



Winter 12-2012

Behind the Seams: An Ethnographic Study of the Performative Nature of Theatrical Costumes

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Behind the Seams: An Ethnographic Study of the Performative Nature of Theatrical Costumes

Abstract

Actors are said to bring a play to life, but what about the garments that they wear? Like set production, light design, and direction, the role of the costume plays an important part in informing and enchanting the audience. However, this is not all that they do. This paper acts as an in-depth examination of the culture of costume creation and destruction at Gettysburg College, researching their roles as garments, as well as how the garments themselves "act" around others. Imbued with their own set of responsibilities, the costumes are expected to behave certain ways, perform specific functions, and put on a show of their own. Through 20 hours of ethnographic research, this paper seeks to show that the costumes are not just as single component of the theatrical experience, but instead an integral performer in the social construction of the story itself.

Keywords

costumes, sociology, ethnography, explorative research, costume design, social life of things, Kopytoff

Disciplines

Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology of Culture | Theatre and Performance Studies

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Winner of the 2013 Stock Writing Prize for Social Sciences

“Behind the Seams”

An Ethnographic Study of the Performative Nature of Theatrical Costumes

Written by Emily Lindholm

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Actors are said to bring a play to life, but what about the garments that they wear? Like set production, light design, and direction, the role of the costume plays an important part in informing and enchanting the audience. However, this is not all that they do. This paper acts as an in-depth examination of the culture of costume creation and destruction at Gettysburg College, researching their roles as garments, as well as how the garments themselves "act" around others. Imbued with their own set of responsibilities, the costumes are expected to behave certain ways, perform specific functions, and put on a show of their own. Through 20 hours of ethnographic research, this paper seeks to show that the costumes are not just as single component of the theatrical experience, but instead an integral performer in the social construction of the story itself.

Emily Lindholm
SOC 323
Professor Hays
12/06/2012

Behind the Seams

An Exploratory Ethnographic Study of the Performative Roles of the Theatrical Costume

By: Emily Lindholm

As symbols of social meaning, clothing plays a large role in informing us and helping us make sense of our surroundings. Whether distinguishing between police officer and criminal, bride and groom, or customer and cashier, the clothing we wear affects and *reflects* the views we have of ourselves and others, and often sets the tone and expectations for how certain interactions will take place. But what about the garments themselves? While they are busy communicating certain aspects of the wearer, what are they communicating about *themselves*? While these questions may seem out of place in regards to everyday “costumes” (tactfully redefined in everyday life as “uniforms”), within the realm of the theatre these questions remain pertinent. In the fabric of their own existence, theatrical costumes are actively involved in the give and take of social meaning.

In this paper I examine the performative nature of theatrical costumes as both objects and as actors within the confines of the Gettysburg College costume shop environment. I argue that while costumes are often considered a “supplemental” aspect of performance, they are actually participating in deeply communicative process with both the handler and the observers in their creation and use. I assert that, like the stage actor or director, a costume assumes multiple social roles embedded with expectations, behaviors, and certain codes of conduct that make it not only a highly social participant independent of its wearers, but as an integral part of the larger theatrical production as a whole.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature surrounding the topic of “sociology of theatre” and theatrical costumes is relatively small. The closest sociological studies of costumes usually focuses on

aspects other than that of the costume itself, like the examination of (1) costumes as they relate to larger theatrical processes, (2) costumes as they are understood by costumers, and (3) costumes as articles that are imbued with cultural meanings. Alves (2007) published an ethnography that took place over the course of two years focusing on the theatre company as a whole, analyzing it from a structural, mechanistic lens.¹ She notes that the production of a theatrical show is a “highly collective activity”² which requires the cooperation of eight different social groups within the company, including the costumers who were seen as taking on a “service relationship” that had been socially legitimized as a position within the workplace. In describing the interactions she observed that “dressers’ tasks consist in helping actors dress and undress, but also in taking care of costumes—cleaning them up, ironing, mending, and putting away...dressers are seen and see themselves as lower grade participants to this artistic activity...the low status is made official through the position they are given in the hierarchy of their jobs”.³ This structural analysis, however, offers little understanding of the meanings of the costume *within* the costume shop, and cannot offer any relevant insight into the performative nature of the costumes. The service relationships between costumers and actors is also discussed briefly by David Orzechowicz,⁴ who analyzes the ways in which actors are structurally provided with the most emotional support while the rest of the social groups are expected to uphold some degree of primary or secondary feeling management.⁵ People in emotionally supportive roles are described as being “responsible for managing many offstage sources of emotion and distraction”⁶ and dealing with anything that could affect the actors’ overall performance if distracted. The rip of a seam or the loss of a button could be detrimental to the actor’s performance, therefore putting the costumer on high alert for signs of any emotional distress. This service relationship is integral to his study as it focuses on *power* relationships

within the production of a theatrical performance, but it does not explain or even acknowledge the communicative nature of the costume in relation to the actor or describe in even brief detail how the character is negotiated and emotionally maintained through the physical garments that the actors are wearing. This lack of attention on costumes themselves illuminates the need for more sociological research on other aspects of theatrical productions, including the performative nature of costumes and how their existence is negotiated within the theatre world.

