

# FUTURESCAN 4: VALUING PRACTICE

## The hidden craft of costume construction: an exploration from the makers' perspective

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### Abstract

Most theatre costumes are unique one-off garments, which are produced within a limited timeframe. They are the translation of a given design, crafted to the performer's individual body size and shape. Every show brings about its own challenges and unique experiences for the costume maker, who will experiment with construction techniques and fabrics. In addition to good sewing skills, costume makers need the ability to compute the intricate engineering of historical silhouettes, as well as manufacture modern and futuristic designs. Experienced practitioners develop an array of specialist skills, from period tailoring, creating historical corsetry and tutus, to the complex construction methods for the development of obscure animals, elaborate dame's dresses, wings and contoured garments using contemporary fabrics. However, although costume makers display great skill and a passion for their craft, they are rarely given credit for their creations. The craft of costume making is highly under-researched and documented. The aim of this study is to explore costume construction from the maker's perspective, with a particular focus on the pride of the maker. It examines and documents this craft as it is being established within the Fashion and Textiles practice discipline as an academic subject in its own right.

The study investigates the construction practices of costume makers within the realms of a medium-scale repertory theatre. Through a range of semi-structured interviews with members of the Wardrobe department team, a clear understanding can be gained of the relationship staff have with the costumes they create and the influences that affect them, documenting the complexities of this presently under-researched craft.

Keywords: costume; maker; skill; craft; design

### Introduction

#### What makes a good costume?

Through discussions with a range of theatre costume practitioners, I have identified that the main qualities required for an effective stage costume are: being faithful to the design, the cut, the fit, durability and the costume looking good on the stage. The famous theatre design group known as Motley (1964:73) stated that the perfect costume is one that '...looks well, fits well, wears well and above all seeks to clearly delineate the character which the actor portrays'.

Since the design is developed to aid the portrayal of a character within a show, it is important that the costume created reflects it. Designers will usually provide only one image of the costume design, displaying the front view. It is the maker's job to interpret this image into a three-dimensional (3D)

garment around the body shape of the performer. The cut of the garment should enhance the portrayal of the character through the creation of the silhouette and positioning of style lines.

Garments need to be cut, not only to fit performers, but also to allow for comfort and movement. Some performances are more physical than others; it is therefore important that the role being played is taken into consideration during the making process. Costumes need to be durable in ways that designers and makers of fashion garments may not usually consider. They have a role to play and it is important that they sustain their purpose for the entire run of a show, which could last a few nights or continue for months of touring. They may have to withstand the rigours of consistent laundering processes after being battered with custard pies twice daily or survive considerable, strenuous wear during vigorous dance routines. Therefore, costumes need to look the part while having the strength to survive the rigours of performance. This is clearly evident in a ballet costume from the V&A archive, which displays an air of fragility on the outside, but internal inspection reveals its strength and durability, created through the use of backing fabrics (figures 1 and 2). Consideration of the maintenance of the costumes is important. Some fabrics may need pre-washing before the making process can begin and some elements of the costume may need to be detachable to enable cleaning.



*Figure 1: Attendant on the Queen of Waters costume, V&A Archive, Garland 2016. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.'*



*Figure 2: Attendant on the Queen of Waters costume, V&A Archive, Garland 2016. Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.*

The costume requirements need to be achieved whilst working within the constraints of the production. Most shows in repertory theatres have a five week make period, so speed and scheduling are always important. Depending on the production budget, costumes can cost from a couple of hundred pounds per show, to many thousands. This will obviously have a huge impact on fabrics used, as well as the amount of staff and expertise a supervisor can buy in. Simple contemporary garments may be easily achieved with little money or making experience, compared to complicated, highly structured designs that may require vast amounts of experimentation with a range of specialist materials and techniques that require making expertise. The demands of performance itself can make a large impact on the construction of a costume. For example, if the performer has to wear a flying harness or is involved in a quick change, the fit and finish of the costume will have to allow for this. To achieve an effective costume, makers need the ability to work within these parameters.

The role of the costume maker requires a wide range of skills and disciplines. Although there are specialist makers dedicated to specific areas, the majority of in-house makers develop skills across a vast range of disciplines, from historical tailoring, crinolines and corsetry through to producing complicated structures for pantomime costumes and delicate, bias-cut evening gowns. They need to be able to interpret the given design into a 3D reality, breaking down the elements of the costume into the different garments required, whilst considering its role within the performance in terms of reflecting the character it portrays and practicalities required to withstand the rigours of performance. Makers also need to have research capabilities in order that they can interpret designs appropriately and understand historical references.

