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Music in Costume Design: A Multifaceted Approach

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Elise Wesley

Committee in charge:

Judith Dolan, Chair
Kyle Adam Blair
Bobby McElver
Victoria Petrovich
Jordan Rose

2024

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The thesis of Elise Wesley is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2024

DEDICATION

For my grandparents: John Kehrer, Jean Kehrer, Harold “Wes” Wesley, and Jeanette Wesley; for their steadfast belief in education, the arts, and the power of their granddaughter.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Music in Costume Design: A Multifaceted Approach

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego

Professor Emeritus Judith Dolan, Chair

Throughout my life, I have been fascinated by both music and costume design. These two interests seemed completely disparate to me, until I was inspired by a colleague to incorporate music into my design process. Throughout this essay, I explore various ways in which music has been a helpful tool and source of inspiration for my costume design work.

Introduction

As a child, my route to theatre was via my love of music. Around the age of four or five, I would sit down at the piano and figure out how to play my favorite songs by ear. My mother decided this seemed like a good reason to sign me up for piano lessons. Over the years, this grew to learning guitar, cello, trombone, tuba, and any other instrument I could get my hands on. I also took voice lessons for many years and initially planned on studying voice in undergrad. Although I chose to study costuming in both my graduate and undergraduate studies, I was still able to feed my passion for music, taking classes in sound design and voice.

For most of my academic career, I believed my interest in music was something that needed to remain separate from my work as a costume designer. I could study costume design, and I could study music, but each topic occupied a distinct and separate space in my mind. However, in my first year at UCSD, I had the opportunity to sit in on the Advanced Costume Design course the second- and third-year costume design students took. While observing the class, a then third-year student, Daniella Toscano, created a soundscape to support her theoretical design for Bertolt Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins*. Before experiencing Daniella's soundscape, I thought of costume design as a strictly visual discipline. I believed a costume designer might respond to a piece of music in a show they're designing, but after that, the process was all about finding and generating images. I had never considered integrating sound and music into the costume design process and allowing them to support a costume design concept the way research images might.

Chapter 1: *Bunny Bunny*



Figure 1.1 Production photo of (left to right) Puk, Moll, Wyn, Noms, Jo, and Dee

Creating Playlists As A Creative Exercise

In my second year, I designed the costumes for *Bunny Bunny*, an original dance theatre piece written and directed by Raja Feather Kelly. Inspired by the paranoia of McCarthyism, *Bunny Bunny* follows six rabbits living together in hiding, fearful of their names being called on a mysterious list. The text was esoteric. I began my research process as I normally would: gathering images of art pieces and clothing that seemed to fit the world of the play. But, no matter how many images I gathered, the way forward felt unclear. I wanted to keep thinking about the play, but realized I needed a non-visual way to keep the creative juices flowing. So, I

turned to music. I decided I would create a 10-song playlist for each of the main characters. I imagined what kind of music these characters might like, what songs represented their personalities and plot arcs. For example, the character of Jo was deeply depressed and self-medicating with drinking and clubbing. However, the script and conversations with the director made it clear that Jo's taste was unrefined and behind-the-times. So, Jo's playlist included upbeat karaoke classics like Elton John and Kiki Dee's "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," and Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl," as well as more somber, introspective songs like Rufus Wainwright's "Cigarettes And Chocolate Milk." Another character, Wyn, was described by Raja as a "manic, codependent, flower child." Her playlist included flower child anthems like The Mamas & The Papas' "Dream A Little Dream Of Me" and Janis Joplin's "Me and Bobby McGee," as well as more contemporary music that spoke to the feeling of codependence like HAIM's "Leaning On You."