The most relevant and fruitful knowledge of costumes as they relate to theatre can be found in literature specifically for costume designers. Motley (1964) dedicates her book, *Designing and Making Costumes*, to describing the process of costuming as it relates to the costumer. This can include anything from detailing their responsibilities as a member of the production, to the proper way to analyze a script, to visualizing the actor before the play is cast, and even suggestions on how to rework the costumes *after* the actors have been cast.⁷ The process of defining a character also begins to be expressed depending on the individual choices of the costumer: “By its color, it can show mood and taste, by its texture, economic status; by its style, both occupation and nationality. It is from a happy union of these qualities that character and credibility are born.”⁸ The communicative nature of clothing as it applies to the stage is apparent, but it is *not* the main focus of the writing. The book instead strays quickly away from sociological concepts such as audience interpretation and character portrayal in favor of technical advice like “facts about fabrics”⁹ and other occupational advice. Tortora and Eubank (2000) begin their analysis of costume design by offering the most basic reasons why sociologists and psychologists believe clothing is worn, describing it as being worn for protection, decoration, modesty, and as a denotation of status.¹⁰ While they state that “costumes” as we understand them in the Western hemisphere are not a universal phenomenon, they do stress that every culture does

have *some* form of decoration for communicative purposes. This leads them to believe that the art of decorating oneself is a “basic human practice,”¹¹ writing that “dress tells the observer something about the organization of the society in which it is worn.”¹² The consideration of the social nature of clothing is evident in the practice of bringing characters to life within the “society” of the theatrical piece. Barbara and Cletus Anderson (1999) use their writings to teach potential costumers the duties involved with designing a costume, including their requirement that the costumer be acutely aware of everything that the costume encompasses: “It must be based on a knowledge of the art form and the world from which it springs [and] must be predicated on an understanding of characters created for the entertainment of others and of the actual people who are the resource for the presentation and its roles.”¹³ While none of these writings are sociological in nature, they fit nicely with the ideas of Goffman (1959) and his sociological theories on the power of individual expression both in the sense of the communicative nature one’s presentation of self and also in what costumers are able to *portray* in designing costumes to represent a character.¹⁴

As costumes are objects that can be imbued with social meaning, they relate to Kopytoff’s (1986) theory of commodity spheres and “the social life of things.”¹⁵ He asserts that, much like humans, objects have their own cultural biographies¹⁶ and that culture “serves the mind by imposing a collectively shared cognitive order upon the world.”¹⁷ He asserts that culture plays a large role in bringing certain objects to life over others, and that being in a social world means actively participating in the categorization of objects by value judgments or “spheres of exchange,” otherwise defined as cerebral categories used to understand which commodities can be exchanged for others.¹⁸ Within the context of a costume shop, the commoditization and categorization of certain equipment over others sheds light on what is valued most and how their

values are negotiated when exchanged for one another. In addition to Kopytoff, Peter Berger (1969) describes how items are categorized as either sacred or profane, and that because the world is socially constructed, the ordering of experience in this way is an attempt to convey meaning onto the negotiated environment.¹⁹ In this same vein, Emile Durkheim (1965) describes how collective consciences determine the ordering of the sacred and profane through religion.²⁰ While the costumes are not necessarily consciously recognized as *sacred* within the costume shop, they take on a heavy significance in relation to the equipment and scraps of fabric that are not being used for the production. The important aspects of these theories by Kopytoff, Berger, and Durkheim include the emphasis on culture as a *determining* factor in what ends up being classified as “special” versus what can be wasted—judgments made on a daily basis in the costume shop. Berger and Luckmann (1966) build on this idea of social construction by encouraging the examination of reality as it is understood by humans in their everyday lives.²¹ They discuss the “taken for granted” nature of reality as it has become legitimized through reification.²² This aids in the analysis of my own research by providing different theories for understanding the social negotiation of objects and encompasses the idea that clothing, when designed to portray a character, has the potential to hold an entire social understanding of reality within its fabric.