Costumes frequently use a backing fabric to add strength and develop the weight or handle of chosen fabrics. It is necessary for makers to have a good working knowledge of a wide range of fabrics so they can evaluate what is required to enable chosen fabrics to work effectively. The yardage of fabrics needs to be accurately calculated at the beginning of the make period; miscalculations can make a

big difference to the budget expenditure or leave the maker short of or without necessary fabrics at a crucial point in the make process.

This paper discusses the role of the costume maker and reveals the connections they have with costume and the passion they hold for their craft. It also considers the unrecognised, complex and intrinsic skills required to create costumes, as outlined in this introduction. This paper reflects on the author's personal experiences and offers a case study of a Wardrobe department in a repertory theatre that includes a number of interviews with costume makers.

### **Case study: Sheffield Crucible**

The case study was undertaken at Sheffield Crucible, a repertory theatre based in South Yorkshire, United Kingdom (UK). At the time of the study the wardrobe department team was working on costumes for their main Christmas production of 'Kiss Me Kate'. The show was very demanding for the costume team, having a large cast of 23 performers each requiring several costumes. Along with extra costumes for the stage crew and musicians. The show was very physically active, involving lively dance routines. The costumes were a mix between 1940s and mock Tudor (figure 3) so required some support structures, but were not historically accurate. The team had enjoyed working with the costume designer on previous productions, so had already developed a good working relationship and a great respect for her work.



*Figure 3: Janet Bird's Designs for 'Kiss Me Kate', Garland 2018.*

This case study incorporated interviews with costume cutters and their assistants working within the Wardrobe department on the production, and a trip to the opening night's performance. Further correspondence was conducted via email. The participants have been anonymised, but their role within the department has been listed in the grid (figure 4). As a maker myself, I was able to undertake ethnographic research in the workroom, spending some of the time sewing alongside the makers.



Interviewee	Position held
Maker 1	Cutter
Maker 2	Cutter
Maker 3	Cutter
Maker 4	Wardrobe assistant
Maker 5	Wardrobe assistant

*Figure 4: Case study participants.*

### Interviews

The first set of interviews took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2018. The previous show had just opened the night before and there was a very relaxed, laid-back atmosphere about the workroom. The four makers present (three cutters and one wardrobe assistant) had just received some of the designs, the script and the cast list for 'Kiss Me Kate'. They had started calculating fabrics and conducting their research into the various demands of the construction. They were generally excited about the show, predicting an enjoyable but demanding make.

My second visit to the workroom was on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2018. At this stage the makers had been allocated designs and were making toiles ready for their first fittings. The room was very calm and the makers were very enthusiastic about their work.

The last time I visited the workroom before the show opened was on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2018. This was only a few days before the dress rehearsals were due to begin. The workroom was full, with extra makers and three students on placement being utilised in the make process. Staff had undertaken a great deal of overtime and although there were numerous people present, the room was quiet with an air of studiousness. There was an obvious increase in the levels of stress concerning the urgency of the looming deadline and the makers exhibited a sense of dedicated concentration.

The final visit to the Crucible was for the opening of the show on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Most of the makers attended this 'Press night' production and for most of them it was the first time they would see their creations on stage. The wardrobe department were enthusiastic about the event and considered it a fun night out.

### The craft of a good maker

The training, skill and experience of the maker can determine very different results, especially given the pressure of the constraints mentioned in the Introduction. The value of a skilled costume maker should not be underrated. Lucy Barton (1950: 49), a pioneer of education in costume construction cautioned that: 'Too often the designer's conception suffers changes from sketch to stage that not

merely falsify his creation but hampers the interpretation of the play by director and actors'. This opinion was reiterated by one of the makers:

*If you had an excellent maker the costumes gonna be stunning; it doesn't matter what the design was it will work and it will fit, it will be gorgeous. But if you have a bad maker, it doesn't matter how good your designer is, that costume is never can look good if someone is bad at sewing or bad at making. (Maker 2)*

There are no strict rules for costume making and construction methods which can differ from maker to maker. 'You ask three cutters how to interpret something, they're all going to come up with something different' (Maker 3).

