

Introduction

“ The art of the theatre is often understood to consist of two parts; the literary and the visual, or more specifically, the writing of the play and its presentation before an audience. The playwright tells his story and creates his characters in words, while the theatre artists must re-create the play on the stage in concrete visual terms.”ⁱ

The following paper will reconsider the role of costume design in the “art of theatre.” Instead of subscribing to the principle that costume is to be “an envelope for the moods and ideas of the playwright,”ⁱⁱ I shall employ Ben Jonson’s term, *Invention*, as the preferred principle. Instead of relying upon the process espoused in standard design education, design will once again be defined as an art, one, like Poetry, based upon the humanities. “Invention is literally the finding of a subject of the poem. It is the first essential; without a fine invention, there cannot be a fine poem.”ⁱⁱⁱ We shall follow a journey of creation: a poet named X. is to design costumes for a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Catastrophe*, a short play in which three characters enact a theatrical ritual: the dress rehearsal. Beckett’s texts are intensely visual and heavily prescriptive; deviations from stated descriptions are forbidden by Beckett’s estate. Yet, what seems to require a mere following of the text’s orders actually requires a true Invention as X. will discover.

Invention

Our designer X. has not had the classic costume design training. Instead, she has been trained in poetry, reading the work of T.S. Eliot on Jonson and the creative imagination, while also working in theatre, which “is also an encounter between creative people.”^{iv} She belongs to a disappearing group of people who do not separate the performing arts from poetry, architecture, or the fine art: she belongs to a group who believe that the core of all Expression involves the same procedure. The tools may differ; the outcome is the same. “ Art itself is produced, in part, from the compulsion to express, a unique attribute of man. It is a desire to find and separate truth from the complex of lies and evasions in which he lives.”^v X.’s philosophy of creative thinking echoes Eliot’s:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of æsthetic, not merely historical, criticism.^{vi}

So, how did she come to design costumes? She was given this assignment primarily because she knew how to sew, a too frequent reason for design assignments^{vii}. X. wonders how she can employ her vision of the creative process to a field that seems to

hold craft higher than Invention. After skimming through a number of texts, X. chooses that classic costume text, Russell’s *Stage Costume Design: Theory, Technique And Style* for guidance: “The book is a splendid combination of the aesthetic and the practical.”^{viii}

Russell’s text, as in so many design texts, focuses on the rather prescriptive problem-solving model called the design process. Although the actual steps vary, the designer is charged to follow a process committing to the production to an analysis of the script, followed by research. The actual process of design is often skimmed over, referred to as incubation and selection. A great deal of attention is paid to the implementation, with discussions of drawing materials, rendering techniques, etc. The point of reference is always the written text.

The problem with this approach is that assumes the designer is to illustrate the text, and not to imitate it. The best of these designers might, “ suggest a confrontation between the text and plastic vision which surpasses and reveal the playwright’s imagination; “^{ix} but the notion of design as an art form has been lost.

Does one even need a costume, X. wonders? She retrieves her *Towards Poor Theatre* where Grotowski discusses the value of “ a costume with no autonomous value, existing only in connection with a particular character and his activities, can be transformed before the audience. In contrast, the more typical autonomous costume and make-up are but a trick he says.

X. is dissatisfied somehow with this definition of costume design as Interpretation, not Invention. It was what Jonson refers to as the Device, a body that lasts a brief life. Still, she finds something in an older article that inspires her to look again at Jonson’s ideas on art. “ In the area of the costume sketch the designer’s work becomes most introspective. Research at that point must be within himself. It is then that he decides how to use the facts he has accumulated to best express the intent of the play for which he is designing.”^x

DESIGNO, as an art and humanity

Design literally means *to designate, to mark*; it is the art or action of conceiving of plan an object is to be built or to look.

Jonson, who conceived of his Court Masques by creating new Emblems based on well-known examples, such as Cesare Ripa’s Emblem books. Invention for Jonson meant a definition of art as imitative. What is honored is that which is allusive. Indeed, for Jonson and others, the concept of originality was a weakness. To recognize and interpret the allusions required the reader to have the artist’s depth of knowledge and visual literacy;

hence, “ a great deal of renaissance art offered its patrons precisely the pleasures of recognition.”^{xi}

X. goes to Jonson’s source, Ripa and considers his emblem for design. (Figure 1)

A stripling of a noble aspect, with a garment of rich Cloth compasses in one Hand, and a Mirror in the other.