It is important to note, however, that the value judgments are not random or unplanned, but instead that the choice of costume is quite a rational one, as shown in the work by Griffiths (2011). Performing research on the processes in which female classical soloists chose their performance costumes, she found that there were many other factors in making the decision, including the dress’s ability to promote physical freedom, signal their views of performance to the audience, and express individuality.²³ Stated another way, the explanation of the processes by

which women chose performance dresses showed that while aesthetic decoration is important a costume will not be chosen if it is understood to be too flimsy, constricting, or distracting from the performance itself.²⁴

My personal research, to be stated in detail in the following pages, uses these theories on the meaning of costumes, the social creation of reality, and applied field research results such as Griffiths' study of how one chooses performance costumes to analyze and better understand the roles of costumes as they relate to the Gettysburg College costume shop. It is my intention to illustrate the daily workings of the costume shop in addition to highlight and the understandings that its members have regarding their role in the creation of costume pieces and the understandings of the social life of costumes themselves.

Methodology

Located in the basement of Brua Hall, the Gettysburg College costume shop is hidden behind two large heavy oak doors which are opened every week on Tuesdays from 4-6:00PM, Wednesdays from 2-6:00PM, and Thursdays from 4-6:00PM. The costume shop is an oddly-shaped, half-oval, fluorescently lit room where *everything* has wheels. The floor is covered in speckled tile that was once white, now tinted with gray and brown due to the wear and tear of constantly moving tables, chairs and unceasing foot traffic from actors arriving for fittings. This semester, eight black computer chairs are strewn haphazardly throughout the shop—some performing their duties for the people who sit in them, while others carry out the role of “honorary shelf,” housing boxes, bags, and miscellaneous costume pieces that had been worked on, or moved over, and briefly forgotten about as the workers moved about their day. Whitewashed walls are splattered with pictures of men and women from the 1960's, and just through the entrance it is easy to see an extensive and far-reaching countertop covered in fabric,

costume pieces, thread particles, and four clunky sewing machines that seem to have been pulled straight from the 1980's. The most important part of the room, however, is completely empty. Nearest to the entrance there lies a space roughly the size of a miniature stage, its borders clearly marked by the presence of tables and chairs—a “display space” for living garments which waits patiently for the next parade of actor fittings.

It was here that I performed 20 hours of field research on the performative aspects of theatrical costumes and, from September 18 until November 12, I was a member of the costume shop student workers, taking on the shared responsibilities of putting together a cohesive set of costumes for a 1960's inspired off-Broadway musical. Actively participating in daily activities and group tasks, and observing fittings, the creation of costumes, and the craziness of being on call during the run of a show, I was able to document a wide variety of interactions in and out of the costume shop as they related to my research question.

The structure of the costume shop is relatively simple. Kathy, a quiet young woman in her early 30's decorated with blond coiffed hair and dark-rimmed glasses, is the costume designer and assistant professor within the Gettysburg College Theatre Department. Her counterpart within the costume shop is a round, balding man named Jeremy, whose long grey hair, goatee, and spectacle glasses express his eccentric nature as the costume shop manager and boss of the seven student workers employed by the Gettysburg Theatre department. All females, the student workers schedule their own hours and can work anywhere from five to seven hours per week depending on their schedules. In addition to these women, the students of Kathy's design class, which she teaches twice a week, plan visits of their own to the costume shop to achieve their required 30 hours of required “experiential learning.”

Over the course of my field research at the Gettysburg College costume shop, patterns emerged that led me to organize my findings around the idea of costumes as highly communicative social artifacts and actors.

Analysis

Costumes serve many purposes within the costume shop, including their high utilization as a tool for garment creation, social negotiation, and project facilitation, in addition to serving as a form of communication in and of themselves—each costume has a unique story, background, and certain attributes that categorize it as worthy of certain roles over others. In addition, they dictate the spatial layout, scheduling of events, and overall social interactions that occur on a day to day basis. In this way, I came to understand that a costume is not just piece of clothing, but instead it is an active prop, actor *and* director within the theatricalities that occur in the process of producing a musical.

Costumes as Props

Productivity and the Art of “Acting Busy”

Jessica sits quietly on her stool, hunched over her project with intensity and focus. Holding the fabric up to eye-level, she makes a single incision of the needle and thread through bright pink denim jeans, determined to keep the line straight. Momentarily distracted by the soft giggle passing by her, Jessica looked up at Kathy who had passed her to get behind the worktable to grab a bag of hats that she would need for a fitting. Her concentration quickly breaking into a smile, she sat up straight and responded to Kathy’s gesture of acknowledgement. “I’m getting there!” she laughed and then added to me, “Everyone thinks I’m going slow because I’m being meticulous but really I’m just friggin’ slow!” Jessica, a student of the costume design class, is one of the many individuals who are kept busy by the tasks of the costume shop.