The interviews demonstrated that the makers had a clear understanding of the requirements, expressing a strong sense that costumes had a role to play, and their job was to produce what was required within the given constraints. The necessity of cutting corners in order to accommodate different aspects of the production for example: time, money constraints and quick changes, did not seem to concern the makers; it was merely another challenge of the job, which made it all the more interesting. The costume designs for 'Kiss Me Kate' had an added complication that the fabric for many of the costumes required hand printing before they could be made. This meant that the makers needed to calculate the layout of each pattern piece to determine the direction of the print and prioritise which fabrics would be required first, so that they could organise their work schedule effectively. It was apparent from discussion with the makers that these challenges enhanced their enthusiasm for their job:

*I liked the fact that it's visual but also it challenges more parts of your brain, it's like a lot of problem-solving, do a lot of mathematics, you have to have a 3D head as well as going does that look right, having a critical eye from that point of view as well. (Maker 4)*

As well as an understanding of the costume's engagement in the production, a consideration and understanding of the stage set-up is imperative too. Depending on the format, costumes need to look good from the view of the audience, so it is not always necessary to pay attention to fine detail and some aspects may need to be exaggerated in order to gain significance from a distant view. At the Crucible Theatre, where the case study is set, there is a thrust stage set-up; this means audiences can be within a few feet of the performers, which can reveal small details to be evident to them, whilst such elements will be limited for spectators viewing from the back of the same auditorium. The makers are conscious of this: 'I think you're so close to the costumes on that stage they've got to be really, really good and yet probably the audience don't notice half the time but we do.' (Maker 3)

### The hidden maker

Notably research in the field of costume construction is uncommon. Although costume makers display great skill and a passion for their craft, participants in this case study felt they are rarely given credit for their creations; 'I think it bothers me when people don't realise how much work goes into something and we kind of keep getting taken for granted a little bit.' (Maker 5)

Show reviews rarely mention costumes. This evoked a particular reaction from a founding member of the Costume in Theatre Association (CITA) in relation to a review in The Stage of West Yorkshire Playhouse's production 'Strictly Ballroom'. Kodicek (2018) posted on CITA's Facebook page 'How is it possible to review this show without ever mentioning the costumes!?!?!? The mind boggles.' There are

some occasions when the designer is commended but the talents of the construction team are noticeably unobserved. The lack of notoriety can be viewed as a positive sign and denotes the success of the costume fulfilling its role. Jean Hunnisett (1986: 8) concurs, suggesting:

*If the costumes become intrusive, they have failed. The artist should first of all be comfortable and unaware of the clothes they are wearing. This in turn, makes the audience believe the characters they play and, together with the set, lighting and sound completes the magic of theatre or film.*

Makers at the Crucible were irritated that the general public, including close friends, misunderstood their career and that they are constantly being referred to as designers, as if the role of a maker did not hold enough prestige: 'Costume designer; that's not my job, you may as well say an accountant.' (Maker 3)

Although makers felt vexed at the lack of understanding of their discipline, they were not as concerned about the lack of accreditation of their individual creations. 'I don't expect things to be noticed, I think often with stage work if it's not noticed you've done it right' (Maker 1). They saw the success of their creations as their ability to work as performance garments. Notably the reviews of 'Kiss me Kate' discuss the choreography and singing and the misogynistic aspects of the show, but do not mention the costumes.

The costume makers felt that they understood and recognised the quality attained in their work far more than anyone else and that they generally made to a standard acceptable to themselves, choosing techniques for their own gratification. They perceived that the standard of construction was on the whole unnoticed by the audience: 'I feel that we notice the quality a lot more than pretty much everyone else.' (Maker 2).