The aspect shews that all things made by Art... The compasses, that Designing consists in Measuring; the class, a good Imagination requires.^{xii}



Figure 1: designing

Design, in these terms, is an expression that can be defined as an art, intellectual in origin; the craft and skill necessary for its expression are only part of its meaning. Vasari also comments on design as arising from the study of copying natural objects and great masters; the invention ‘demands an innate propriety springing out of harmony and obedience.’^{xiii} Design may often be seen as the lines that express the mental conception; but like words of the poem, the *diseño* arrives from the formation of the Invention.

Timber, or the Discoveries

X. then picks up Ben Jonson’ *Timber, or the Discoveries*, a curious text that today might be considered largely plagiarized, where Jonson compiled the thoughts and ideas from his expansive reading. In *Discoveries*, he defines the poet as one who is a maker, one who finds and forms a fable. X., our costume designer, believes this definition should be extended to that of the costume designer as well. The designer should be a poet, for all costumes require an Invention. Costume is not an interpretation but a fable itself. The costume must stand alone, without the body and words. Like any art, the costume has a beginning, middle and end. It has structure and meaning. The costume progresses from the mute drawing to physical structure that transforms an actor’s body into another body. It is not clothing.

In Jonson’s *Timber, or Discoveries made upon Men and Matter*, both poetry and picture are defined as:

Arts of a like nature, and both are busie about imitation... For they both invent, faine, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use and service of nature.^{xiv}

Clothing and Costume

Costumes are the moving scenery of a production, and when worn by the actors, who are the center of all dramatic action, they are the strongest element of the visual scene; they project personality and individual emotion and obtain the strongest audience focus.^{”xv}

As a poet, X. concerns herself with the words, costume and clothing. Clothes are items to worn to cover the body; costume, from the word *custome*, is a set of clothes but also fashion. And fashion, from the Latin *facere*, to make, or to do, is also a manner of doing something in a particular way, of appearing a particular way, or shaping a particular thing. Russell notes that a person will thus define himself through fashion: “the person who is so self-effacing that he dresses in a way to erase himself from memory.”^{”xvi}

Clothing and costume then are physical representations the human body. Russell defines the purpose of clothing, whether wrapped, draped, or cut-to fit, as possessing two purposes, “ protection against elements and a sexual idea of manhood or womanhood;” in particular, he discusses how feminine dress is often an “ever changing game of revealing and concealing certain portions of the body.”^{”xvii}

X. thinks of Jonson who claims for words the same ability to suggest a physical character; and that the physical character matches the character.

Language most shews a man; speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent, of it, the mind. No glasse renders a man’s forme, or likenesse, so true as his speech. . . Some men are tall and biggee, so some Language is high and great.^{”xviii}

Thus, X. begins to discover how the line blurs between interpretation and *Invention* as costume designers discuss their work. “ A good costume becomes part of the actor’s characterization; it clothes the character properly. So that the audience is never aware of the dress as separate from the character.”^{”xix} Even in Grotowski’s *Poor Theatre*, costume becomes more than clothing: the costumes form *Akropolis*, a performance about the Holocaust, are “...bags full of holes covering naked bodies. The holes are lined with material which suggests torn flesh; through the holes one looks directly into a torn body.”^{”xx}

The Fables Of Catastrophe

“..but the costume designer can seldom go directly from the script to his imagination to produce the finished designs.”^{xxi}

So, as Russell would tell her, X. starts with reading the text. The first step in the design process is to read the text, with ‘ an understanding of the plot, character, thought, language,’^{xxii} in order to note important information such as who wears what when and how many costumes, and how long would it take to build each. What remains of the creative process, what T. S. Eliot describes as:

The creation of a work of art, we will say the creation of a character in a drama, consists in the process of transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author into the character. This is a very different matter from the orthodox creation in one’s own image.^{xxiii}

Catastrophe was written in 1982 for the Avignon Festival, an evening of performances in support of imprisoned dissident Czech playwright, Vaclav Havel. The short play takes place on an empty stage where the four characters, the Director, the Protagonist, the Assistant, and Luke the lighting director are rehearsing the final scene of an unnamed play. The action is both simple and complex. The Director directs the Assistant to sculpt the Protagonist, standing still and silent upon a plinth, from an identifiable human being, who is clad in dressing gown and large hat, to an object that is stripped nearly bare, whitened, with the bare top of his head light in a sea of darkness.