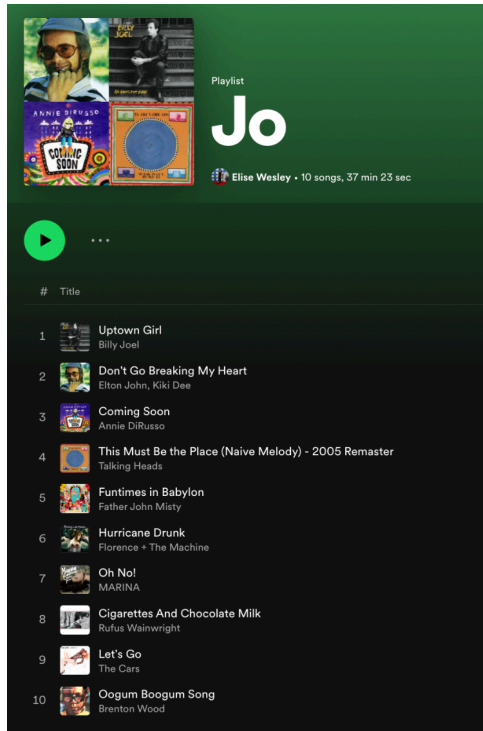


Figure 1.1 Screenshot of Jo Playlist

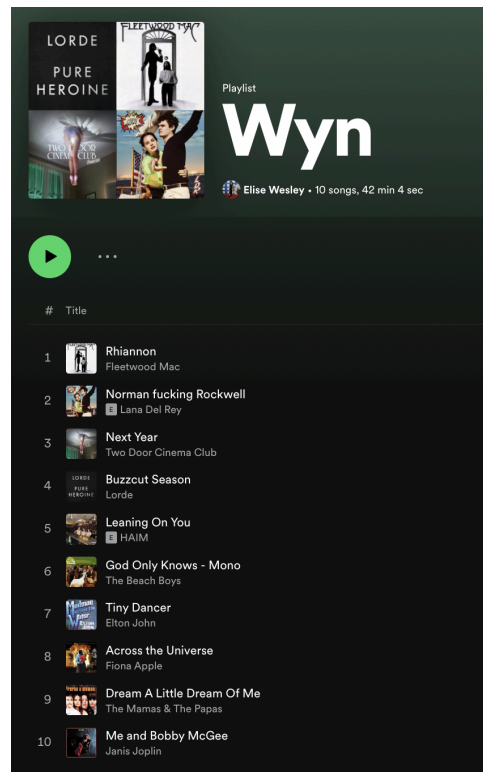


Figure 1.2 Screenshot of Wyn Playlist

Once each playlist was complete, I listened to them constantly, seeing what they might reveal. Were there lyrics I had missed on my first listen? How did the songs relate to one another? What was the experience of switching immediately from a Green Day song to Fleetwood Mac? Were there any throughlines in regards to timbre, arrangement, chord progression? And, most importantly, how might this inform these characters' clothes?

Incorporating music into my design process was a game changer. It allowed me to continue to think about this particularly challenging play, even when it seemed I had creatively stalled out. The music inspired me to explore textures, shapes, and clashing patterns in my design that I otherwise might not have considered.

Jo

One character whose design was notably impacted by my playlist-making exercise was Jo. Several songs on Jo's playlist were from the 1970's and 1980's, so I wanted the styles of those decades to have a presence in Jo's look, which ultimately led to his shaggy mullet-like wig (Figure 1.6). I also wanted Jo to have a piece that spoke to the complexity of the music in his playlist; something that was edgy, working class, dorky, and whimsical all at once. After stumbling across an old purple fishing vest in our costume stock, I knew immediately that it was the base for the piece I had been dreaming of. I decorated the front of the vest with patches and pins Jo might have amassed throughout his life (Figure 1.4). These patches included Girl Scout and Boy Scout merit badges, logos from gas stations, the Grateful Dead's iconic skeleton imagery, military insignia, and a National Honor Society torch that one might find on a high school letterman jacket. On the back, I attached a decorative vintage tea towel from Niagara

Falls (Figure 1.5) to drive home the idea that this is a character who has experienced the world, but is now trapped inside by their own paranoia.



Figure 1.4 Jo's costume in-process on a mannequin



Figure 1.5 Trying the Niagara Falls tea towel on the back of Jo's vest in a fitting



Figure 1.6 Production photo of Jo

Wyn

Another character whose design was notably impacted by my playlist-making exercise was Wyn. Most of Wyn's songs had a soft, dreamy quality that I wanted her costume to reflect. Many of Wyn's songs also told the story of someone in need of support, so her costume had to have some sort of comforting element. Additionally, I wanted to pull from the styles of the 1960's and 1970's as those decades were heavily represented in her playlist to honor her "flower child" description. I chose to give Wyn a very flowy maxi dress with three rows of patch-work panels (Figure 1.7) that was as much a comfort blanket as it was a garment. The patchwork was made from silk scarves found in our costume stock, vintage aprons and tea towels, as well as scraps of fabric I inherited from my grandmother. All of the fabrics were very soft and lightweight to evoke the dreamy quality of her songs. After gathering all the materials that excited me, I laid out the pattern pieces on the floor of our fitting room and arranged the different fabrics on top of the pattern pieces (Figure 1.8), to create the mismatched style of someone still finding their identity. Wyn also sported a very long, wavy, red wig (Figure 1.9) that evoked the flower child aesthetic and specifically Janis Joplin, who was featured in Wyn's playlist. The wig began the show styled in two braids that unraveled throughout the course of the performance to reflect the character's downward mental spiral. This not only allowed, but encouraged the actor playing Wyn to play with their hair and physicalize the anxiety present in many of her songs.