This act, while illuminating the casual nature of the language used within the costume shop, as well as one Goffman-esque tactic used to “save face” through making slowness a joke rather than an issue, also represents a bigger role that the costume plays within the environment in that it serves as a tool for the workers and students to show they are being productive. Tasks assigned on the average day range from hemming and button sewing, to ironing and washing, depending on where the costumes are in the process of production.

While it is important to get these projects done, however, I noticed that the distribution of tasks is also strategic in nature when it comes down to exactly who needs to appear productive at any given point in time. The expectations differed from group to group; the costume design students were required to spend time *learning* about projects and the general nature of the costume shop, which included more watching and “hands-off” instruction. In contrast, there was a much higher expectation put on student workers to physically perform and complete tasks due to the fact that they were getting paid to be there. Most importantly, however, it seemed to be paramount for Jeremy, the costume manager, to have tasks to accomplish. There was almost never an instant when I was in the costume shop that he wasn’t fixing, hemming, ironing, or preparing something for the production. This division of labor within the costume shop was most apparent when there was not enough for the entire shop to do, and instead of delegating tasks to workers and students, Jeremy performed them himself. An example of this can be seen below:

“Margaret, turning to Jeremy from her rolling chair near the back wall of sewing machines was the first one to break the silence. ‘Jeremy,’ she asked, ‘do you have any work you’d like us to do?’ Jeremy, immediately acknowledging her question with a nod, got up out of his rolling chair and began talking to her about how the other patterns needed to be cut for the shell dress. However, even though she asked for work she could do, Jeremy grabbed scissors and headed to the workstation where he himself began to cut the patterns himself as we watched....”

Margaret, asking for a task, seemed to be acknowledging her own deviance from her role as a productive student worker, but Jeremy's reluctance and overall inability to provide her with the props she needed (in this case, the fabric patterns) showed the importance of costumes as a tool and prop for projecting his own image of productivity.

Physical & Emotional Barriers to Intimacy

In discussion the task of fitting a costume to an actor, Jeremy was open with me about sharing his understanding of his job in relation to the people that he dresses. Sitting side by side in rolling chairs, talking quietly while the final performance of the fall musical took place above us on Kline Stage, Jeremy mentioned that he often saw “an actor in costume as nothing more than a living mannequin.” He laughed, “Sometimes I have to take a step back and remember that when I need the zipper up on a dress, they can do it themselves!”

The dynamics of a costume fitting are simple. Actors are expected to show up at the costume shop within five minutes of the time they have previously agreed to. Signing up via email or, for those who are less inclined to check their email, *being* signed up for a time, they can enter a variety of situations. Receiving anything from one pair of shoes to multiple three-piece suits to try on, they are then always given instructions on what to try on first before being dismissed to try on the items in the dressing room just down the hall. Returning fully dressed in the requested costume, they step back into the costume shop and into the “display space” near the entrance to wait to be looked at. Once in costume, either Kathy or Jeremy analyze the look, consider it for the show, and then ask them to go take it off and bring it back to the costume shop to be dealt with by the rest of the costume shop workers.

While this process is simple, it is nevertheless an extremely intimate interaction. Not only are the actors being looked at, but they are often touched—their sleeves examined, their waists

measured, their shoulders rotated—as the costume is accessed in relation to their body for its overall effectiveness in the show. Being analyzed, visually assessed, and *touched*, it is not hard to imagine how a situation like this between the costumers and the student actors has the potential to be awkward and uncomfortable. However, using the following example, it is shown that both parties attempt to navigate this interaction in an overtly professional manner:

“When Kathy eventually does come back, she introduces herself and shakes the actress’s hand before standing back to look at the dress. Informing the girl that she will have her try on a few dresses, she then begins touching the waist of the dress as if checking how much room is left and would need to be taken in. She pulls a few other items from the rack and instructs the girl on what to pair with what, and also gives her a ‘just in case’ shirt that she could wear if one shirt did not fit.”

