one culture from the other is found in the areas of political, social and economic conditions, in which lies their rich costumes. In the words of Brockett and Ball (2004:387), costume designers must be well grounded in social and cultural history because clothing reflects the mores, standards of beauty, and stylistic preference of period and place. The more designers know about daily life, occupations, class structure, and favorite pastimes of a society, the better prepared they will be to design garments that reflect the status and foundation of a character within a specific culture.

A costume designer who has read about the history of costumes needs to put into practice how those costumes are constructed to enrich his skills. However, since he is always busy constructing costumes for other productions, he gets no time to practice them until he gets such opportunity to do so. Costuming period plays affords the costumier the ability to have a feel of how these costumes can be constructed thus increasing his skills in construction in general. Having an idea of the two dimensional (pictorial view) structure of the costume, the costumier is confident in constructing its three dimensional aspect. This is because viewing the pictorial format, the idea has already been formed in the mind's eye, and thus constructing it brings to bear the visual reality, creating the opportunity for a taste and feel.

6. Challenges in Costuming a Period Play: A Costumier's Personal Memoir

It cannot be said that there are no challenges associated with the costuming of a period play. Challenge is defined according to the *Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary*, (2003:192) as “something needing great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and which therefore tests a person's ability.”

A unique challenge peculiar to the costuming of a period play is the non availability of materials used in a given period. That is, some or most of the materials used in constructing such costumes do not exist in the 21st century. This is largely due to technological advancement which has taken place over the years. In instances where these materials exist, they are very expensive and can hardly be purchased for use.

Additionally, the non availability of a particular kind of motif in a fabric also hinders the costumier's intent when he wants to produce costumes for a particular period play. The ability to identify other substitutes or create a similar one yourself which may best suit the original is also a challenge to battle with.

Admittedly, climatic conditions determine the style of costume and natural resources determine the initial materials used for costumes in each civilization. For instance, during the Roman civilization, woolen fabrics were used to construct costumes to keep them warm due to low temperature. In staging a Roman play in a tropical region such as Ghana, it is not convenient to costume actors in woolen fabrics.

This is because the woolen fabric does not absorb sweat rapidly but rather retains heat and so is not convenient for use in a tropical country like Ghana where the temperature is very high. Additionally theatrical lights used in performances produce some level of warmth on the stage. As a result, actors will sweat in woolen fabric which cannot absorb sweat. Such woolen fabric also bites or itches with sweat. This is a challenge to the theatre costumier in costuming period plays.

Furthermore, a costumier is likely to go through several ways of ‘try and error’ in his quest to achieve his intent. This situation is likely to take more time in the costuming process. For instance, in the building of the lion’s mask this essayist went through several challenges before achieving the exact profile that was needed. With “try and error” serving as basis for obtaining the intended costume, it increased the cost of building the intended costumes thereby making the designing of costumes for *Androcles and the Lion* very expensive.

In the play, *Androcles and the Lion*, Bernard Shaw introduced animals and it was therefore challenging to identify materials to construct these creatures. Additionally, how and what to use to build the gladiators’ helmets and shin guards were also another great challenge. Having experimented with a number of materials and settled on the preferred ones using metal gauze, the process involved in the building of the animal masks involved inserting of fingers into the holes in the metal gauze and twisting them at various angles and this caused injuries of varied degree to my fingers.

Additionally, how and what to use to build the gladiators’ helmets and shields were also another challenge as I spent a lot of time experimenting on possible materials to use.

Bernard Shaw introduced characters such as slaves in Etruscan masks and gladiators in the play under review. In building the Etruscan mask, shin guard and helmets for use, sunshine was needed to dry the items at each stage so as to move on to the other. However, in the month of September 2011 in which these costumes were built, it rained almost on each day. This condition did not help to accomplish the task with much ease. In overcoming this challenge, the hot air that emitted from some air-conditions at the School of Performing Arts served as substitutes in drying them.

The large number of cast to be costumed was another challenge. This was because it is not easy to costume a large cast with different cultural backgrounds.

7. Conclusion

Costumes play a key role in theatrical performances. For that reason, actors must wear costumes to project who they are and where they come from. When this is not achieved, then the performance may be classified as a rehearsal. Ideally, a good craftsman is usually known by the condition of his tools and how effectively he uses them to carve or create a fashionable product for people to cherish. Costuming is an art and as such a costumier is expected to be creative. Costuming plays of varying backgrounds, adds to the depth of a costumier's knowledge despite the odds and challenges that may crop up. This study has dealt with designing costumes for Bernard Shaw's, *Androcles and the Lion*, a period play written in 1912, set in ancient Roman civilization and presented on the contemporary Ghanaian stage.

It is important to note that staging a period play like *Androcles and the Lion* comes with a number of challenges. One such challenge to the costumier is the difficulty in identifying and employing the exact kind of materials to construct costumes to meet the exact kinds of costumes that were used in the early Greek and Roman periods. It was against this backdrop that the researcher had to improvise materials to create costumes for the staging of the play under review. This was because some or most of the materials used in the building of Greek and Roman costumes in the early civilization cannot be found in the Ghanaian setting. In instances where they can be found, they are very expensive and cannot either be purchased by costumiers nor used on stage due to differences in climatic conditions.

Costumiers must challenge themselves by costuming all kinds of plays and stop being selective based on intended challenges. This is because it broadens the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of the costumier.

8. Appendix



Fig. 1
Moulding of Lion's mask



Fig.2
Preparing of helmet



Fig.3
Androcles and the Lion



Fig. 4
Lavinia and the Captain



Fig.5
The lion recognizing its friend, Androcles



Fig. 6
Cross section of gladiators



Fig. 7
Cross section of actors



Fig. 8
Cross section of actors

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