Figure 1.7 Wyn rendering



Figure 1.8 Fabrics laid out for placement on Wyn's dress



Figure 1.9 Production photo of Wyn

Using the Playlists as a Communication Tool

Not only did my playlists inspire my designs, they also became a helpful communication tool for me to use with the cast, director, and creative team. At our first full design team meeting, Raja revealed that he created playlists for all of his projects as a way to help imagine what the world of the piece feels like. I was delighted to be able to tell him that I had created a playlist for each of the six main characters to aid me in my process. We were then able to exchange playlists and use the music as another language through which we could communicate our ideas and impulses that might otherwise have been difficult to verbalize. I was also able to share my playlists with the actors to give them further insight into my approach to the character. Sophia Marcos-Jeronimo, the actor playing Puk, found the playlist particularly helpful in better understanding the character's psyche. Ultimately, the playlists became a useful tool for not only me and my process, but for the whole company.

Chapter 2: *Orlando*



Figure 2.1 Production photo of *Orlando* and chorus

Collaborating with Sound Design

In the fall of my third year, I designed the costumes for *Orlando* by Sarah Ruhl, directed by Allie Moss. The play follows the life of Orlando, a young English nobleman, across five centuries. About halfway through the play, Orlando goes to sleep for seven days, wakes up to find they are now a woman, and must now navigate the world as such. The play also features a chorus that narrates the story and plays all the supporting characters in Orlando's life. The wide span of time, multitude of characters, and exploration of gender provided a unique challenge for the costume design.

I found this research process much more straightforward than *Bunny Bunny*; there was a wealth of historical images for me to use as a jumping off point for my design. However, the

speed and magical quality of the text demanded a versatile design. Rather than having the chorus in full period-accurate costumes for each century, I took a more anachronistic approach, drawing inspiration from Vivienne Westwood, Olga Suvarova, and Sophia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*. The chorus wore mismatched corsets and bloomers with a few modern pieces thrown in (Figure 2.1), allowing them to feel historical without being specific to a particular era.

While developing my design, I lived with the production's sound designer, Padra Crisafulli. Our close proximity and excitement about the project meant ideas were constantly flowing: I would show Padra exciting research images and Padra would play me music from each century. Although I was not going out and finding the music, music still played a large role in my design process.

Later in the process, after a large shift in the scenic concept for the show, Padra found themselves unsure of how to make the sound design work with and enhance the visual world. Padra and I discussed the visual vocabulary of the piece— an anachronistic blend of historical garments and modern pieces— and how that might translate into sound. Ultimately, the sound design for the piece incorporated both period-accurate music played by both historical and digital instruments, as well as contemporary pop music. The anachronism of the costume design was reflected in the sound design.

The Archduke

Although I did not make playlists for *Orlando* the way I did on *Bunny Bunny*, I found that my love for music inspired me in a different way. When considering the character of the Archduke/Archduchess, who presents as a woman in Act II of *Orlando* and then returns in Act III presenting as a man, the director wanted to lean into androgyny rather than extreme

femininity and masculinity. This led me to consider iconic androgynous figures throughout history and pop culture, with rock singer Prince, specifically, coming to mind. Not only was Prince androgynous, his clothes often referenced historical fashion. I found two specific images of him to be particularly helpful. The first (Figure 2.2), features Prince wearing eyeliner and blush, as well as a broad-shouldered satin blouse worn open to expose his chest, with matching slim-cut trousers and high-heeled boots. The broad shoulders and exposed chest evoking the masculine, while the makeup and boots evoke the feminine. The second (Figure 2.3), shows Prince performing in a white blouse with frilly sleeves and a dramatic jabot under a metallic green and blue duster with matching slim-cut pants. A perfect amalgamation of anachronistic and androgynous. The final costume for the Archduke featured a metallic frock coat, high heel boots, sheer lace shirt and jabot, as well as feminine makeup, and a larger-than-life pompadour wig (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.2 Research image of Prince



Figure 2.3 Research image of Prince



Figure 2.4 Production photo of Orlando and the Archduke

Conclusion

Although I used to believe that my love for music needed to occupy a separate space from my work as a costume designer, experimenting with my process on *Bunny Bunny* and *Orlando* led me to realize that music can actually be a useful tool and source of inspiration when designing costumes. Not only does it help me in my own process, but it can also be a helpful communication tool when working with other artists. I am now able to show through my costumes how a song feels, and communicate to others how visuals could be sonified. Incorporating music into my process has helped strengthen my ideas and made me a stronger collaborator.