Certainly, the Protagonist can obviously be seen to represent Havel; however, protagonist is also the term for the principal character in an Aristotelian drama, who is stripped of all pride, shamed and ruined by the play’s end. His downfall is observed and vicariously experienced by the audience. The Director, dressed in a heavy fur coat and hat, resembles the stereotypical communist bureaucrat as well a stereotypical pompous director. “ Get going. Lose that gown. [He consults his chronometer] Step on it, I have a caucus.”^{xxiv} Yet, he also acts as a poet, rearranging and contemplating the protagonist. The Assistant fulfills the Director’s orders, which can be read as a series of “subtractions” where the director expresses his poetic image through a series of commands.^{xxv} The protagonist is gradually stripped of any humanity, his body cast into darkness, with only a light on his head; the assistant disappears into the shadows and the director has vanished, with only his voice barely audible from the back of the house. Luke, the lighting director, never appears; we only see only his actions. An ironic reference to the author of the third Gospel, and patron saint of artists and brewers, this Luke acts as the final instrument of the Director’s will.

X also considers the play’s title. Here *Catastrophe* refers to the dramatic concept of a

reversal of fortune, or the highly charged turning point in the play's dramatic structure, when the protagonist is confronted with his hubris, about to be stripped bare (figuratively) and humbled. The irony is that we watch the director systematically and thoughtfully reduce the protagonist to an object, "Bow the head... whiten all flesh," but the Protagonist fails to be humbled, instead looking up directly at the audience as the light narrows on his bowed head. It is a rehearsal; but the audience should wonder if the Protagonist will be allowed to perform after breaking the Director's will?

After considering the meaning of the play, the designer charged with finding a concept, an interpretation, which is "the envelope for the mood and ideas of the playwright- a visualization in color, line, and texture of the actor's actions and emotions."^{xxvi} However, in *Catastrophe* as in all Beckett's plays, the meaning of the play is the words. Billie Whitelaw, who many call Beckett's actress, says "Trust the words. Because to me it seems that Beckett doesn't write *about* something- about an emotion... he actually writes about it. He writes the thing itself. And you don't have to add to that."^{xxvii}

The tricky part, for X., is how to approach it as a poet: "the third requisite in our poet or maker is Imitation, to be able to convert the substance, or Riches of another Poet to his own use."^{xxviii}

If one thinks of theatre as originating first with the word and then is transformed into a visual sign, then this play could easily be interpreted. The director forms creative choices, using words to direct the visual image, the silent protagonist, whose muted body still speaks. The protagonist stands still but not frozen on the plinth. The actor may not talk but he does speak. His final gesture, the glance upward into the light, after the director tells his assistant that the protagonist's head remain bowed, that one look upward causes "the applause to falter." Whitelaw claims that "...because the way the thing looks and the way he paints with light is just as important as what comes out of my mouth."^{xxix}

The process of the action to this moment of the catastrophe, the overturning, is both a metaphor for theatre, mocking the process of dress rehearsal where the technical elements, lighting and costumes, are focus, not the performers. The complexity of this metaphor is also what makes theatre such a difficult place to separate the text from the production. The design process based on an interpretation of a literary dramatic text tends to lead only to an illustration, and not an Invention.

The Assistant

Given the rigor with which Beckett expresses his plays visually through the words, costume can be an ideal place to consider how the image can be itself "the immortal soul." X returns to the other proponent of the Holy theater, Grotowski who says that art is concerned with allowing us to "cross our frontiers, exceeds our limitations, fill our

emptiness-fulfil ourselves. This is not a condition but a process in which what is dark in us slowly becomes transparent.”^{xxx}

X. decides to concentrate upon the Assistant, who is only described as wearing “ White overall. Bare Head. Pencil on ear. Age and physique unimportant.” Gender apparently is important.

The Assistant is not quite a partner, nor a servant to the director. She is (from the middle French *assistier*) to stand by, to help. Thus she gradually becomes encumbered with the Protagonist’s costume; his dressing gown, and hat cover her own costume, turning her into a ghost of the protagonist. The Director and the Protagonist are confined to a chair and pedestal respectively; the Assistant alone moves about the stage, adjusting the Protagonist, lighting the Director’s cigar. While she follows the Director’s every directive, she also retains a bit of humanity, noting that the Protagonist is shivering after having been relieved of his dressing gown. Yet, she too is trapped in the world of the stage; once the director exits to the rear of the stage, she does not leave, only sitting for a moment in his chair. Then his voice forces her to return to the stage, adjusting minutely the protagonist’s hands, standing as trapped as the Protagonist, and eventually like the Protagonist’s body erased by the darkness.