By first introducing herself, and also by informing the actress of what they were going to do that day, the stage was set for a professional and socially agreed upon interaction. In addition, Kathy’s extreme professionalism was unmistakable as she actively switched to different focal point around the room to see how the dress fit the actress. While not a very prominent shift in attention, the way in which Kathy’s focus remained entirely on the dress and not on the actress’s body effectively neutralized the intimacy of the situation. In a way, the actress’s body took on a certain objectification in the sense that she became something like a living mannequin—a breathing form for the dress. Another example of a way in which the costumers used costumes as a way to relate to the body without putting attention directly *on* the body can be seen in this excerpt of an interaction between Jeremy and Margaret, where he asks her to act as a mannequin so he can see how the dress looks like on a form:

“Jeremy, finishing his work with the zipper of the shell dress, asks Margaret to stand up so he can put the dress on her... She begrudgingly stands up and smiles, and we all laugh because she has a large sweater and pants on, and the dress will be going over all of it. He puts the dress on her over her head, and pulls it down to her knees... Jeremy stands back to look at the dress, and makes a comment about how the dress

falls on Margaret's chest. 'Bring them [motioning to her breasts] up where they belong' he jokes—she plays off of him and replies that she is sure that her breasts are in the right place, and that no one should have breasts that high on their chests.'"

Again, while the conversation is about intimate things, the humor and physical distance between the two parties, along with the focus on the dress and not on Margaret's body, is what kept the conversation from feeling inappropriate.

Construction, Destruction, and Value Judgments

Not all costumes are created equal. In the costume shop, value judgments determining the life and death of a costume are made daily. Whether it's seam-ripping a hem or transforming a dress from a 14 into a size 4, costumes are constantly torn apart and recreated depending on the needs of the show. Often, while sitting in the costume shop, I'd watch as entire outfits would be pulled off of the racks positioned carefully around the costume shop and given to workers or students to be "deconstructed" in order to be used as parts of another costume for the upcoming performance:

"Kathy, looking up from her ever-increasing 'to-do' list, quickly surveyed the room and then glanced back at her work station, announcing to no one in particular that she needed someone to help her with a 'reconstruction project,' which meant that she wanted someone to take apart a long skirt so they could use the fabric to make part of a dress for the lead actress..."

Due to the unique pattern of the fabric, Kathy had decided that it would be the perfect addition to the yellow, blue and brown plaid jumper that she had designed. The willingness that Kathy and Jeremy had to "sacrifice" costumes for the sake of others indicated that while every costume was special property of the Theatre Department, the costumes that needed to be created for the most recent show took priority over all others. This was further supported by my observations that costumes being used for the show were attached with more "handling regulations" as compared to those that were not chosen for the show. In order to pull the costumes for the upcoming

musical from the racks, for example, special permission had to be given by either Kathy or Jeremy, and if it was not granted, the costumes remained where they were.

In another instance, the costumes were not directly mentioned but they can be added into this type of “commodity sphere”²⁵ mindset that Jeremy explained to me after describing in great detail the idiosyncrasies of the previous costume designer at Gettysburg College and how her ideas about what was important to have in the costume shop were radically different from his:

“Explaining the previous costume designer’s difficulty to work with, Jeremy stated with incredulity that she ‘didn’t like wire hangers, and the next day didn’t like plastic hangers!’ and that he saw this as ridiculous because things like hangers, bolts of fabric, boxes of pompoms, and zippers were ‘disposable parts of the shop,’ which he later restated as being the ‘consumable’ parts of the shop....tables, shelves, and carts on the other hand were considered ‘equipment,’ meaning that they were necessary and long-lasting items within the shop that were intended to be kept and maintained in good condition”

This is one of the best outright representations of the Kopytoff’s typification²⁶ process within the costume shop in that Jeremy actively shared with me his understanding of what items in the shop he could afford to lose—those which he saw as relatively replaceable in relation to those things which he believed were valuable and should be respected and cared for. Applying this mentality to the costumes, it could be gleaned that the costumes within the current production had been “placed” in a higher sphere of commodity value due to the relatively low amounts of interaction they received after being perfected for performance. While the costumes were isolated from other costumes and equipment via the racks, the equipment such as tables, chairs, and carts remained in constant use, serving many different purposes at once. It is interesting to note, however, that even aspects of the costumes being created for the show could be pulled quickly from their highly valued commodity sphere, as shown in the following example of one costume design student who, after finishing her project, decided to revisit the remaining materials:

“Once the Girl Scout badges were completed, the workers and students took their seats, except for Amanda, who had approached the workstation with her kindle in a black case, and began putting stickers on each of the corners in various directions. She didn’t ask, and no one remarked on the behavior. She was up at the workstation for about five minutes putting stickers on her kindle before resuming her chair and opening up the kindle to read.”