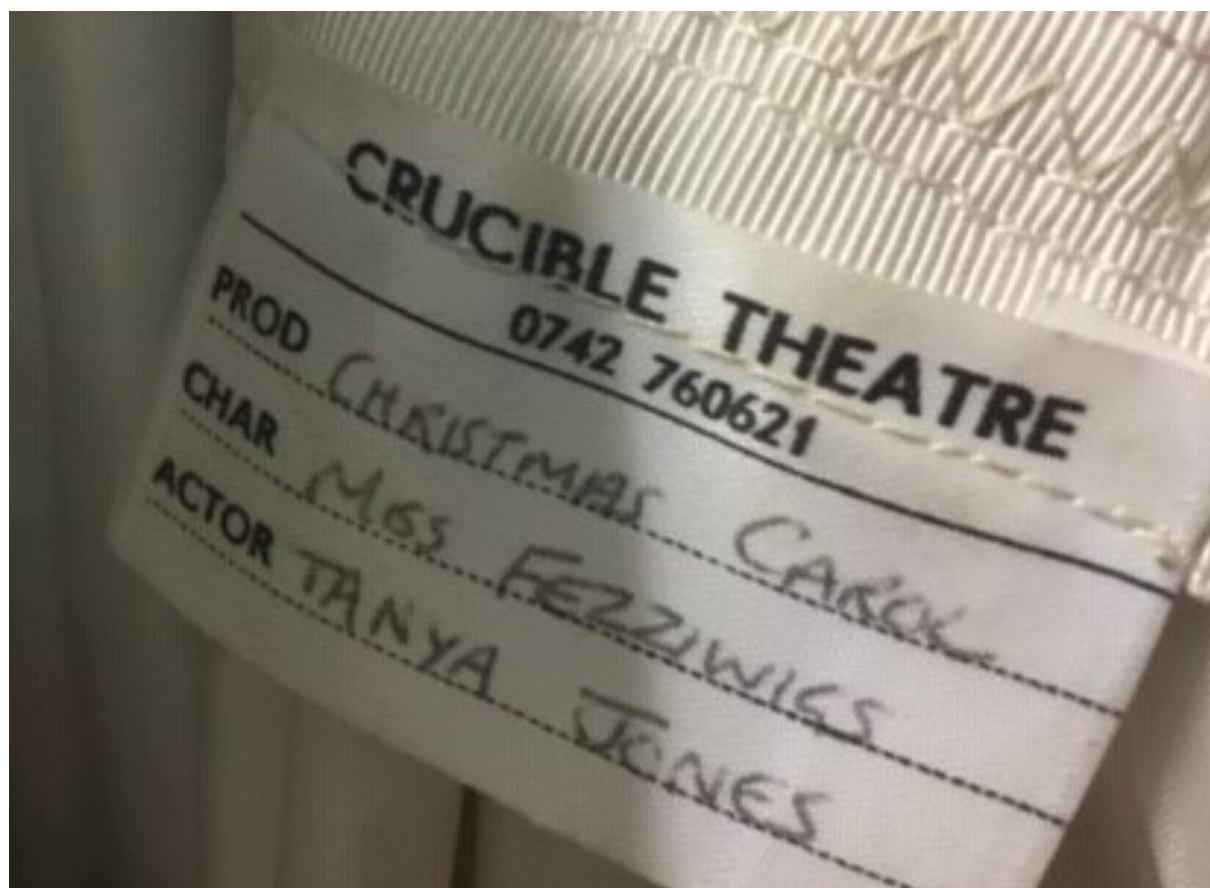
#### Whose costume is it?

At the period of their construction, the makers develop an intense relationship with their creations. However, there are an array of people who all have a valuable connection with costumes throughout their lifespan. So, who owns the costume? Starting with the designer, it travels through the many hands of the supervisor, cutters, wardrobe assistants, actors, dressers, maintenance person and stockroom manager, all of whom have a different relationship with the costume.

The makers felt they had ownership of the costumes they created, with one commenting '...mine all mine, even if I only sew on a button it is still mine' (Maker 1). This possession was evident from the first set of interviews, with a strong connection already apparent between the maker and their given designs. Although the role of the costume always remained paramount, the connection still remained after the costumes had been handed over to the show: 'They're always mine, of course, now they've been worn and they spent three weeks crawling around the stage in a peach suit, but that's what they're for isn't it?' (Maker 1). Many of the makers said they had taken the time, when passing the maintenance rail, to check on the condition of costumes they had made for the production presently running. Maker 5 discussed how attached she had become to the Tin Man's costume. Having watched the Christmas Eve performance, she noticed it was in need of repair and considered working on Boxing Day to mend it herself to ensure it was done properly (Maker 5).

Whilst inspecting stage costumes in different stockrooms and the V&A archive, I noted that the makers remain anonymous. For practical reasons costumes are labelled with the performer's name, character

and production (figure 5). The makers details, however, are excluded. This label is usually replaced in the event of a costume being re-used in further productions.



*Figure 5: Costume label, Garland 2016.*

Most of the makers interviewed were not interested in having their names on the costume labels. One maker had makers labels printed when working as a freelancer, but did not like using them. They did not feel the need to sign their creations. As Maker 3 pointed out, it would need to be a very long label if a costume had been passed around the workroom in a joint effort to complete it: ‘...you may have five or six names on the ones from the show.’ Another maker expressed concern that a costume with her name on could in future be badly adapted for another show and she would not want to be associated with poor craftsmanship (Maker 1).