With an understanding of the text and the assistant, X. returns to Russell’s text:

The theatre artist must create a visual and aural equivalent on stage for what occurs in the script. If the interpreters are fine artists, and if they have understood the text and have been intelligent in their interpretation, the same thought and spirit should govern the re-created vision that governed the original.”^{xxxi}

An Overall

She considers what the term *Overall* might mean. A loose fitting garment meant to protect against dirt and heavy wear, the overall suggests a scientist or a factory worker; the white color indicates both purity and coldness. But Beckett does not say how long is this overall, or if it covers another garment. X. then considers the fable implied in the possibilities of Overall.

“Costume functions on two levels; the aesthetic or formal level, as pure art; and the associative or symbolic level, where it suggests by stimulating an audience’s visual experience and sense of association.”^{xxxii}

Alan Schneider, who directed a version of *Catastrophe* in 1983, wrote to Beckett regarding the Assistant that “we worked on a great deal.. the proper ‘ballet-like’ movement from the Assistant...I think you will find Maggie Reed as the Assistant very ‘ballet-like’ indeed.”^{xxxiii}

Ballet is an odd association; ballet is a dance of highly formalized steps and gestures. The body is trained to the limits of its flexibility; hips turned out, etc. The movement is choreographed and silent. The body alone speaks.

How can X. costume use this?

Hobble

“If unrest, repression, and inhibition prevail and the normal human form is not admired, costume structure will cover and distort or actually change the human figure.”^{xxxiv}

But a woman must play the Assistant: gender is important in underscoring the power relationship between the Director and the Assistant who fulfils his directives.

What if the skirts were to be made of a huge skirt, covering hoops, a gown of 40 yards of muslin, gathering draped over hoops that would fill a small kitchen. The woman swallowed up in the fabric, becoming the gown.

X. abandons this as impractical. How would the assistant remove the coat, adjust the protagonist’s head.

She considers Paul Poiret, who hobbled women while claiming to free them. This could be a skirt with pleats, folds hiding that which it covers, opening slightly and revealing the form of the leg, the hip, and the hobbled stride. This so-called hobble skirt even required wearing a hobble garter, a sort of harness tied around a woman’s legs to prevent her from splitting her skirt. Such a garter was used on animals and derives from the Old Dutch, *Hobbelen*, or to rock from side to side.

The top could be the crisp overall, a stiff collar, a stiff line collar dyed in yellow. The rest disappearing into the open framework of a corset; the form of the overall remains. “Simplify and exaggerate” is used in most classes in costume and set design it is the basic concept behind turning source material into stage worth costumes or scenery.”^{xxxv} The effect is to demonstrate the contradiction between the fluid human body and the constriction of all costume, theatrical or daily.

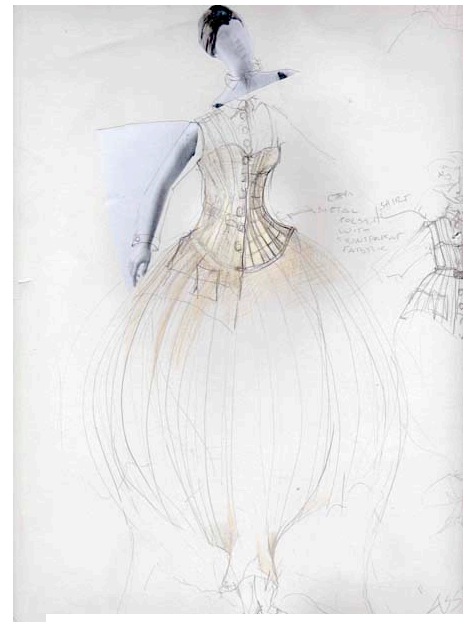


Figure 2: The Assistant

The original sketch was uncolored. (figure 2) Like Inigo Jones, she traced the line of the costume, forgoing the color, already chosen by the playwright. The drawing, like the costume itself, is composed from collage and hand drawing. The drawing is the fable for the costume construction; as the text is the fable for performance.

The Pattern

“ The designer must know a great deal about fabrics, the basic element of stage costume design.”^{xxxvi}

X. never realized how heavy fabric was until she tries to drag the three large bags to her car. Heavier than cradling a child, the fabric is a dead weight, ripping the handles off the plastic bags. Yet these bags represent hundreds of dollars, of woven material, velvet, linen, and the soft flannel for the Protagonist’s pajamas.

The fabric is smoothed, washed, ironed. Each pattern piece ironed and laid carefully, pinned with thin steel pins, so small they slide easily to the floor, soundlessly falling underfoot.