This freedom expressed by Amanda in utilizing that which was once strictly reserved for the costumes showed how quickly commodities could travel between commodity spheres. The stickers began as highly valued aesthetic components that were to be treated with care as the badges were made. Once the project was finished, however, there was no more need for the remaining stickers, and they suddenly became commodities of the lowest order waiting to be disposed of. It is important to note that this can happen to anything in the costume shop, including to costumes. For example, just minutes after the final performance, the costumes were immediately collected and thrown on the floor of the costume shop to be washed and reorganized. This behavior would not have been permissible at any point before that night due to the fact that they were going to be used, but since their utility had expired, they lost their high value as a commodity.

Costumes as Actors *Role Expectations*

While the costume acts as a prop for others to use in their own “world-building,” the costumes themselves have certain behaviors and ways of acting that are expected of them, much like those of a human actor. The first and perhaps one of the most important expectations of a costume is that it is durable, strong, and resistant to change. For example, in a talking with Jeremy and Sasha about the previous costume designer, they shared a smirking laugh about her obsession with having “authentic” costumes:

*“Jeremy said that Karen ‘used to be easygoing...then she needed things to be **authentic**’ to which Sasha laughed in a belittling fashion and said in agreement ‘this is theatre, not reenacting.’ Jeremy then responded ‘this is theatre, not real life.’”*

Both parties agreed that the previous designer’s vision of having authentic, period costumes was ridiculous. Jeremy continued to laugh as he further explained how she would demand that if the play was set before the 1910’s there couldn’t be a zipper on it, as zippers had not yet been invented. “You can’t have buttons and do a quick change!” he said, “It just doesn’t work!” This was clearly an attempt to delineate theatrical costumes with other types of garments including actual period-authentic garments, and garments which were not built for the wear and tear of quick costume changes and, in the case of musicals, large amounts of dancing. Costumes are given the responsibility to hold up night after night, performance after performance, and wear after wear without falling apart, much like the actual actor who is wearing it. This mirrors Griffith’s article in that the durability of the costume is also something that the female soloists take into account when they are choosing a performance dress.

Theatre Historians

While costumes take on the role of the actor on stage, they also become something of theatre historians as they are recycled through performances. The “mystery of the red dress,” for example was a mystery that was brought into the costume shop collective consciousness²⁷ one day during a fitting with a tall blonde actress who was being fitted for a dress suitable for a 1960’s homely school teacher. Entering the costume shop wearing a red dress that Kathy had assigned her, she stepped into the “display space.” Kathy tilted her head, puzzled by the strange shape of the dress, and instead of ignoring it, she asked the actress to go back and take off the dress so that she could examine why it was draped in such a strange and lopsided way. While she

initially thought it must have been used as a “prop dress,” after close examination Kathy figured out that, through looking at the seams, the dress had been altered a considerable amount:

“Kathy later told me that she had realized the red dress wasn’t just a prop dress, but instead that it had been reconstructed from a plus size wrap dress into a size 4 zip-up dress. That was why the seams were so strange—investigating the costume is important because they can be used so differently each time”

Not only did the costume serve a purpose as a garment, but it also harbored its own “scars” from being reconstructed to fit actresses in the past. The visible nature of the story and the ability that the dress had to communicate its story seemed to exemplify that the costume was not as simply a “red dress,” but instead it was some sort of constantly transforming culmination of creative processes. In addition to this story, it was always evident when a costume had been used for a previous show. Because the costume shop does not have access to an unlimited amount of costumes, they often repeat costumes when the time periods are relatively the same. Because of this, one dress instigated the following situation:

“Reentering the costume shop in a white dress with sleeves and a poofy skirt covered in blue flowers, the tall, slender redhead actress looked at Kathy and, while running her hands over the fabric, exclaimed that it fit absolutely perfectly. She asked if it was a dress that the shop had bought, to which Jeremy replied that it had been used for Blanche’s dress in “Streetcar Named Desire,” which none of us remembered as it happened the year before we came to college.

This type of “running biography” fits into Kopytoff’s idea of cultural biographies²⁸ as they are applied to costumes. It serves as a running story of the history of its own interaction with the costume shop, and because Jeremy has also been with the costume shop for ten years, he was able to accurately retell its story.

“Being” the Character

In addition to both of the previously mentioned roles, the costumes are consistently treated as part of the character that they are supposed to clothe. This pattern was nowhere more

apparent than in the interactions that Kathy had with and around the costumes she was assigning to specific people. Instead of assigning garments to specific *actors*, however, I often found that she was assigning them to specific *characters* that didn't actually exist. For example, the following is an excerpt of an interaction I overheard between Kathy and Jeremy in regards to the specific accessories that would be worn by the group of Girl Scouts within the show:

“Jeremy and Kathy are huddled around Rose who is currently wearing a yellow bow on her head and texting absentmindedly as the two adults examine the bow. At present, Jeremy is showing Kathy the general idea of the ‘bow headband’ that he saw in a show on the History Channel, which is different from Kathy’s idea to have the bows wrapped around the necks of the little girls...Kathy is silent for a second, taking in the idea of the bow, and responds slowly that ‘maybe one person can have it... you know, if she was trying to be different’.”

