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A Lesson on the Importance of the Body in Costume Design

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

in

Theater and Dance (Design)

by

Daniella Toscano

Committee in charge:

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair
Professor Susan Narucki
Professor Victoria Petrovich
Professor Vanessa Stalling

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

A mi Mamá, Rosa, por enseñarme como ser una mujer fuerte y luchadora.

To *Papá*, Daniel, for always supporting my artistic inclinations.

To my brother, Fabrizio, for inspiring me to be fearless.

To Mycah, for the endless supply of patience and laughter.

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VITA

- 2012 Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art (Painting and Drawing), University of Nevada Las Vegas
- 2022 Master of Fine Arts in Theater and Dance (Design), University of California San Diego

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Lesson on the Importance of the Body in Costume Design

by

Daniella Toscano

Master of Fine Arts in Theater and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair

Before coming to UCSD for graduate school, there were two main influences in my costume design work: the art of animation and the art of grand opera. Once I arrived, I quickly learned that there was more to theatrical costume design than creating beautiful visuals. In this thesis, I will speak on the most valuable lesson I learned in graduate school, about the other important influence for a costume designer: the actor and the actor's body.

CHAPTER 1

At a young age, I became obsessed with cartoons and the storytelling capabilities of animation. From high school into college, I thought I would become a character designer for Disney Animation. A fateful run in with the performing arts late in my college career, however, took me on another path. After a stint with performing and singing, I decided that I could not give up my love for design, and in particular my love of characters. I wanted a say in how the performer would be dressed and I had big ideas on how to create the visuals for the worlds that existed in the musical scores I was studying. But despite continuing to work in the performing arts, opera specifically, I could not shake my animation sensibilities. It wasn't until I came to graduate school that I realized that I had been designing characters on a flat piece of paper, thinking about it in terms of two-dimensional character design, and not considering the real life, tactical experience of live theater in all its forms, with real human bodies and all that comes with them. Of all the things I learned in graduate school, there is one point that has rang the loudest: The body of the performer is just as important to the final design, on the same level as the visual research, dramaturgy, and character analysis that goes into the costume design process and should never be overlooked.

Coming from the opera world, I was used to certain conventions that are used time and time again. The trend is to use historical costumes made of heavy fabrics, with limited, measured staging to allow for the best singing technique. Wigs are almost always used in opera and theatrical makeup is a must. When designing *Elektra* by Sophocles at UCSD in 2019, the production's turn of the century concept meant designing historical costumes, and my old opera habits came running back. For the character of Elektra, I became fixated on the iconic photographs of Edwardian actresses, with their resplendent long locks and neo-classical garb,

and wanted to recreate this image in the costume. Similarly, the research I gathered for the men included fanciful facial hair and I was also set on recreating the image of a mustachioed Edwardian gentleman for the character of Aegisthus. I've had previous experience with wigs and stage beards in opera, and so I had no qualms in introducing them into the process for *Elektra*. I quickly learned that not all theater is opera, and some conventions should not apply. I did not consider the reality of the situation that the actor portraying Aegisthus is quite clean-cut and boyish, and that the actress portraying Elektra did not have the same body type as the actresses in my Edwardian photographs. Also, I was no longer working in a large proscenium theater like in the past, but in a small black box theater space, the audience mere feet away from the performers, further emphasizing the importance of body of the actor and their relationship to the space. The wig and facial hair ended up causing much difficulty during tech rehearsals; The actress portraying Elektra was tall and the long, curly wig (its style inspired by the long locks of the women in the Edwardian photographs) added height and volume where it was not desired, and the faux mustache went through many iterations in order to make it look remotely real on our clean-cut actor. In the end, the faux mustache was reduced to its most minimal state, and the wig was cut from the production, after consulting with the actress and realizing that her natural hair, despite only being mid-length, was just as effective for creating the character. In the beginning of the process for *Elektra*, without really realizing it, I prioritized the research imagery and designed a character for the purposes of a two-dimensional illustration, and I attempted to force the actors to fit into the outline I created. The experience was a hard, but invaluable lesson on how the actor and the actor's body, and what they bring to the table is just as important an element as any of the visual research and dramaturgical intentions that go into a successful costume design.



Figure 1: Production photo of *Elektra*, showcasing actors Anthony Adu in the role of Orestes and Savanna Padilla in the role of Elektra, wearing a wig, by Manuel Rotenberg.



Figure 2: Production photo of *Elektra*, showcasing actors Anthony Adu in the role of Orestes and Savanna Padilla in the role of Elektra, with her natural hair, by Daniella Toscano.

After *Elektra*, consideration of the performer’s body has become a priority in my process. During the UCSD production of *Everybody* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins, the cast announcement was delayed. In order to stay on schedule and to have some material to work with moving forward, I designed the character of “Stuff” before knowing who the actor was going to be. The original design was somewhat esoteric, more of a moving art piece than a traditional costume. I pulled visual cues from modern assemblage art to express the idea of hoarding and the accumulation of material things, an idea that was present in the script.



Figure 3: Original costume rendering of “Stuff” for UCSD’s production of *Everybody* (2022).

However, once the cast was made official and rehearsals were underway, I made it a priority to adjust the design. I met with the actress who was to portray the character of “Stuff”; I heard her ideas about how she saw the character, took notes of the way the actress tended to wear clothing, and heard her speak the lines in character. With all this new information, I was able to pivot and work with a better understanding of the body that would be wearing the costume. The actress was bringing a charged feminine energy to the character, not just with her voice but with her body language as well, and therefore the costume should and would reflect that. The costume for “Stuff” was no longer a moving art object, made to resemble a pile of material goods thrown on the floor. Instead, I decided to use the glamorous side of materialism for inspiration, and created a high fashion Dior-inspired silhouette, with shiny objects placed all over the outfit. The actress had free range of motion of her arms and access to her waist and torso. She could still sway and sashay the way her body naturally is inclined to do.

Everybody (Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins)
DESIGN BY DANIELLA TOSCANO
UCSD 2022



**STUFF/
Somebody 4**

Figure 4: Revised costume rendering for “Stuff” for UCSD’s production of Everybody (2022).

I was concerned about the “Stuff” costume going into technical rehearsals. Would it be too heavy? Too burdensome for the actress? Would her engaging acting choices be lost in the mass of the costume? But there was nothing to be concerned about. The effort made to design *for her specific, natural physique* paid off. The actress shined from the moment she set foot on stage. She felt comfortable and excited. It was only a rehearsal, but the character was fully brought to life. It was a moment of victory for her *and* for me. I was saved from going through the same hardships I faced during *Elektra*. And by not going through those troubles, by simply designing with the body of the actor in mind, there was more opportunity for further enriching of the character, for magic, for beautiful storytelling– the things that captivated me about animation in the beginning and the things that inspire me now as a costume designer for the stage.