All the makers felt that research into costume construction is important. They were saddened by the barriers created by the anonymity of past makers and the absence of information in the archives. They felt there was need for greater recognition of the complexity of costume skills and acknowledged that adding their names to costume labels could be a valuable tool for future research. In the archives the costumes are generally affiliated to the designer or performer. In previous research relating to the value of costume, it appears that monetary and sentimental value are mainly defined by the fame of the performer.

From time to time many theatres will invite the public to purchase costumes from past productions that are no longer of benefit to the stockroom. The price attached to many of these costumes will be defined by the popularity of the performer for whom it was made. As can be seen on the price tag shown in figure 6, that references the actress who wore the costume. The makers were unconcerned at the monetary value put on the costumes during stockroom sales. They felt that the garments had



already fulfilled their intended role and were happy that they had another life outside the theatre and were still serving a purpose:

*I quite like the getting rid of things, particularly, certain costumes are particularly designery so they are really only suitable for the show on the actor and they become virtually useless in the store. (Maker 1)*

From the above quote, it seems that the maker's connection and passion lies with the craftsmanship of the make not the physicality of the garment.



Figure 6: Price tag on costume for sale, Garland 2016.

### Passion for their career

Generally, the makers were disconnected from the fame of the performers for whom they made costumes. The only advantage they discussed was the interest gained from people outside of the theatre environment as the performer's fame often stimulated interest and conversation about their work. They were much more concerned with the making process rather than the performer wearing it. Equally they did not feel any advantage from knowing performers from previous productions: 'It's the costume that matters more than who wears it' (Maker 1).

The makers interviewed were very clear that they did not want to be designers, and were frustrated by designers who hindered the making process by not providing enough relevant information; they did not want to make design decisions for them. They found the process of costume construction offered a vast array of challenges to inspire, explore and satisfy their talents. Sometimes after seeing the outcome of a costume design or performance role on stage, the designer or director may decide a costume is not required in the show and it will be 'cut' and returned to the department unused. Many of the makers displayed frustration that costumes they had lovingly worked on, had not made the final production: 'That's the worst isn't it because nobody sees it then' (Maker 4). It seemed it did not have a reason for being and therefore the make process was futile. Although the joy came from the make process, it was important that the costume fulfilled its role. 'It's not just making something beautiful,

but something beautiful that gets used and has a purpose' (Maker 4). This was also evident during the Press night viewing. There was a real sense of accomplishment from the team and on the whole they were proud of what they had achieved. It was apparent from the conversations after the show that the makers struggled to fully disassociate from the costumes while watching the production. Much of their concentration during the production had been captured as they inspected different aspects of the costumes they had made, to see how successful they had been at fulfilling their role. One maker reflected:

*I found myself often looking at the tiny details of the costumes (everyone's, not just my own), like those braces are a bit twisted or that a mic pack is not quite tucked in; I had to keep reminding myself to mentally step back and look at the show as a whole.*  
(Maker 3)

## Conclusion

Initial findings from the interviews revealed that all the makers displayed a genuine passion for their craft. They were extremely proud of their specialism and the work they produce as highlighted in this quote: 'A costume is something that can be made, and made with skill, and look brilliant, but then it also serves a purpose, it gets used' (Maker 4). Interviewees felt a sense of ownership over the costumes that lasted past the point of completion. They loved their careers and their aspirations were connected to costume construction and not the other aspects of the industry. Even though two of the makers interviewed had fine art degrees, all the makers were very insistent that they would not want any other career: 'Oh not it's not just a job, I mean it is the best job in the world but it's not just a job, ...it's an art and a craft' (Maker 1). Their enjoyment is a result of the making process and the challenges it presents. It is not affected by either the potential recognition of their work or the celebrities wearing them.

To conclude, costume makers passion for their craft was ever evident, even during stressful periods. It is the joy of the make process and ever-changing challenges that give the passion for the maker and, indeed, spending the short time sewing alongside them, I too recall the joy of the make. Future research will see me return to the Crucible Theatre and examine the costumes from 'Kiss Me Kate' now that they have been relegated to the store room. Discussion with the stock manager will ascertain their present value as working garments. Returning the costumes to the workroom I will observe the reactions from the makers, gauging their true connection with their bygone creations. I will carry out further interviews with freelance makers to consider the contrast in making experience in terms of environment, fulfilment and connection to costume makers craft.

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