In this discussion, the bow seemed to be much more than an accessory. In fact, it played a key role in communicating to the audience exactly what *type* of girl the wearer of the “headband bow” was. Kathy seemed to fully understand the largely communicative role that costumes (and accessories) have in the progression of the telling of a story, and it was evident that she took into consideration what each costume communicated about its own personal character. In another relevant anecdote, I witnessed Kathy interacting with an actress as they negotiated their understandings of her multiple characters:

“Kathy was again attending to an actress who had come in wearing a bright pink dress and was standing three feet away from her, in the ‘display space’ of the costume shop. Kathy asked her ‘Are you Theresa the whole time or are you ever ‘Generic Girl’?’ which would seem like an odd question to be asked anywhere else, but Kathy wanted to know if that dress could/should be worn as part of the overall character the girl was playing, or if it was better suited as ‘scenery’ for the stage.”

In this example I saw that the difference between Theresa and “Generic Girl” appeared to be the presence of a personality worth recognizing—at least from the audiences perspective. In this way

the costumes, like the bright pink dress, radiated their own personalities onto others, and part of the job of a costume designer like Kathy is to take those costume personalities into account. Referring back to Motley's *Designing and Making Stage Costumes*, this story represents their theory that many things are expressed through costuming including mood, personality, time period, and other nuanced aspects of the character. It is the tedious job of the costumer to capture this in a few carefully chosen garments. In this way, the costumes themselves are not just clothes, but instead seem to be an important part of encompassing and actively defining the character.

Costumes as Directors *Physical Layout & the Negotiation of Space*

As previously mentioned, the costume shop is required to contain essentially everything needed for the creation of a costumed production. What I noticed in my field research was the dynamism of the costume shop in that it was constantly changing to support and facilitate the unique tasks of the day. Racks that were outside in the hallway one day would be lining the interior walls the next, while a mannequins entered a state of perpetual travel as they transported costumes to and from the middle of the room—the “display” space—to a secluded corner, and then outside into the hallway for final observation. Through these observations I noticed that it was not the people who dictated the layout of the room, but instead the costumes who took precedence over the space and forced students staff to work around them. While obviously the garments have no physical powers to dictate the workers, I describe their power in terms of how their placement and overall consistently took priority over the needs of the workers and students, which led them to sit in various spots around the costume shop. For example, the sheer act of finding a seat that would not inconvenience the process of making costumes could sometimes be a complete guessing game:

“I asked a girl named Anna if I would be in the way by sitting in the empty rolling chair. Located in between the washer/dryer set and the workstation table littered with fabric scraps and half-finished patterns, I was unsure whether or not someone would need to get around me. She was also unsure, and expressed that by laughing and saying ‘...not right now?’”

Sure enough, within the next twenty minutes I was very much in the way. Jeremy instigated another group project that required the work table, and I was forced to move yet again to the other side of the room. It is an accepted norm that everyone will be expected to move at some point, easily evidenced by the copious amounts of equipment with wheels—anything that needs to move *will* move. In addition to simply being required to move for the sake of the costumes, I observed that some workers and students were actually required to also give up their personal space when space was tight and there were many workers in the shop:

“Lisa looked around for seating and found that there was only one open seat—a stool—that was directly behind Sasha. As she sat down, Sasha, seated in a rolling chair, looked back and indicated that Lisa was seated very close behind her with a long, overly friendly ‘Heeeeeeeey...’ to which Lisa too acknowledged their strangely intimate distance, laughed it off, and said ‘Sorry... eavesdropping.’ Both girls chuckled, and Sasha turned back around to resume her homework”

While the intimacy of the space was neutralized by their mutual recognition of the situation, this scene represents that the needs of the costumes have an amount of control over the environment that the workers are expected to accept.