She marks the darts and gathers with thin sliver of waxy blue tailor’s chalk. Cutting carefully and swiftly with sharp shears, and then removing the pattern, leaving the steel pins glinting in the velvet, X folds each piece and places to the side of the table.

Each oddly shaped, vaguely geometrical piece is tacked to a blue covered dress form. X. carefully adjusts each piece, forcing seams into a more fitted silhouette. The costume now looks odd, composed of dismembered pieces of fabric, which, like a pseudo skin, are flayed flat, and then re-sewn into a body.

She’ll embroider it later, while carefully inserting mirrors in the round fabric frames. Half of the glass will be seen in folds as the Assistant attempts her balletic walk across the stage. She needs to observe carefully the effect of the mirrors as they appear and disappear; they need to be choreographed, as does the actor.

The sewing of the belt loop on the skirt is completed not last, but early in the construction. Inside she embroiders the poem, tracing it along the panels of velvet.

Like the costumes of Akropolis, the Assistant’s body is revealed in its contradiction to her movements: “...a costume with no autonomous value, existing only in connection with a particular character and his activities, can be transformed before the audience,

contrasted with the actor’s functions.^{»xxxvii}

Conclusion

X. reveals her secret; she also plays the Assistant. In her acting journal, she records her fable, the one she creates from wearing the costume.

The body

Known through the

very vague traces we can only understand by diagramming

or the bit of blue cotton string tied around the elbow

spidery traces of women’s lingerie like a

Bruise on her cheek

Broken statues come crashing like waves

ⁱ Douglas A. Russell, *Stage Costume Design: Theory, Technique And Style* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1973), p. 3.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ D.G. Gordon, “Poet and Architect: The Intellectual setting of the Quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 12 (1949), p. 158.

^{iv} Jerzy Grotowski, “Theatre is an Encounter,” *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 57.

^v Robert Gwathmey, “Art for Art’s Sake?,” *American Art*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1993). p. 100.

^{vi} T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Sacred Wood; Essays On Poetry And Criticism* (London: Methune, 1920. Bartleby.com, 1996. www.bartleby.com/200/.)

^{vii} In Lucy Barton’s article, “A Major in Costume,” she discusses both the fallacy of believing that all women can sew but also the fact that anyone that can sew can also create a costume.

^{viii} Susan S. Day, review of *Stage Costume Design: Theory, Technique And Style* by Douglas A. Russell, *education Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Dec. 1973), p. 529.

^{ix} Grotowski, “The Theatre’s New Testament,” *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 30.

^x Patton Campbell, “Research in Theatrical Costume,” *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol 19, No. 2, Conference on theatre Research (June 1967), p.287.

^{xi} Stephen Orgel, “The Renaissance Artist as Plagiarist,” *ELH*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), p. 480.

^{xii} Cesare Ripa, <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/Ripa/Images/>

^{xiii} Giorgio Vasari, *On Technique*. translated by Louisa S. MacLehose (New York: Dover

Publications, 1960), p. 210.

^{xiv} Ben Jonson, *Timber, or the Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, edited by C.H. Hertford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson. Vol. VIII. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 609-10.

^{xv} Russell, p. 7.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 15.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 16.

^{xviii} Jonson, *Timber*, p. 625.

^{xix} Lucy Barton, "A Major in Costume."

^{xx} Grotowski, "Akropolis: Treatment of the Text," in *Towards a Poor Theatre*, p. 64.

^{xxi} Russell, p. 35.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 31.

^{xxiii} Eliot, "Ben Jonson," in *The Sacred Wood; Essays On Poetry And Criticism*.

^{xxiv} Samuel Beckett, *Catastrophe* in *The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 298.

^{xxv} Michael Guest, "Act of Creation in Beckett's *Catastrophe*," *Reports of the Faculty of Liberal Arts*, Shizuoka University (Japan), Vol. 31 (September 1995), <http://mural.uv.es/esase/beckettcatastrophe.html>.

^{xxvi} Russell, p. 4.

^{xxvii} Jonathan Kalb, *Becket in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 238.

^{xxviii} Jonson, *Timber*, p. 638.

^{xxix} Kalb, p. 235.

^{xxx} Grotowski, "Towards A Poor Theatre," p. 21.

^{xxxi} Russell, p. 3.

^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, p. 10.

^{xxxiii} Alan Schneider to Samuel Beckett. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, edited by Maurice Harmon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 449-50.

^{xxxiv} Russell, pp. 19-20.

^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, p. 8.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 105.

^{xxxvii} Grotowski, "Towards A Poor Theatre," p. 21.

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