Group Projects and Isolation

In addition to dictating the spatial elements of the costume shop, the costumes play a large part in determining the sociability of the workers during the costume shop hours. In general, projects are individualistic in nature as the tasks required of workers are usually smaller in scope and require only one pair of hands to hem, stitch, sew, or iron. Because of this, student workers and staff are often pulled from the main sphere of interaction within the workspace, isolated by

location and by the nature of their project. While costume creation can be isolating, it also has the potential for facilitating large amounts of interaction when a project requires many volunteers. Throughout my time as a student researcher I had the ability to witness both sides of this phenomenon and interact with the students and workers while creating parts of the costumes:

“Seven of us crowded around the workstation taking separate responsibilities, while Allison, a tall brunette with blonde streaks dressed in a Gettysburg College sweatshirt and black skirt with rain boots, was sewing on the zipper to the dress shell that Jeremy had worked on last week. As we designed our badges, the girls began trying to determine what the imaginary girl scouts would have had to do to earn ‘a heart badge with three upside-down birds and a pineapple,’ giggling and making up strange stories.”

These types of interactions, where the group was actively making up stories based on the information in front of them, would not have been possible had it not been for the nature of the job. I am comfortable stating this because I witnessed the opposite pattern of group interaction when there were individualistic projects or no projects at all taking place—in these times the topics of conversation revolve mainly around popular TV shows that were most often discussed in small groups, splitting between student works and “Costume Design” students. I conclude that it is the nature of the project itself and the costume’s ability to be worked on that provides a “social equalizer” in which no prior cultural knowledge is needed to instigate interactions with others.

Conclusion

Through my twenty hours of qualitative research I was able to highlight the importance of theatrical costumes through a symbolic-interactionism lens as they relate to individuals and the process of the social construction of reality, and proved that there is valuable research to be done on the garments *themselves* in the sociological studies of theatre. Through my micro-level analysis of costumes, I have provided a new framework in which the social life of clothing can

be understood and utilized. By framing costumes as props, actors, and directors within the costume shop, I have shown that the responsibilities of clothing much exceeds the research that has been performed on this topic, and that it is relevant to the works of Berger, Durkheim, and Kopytoff's theory of the social life of things.²⁹ It also lends itself to supplementary support for the initial research found in Griffith's ethnography on the way in which women understand performative aspects of clothing.³⁰

Though my time spent researching this topic was not nearly enough to lend itself to any sweeping conclusions on the true nature of the theatrical costume, it lends itself as a "jumping off" point for future research and offers a new theoretical framework to better understand and consider the interactive nature of clothing. I am aware that the time spent on this study is not optimal for solid research findings, but it proves to be a sturdy and well-evidenced piece of exploratory research that is well supported by grounded theory. Future research initiatives could focus on many different aspects of this study, including how costumes shape the actor's understandings of their character, or analyzing the role of the costume shop as an entity in the larger organization of the theatrical production as a whole.

My time as a student researcher in the Gettysburg College costume shop showed me that costumes are not just fabric, but instead have a life of their own. As objects, they serve as markers of productivity, props for their creators, and barriers to intimacy in the costumer/actor relationship. As an actor, the costumes actively communicate stories and are imbued with meaning through the processes of creation and destruction, and carry roles and expectations that they are expected to perform carry out. Finally, as a director the costumes dictate and facilitate not only the special layout of the costume shop, but also have an influence on the social atmosphere that exists among workers, staff, and students. In conclusion, the theatrical costume

is a complex social artifact that has a prominent role in the creation of reality (theatrical or not), and offers many new and exciting ways in which objects and commodities can be understood in the study of sociology.

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- ³ Alves. 2007: 87
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- ¹⁴ Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Doubleday. P.40
- ¹⁵ Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. "The Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process." Pp.64-91 from *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
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- ¹⁷ Kopytoff. 1986:70
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- ²⁰ Durkheim, Emile. 1965. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York, NY: Free Press
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- ²² Berger & Luckmann. 1966:128
- ²³ Griffiths, Noola. 2011. "The Fabric of Performance: Values and Social Practices of Classical Music Expressed Through Concert Dress Choice." *Music Performance Research* (4). P.30
- ²⁴ Griffiths. 2011:45
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- ²⁸ Kopytoff. 1986:68
- ²⁹ Kopytoff. 1986:68
- ³⁰ Griffiths. 2011:30

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Appendix 1*Time Log of Time Spent at Research Site:*

September 18 (4-5:30PM) = 1.5
September 19 (4-5:00PM) = 1.0
September 20 (5-6:00PM) = 1.0
September 25 (4-5:00PM) = 1.0
September 26 (5:15-5:45PM) = 0.5
October 2 (4-5:30PM) = 1.5
October 4 (4-6:00PM) = 2.0
October 11 (5-5:30PM) = 0.5
October 17 (5-6:00PM) = 1.0
October 18 (4-6:00PM) = 2.0
October 23 (4-6:00PM) = 2.0
November 6 (4-6:00PM) = 2.0
November 12 (6-10:00PM) = 4.0

= 20 Hours Total