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# THE FABRIC OF PERFORMANCE

THE ROLE AND HISTORY OF TEXTILES IN COSTUME FOR THEATRE AND FILM

TONI BATE

# *The Fabric of Performance*

*The Fabric of Performance: The Role and History of Textiles in Costume for Theatre and Film* provides an overview of the narrative properties of textiles and how they have been utilised in the design and construction of costume for dramatic performance in Britain.

The book explores how textiles can be used as a semiotic tool in the realisation of performance costume, subconsciously transmitting codified signs to the audience through the colour, pattern, weight, drape, texture and embellishment of the character's clothing. The main body of the book encompasses a history of the design and implementation of textiles within costume for theatrical production, from medieval mystery plays, Stuart court masques and Shakespearean theatre, through to the work of innovative and significant practitioners who have created seminal costumes for twenty-first century performance. This is followed by a summary of the development of textiles in costume for film and television across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The final chapter documents the journey of the design and making of a costume from the perspective of the textiles used in its creation, investigating the work of the costume designer, costume supervisor, costume maker and textile artist. Drawing on a broad range of visual, physical and literary sources, this text provides an original perspective and unique insight into the historical and contemporary role of textiles in costume for both live and filmed productions.

*The Fabric of Performance* will be of interest to costume, textile, theatre and fashion historians, costume researchers, costume design and construction students and industry costume practitioners.

**Toni Bate** is programme leader for the MA Costume Design & Making programme at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA). Prior to this, she was costume construction lecturer on the Costume with Textiles degree at the University of Huddersfield and has experience of teaching costume at several other institutions. Toni's previous publications have investigated the allegorical costumes of the court masque and morality plays, the contribution of the costume maker to the reconstruction of historical performance costume, the social history of costume making, the concept of the costume store as a living archive and the implications of using surviving historical dress as costume. Since graduating from Liverpool's prestigious Mabel Fletcher course in 1994, Toni has also worked as a costume maker, tailor and wardrobe supervisor for theatre, film and television.



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The Role and History of Textiles in Costume for  
Theatre and Film

Toni Bate

Designed cover image: Costume design for *La Valse* by Anne Curry. Photograph by Brian Roberts ©Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts.

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*For my brilliant boys, Miles and Sonny.*



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# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> TEXTILES AND COSTUME	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Chapter Overview	5
1.3 Consideration of Terminology and Research Sources	6
1.4 Conclusion	8
References	9
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> TEXTILES IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE	11
2.1 Symbolism to Characterisation	11
2.2 Mystery, Miracle and Morality	11
2.3 The Court Masque	24
2.4 Shakespeare's Stage	47
2.5 The Restoration Stage	61
2.6 The Rise of Realism	69
2.7 The Nineteenth Century	87
2.8 The Twentieth Century	108
2.9 Into the Twenty-First Century	126
References	133
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> TEXTILES ON SCREEN	144
3.1 Changing Considerations	144
3.2 Technological Advances	146
3.3 Historical Interpretation: Case Studies	152
3.4 Conclusion	160
References	160
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> TEXTILES IN THE COSTUME INDUSTRY	163
4.1 Introduction	163
4.2 Costume Design	163
4.3 Supervision and Sourcing	170
4.4 Making the Costume	175

4.5 Painting, Dyeing, Printing and Distressing	182
4.6 Sustainable Textile Practice in Costume	191
4.7 Fabric in Performance	194
References	194
<b>CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION</b>	196
References	197
<i>Glossary of Terms</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	204

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# Textiles and Costume

## 1.1 Introduction

The act of making cloth within a costume can be seen as a primary form of storytelling. The cloth within a finished costume conveys a narrative which is expressed in the language of the cloth itself, it is through the act of marking, staining, and stitching that the cloth speaks, it surprises.

(Sweeney, 2015)

Costuming a performance is a complex process, from the initial creative concept through to its realisation on stage or screen, the journey through the design and construction of a costume requires collaboration and compromise between director, costume designer, costume supervisor, costume maker, textile artist and performer. The costume designer must interpret the text to develop an overall design concept, drawing from various periods, places, cultures, and a range of broader aesthetic influences and wider contextual factors, to create an imagined and often stylised world within which to tell the story. They are then tasked with characterising the individual players within the environment they have established, supporting the convincing portrayal of those characters and their personalities to the audience through the clothes they wear. The costume production team then contribute their expertise to this process, working within a given budget and timeframe to provide costumes which fulfil the designer's brief. Historical or fantastical productions might require a combination of costume realisation approaches, such as making new garments or adapting hired costumes, while a performance set in the modern day may involve buying,

fitting and altering ready-made clothing. Constructed costumes will be made as bespoke garments from a range of sourced materials, some of which may be dyed, printed or treated in advance by a specialist textile artist. For a custom-built costume, the maker must accurately translate the designer's vision through interpretive pattern cutting, tailored fitting and the application of specialist construction methods, while simultaneously acknowledging the practicalities of the performance and the comfort of the performer. The textile artist may then be called upon once more to paint into the costume to give it depth and shadow under the stage lighting, or to embed a convincing back story through the distressing of the character's clothing. Finally, the costume is embodied by the performer and situated within the wider cast of characters who will go on to populate the scenographic environment of the production, complementing the set and lighting design. Here, the costume begins its performative storytelling role, becoming a fundamental element of the performance. Within this context it transforms into;

A 'magic' garment – a garment that enables an actor to become, for a time, someone else. Like Prospero's cape, which concentrated his supernatural powers over the winds and sea, an actor's costume helps concentrate the powers of imagination, expression and movement into the creation and projection of character to an audience.

(Cunningham, 2020, p. 1)

Textile design has always played an integral role in the creation of the 'magical' properties of performance costume,

characterising a performer through cut, colour, texture and applied decoration, rooting us in the setting of the text and contributing to the overall spectacle of the production. 'Textiles have long been important in advancing visual stories' (Peterson, 2024, p. 8) and, as part of performance costume, they subconsciously transmit messages to the audience, offering them information about the character and their broader surroundings;

When we meet a character in a performance, the implicit understanding is that they have existed until the point where we join their journey and will continue existing after we leave them. Their clothing tells a story, a history to the audience before we hear them speak and before any action takes place.  
(Malik, 2016, p. 188)

The silhouette, cut, colour and texture of a performance costume can tell us the period, geographical location, season and time of day of the dramatic scene while, in terms of character, they provide us with clues about age, occupation, gender, social standing, nationality and personality, conveying a hidden lexicon of complex cultural, societal, historical and political associations. In a costume context, the making, choosing, treating and shaping of the textiles used in its production are crucial considerations as, 'The same garment, cut of different fabrics, can suggest characters of very different ages, personalities, or economic levels' (Cunningham, 2020, p. 13). Therefore, it is vital to the successful outcome of the design interpretation process that through its, 'material gestural and the tactile communication of its stitches and folds' (Barbieri, 2017, p. xx) the costume reflects these characteristics and traits, as well as the circumstances the character finds themselves in. Studying textiles in relation to characterisation can, as Finlay notes, 'give a glimpse of something truthful, a clue to what is under the surface of things', establishing 'the connection the material world we can see has with the non-material world we cannot see' (2022, pp. 1–4). This is achieved not only through the garments the character wears, but through the considered selection and treatment of the materials chosen to construct their costume; the physical realisation of these materials into the characters' clothing allowing the audience to 'create an ongoing sensory and visual dialogue with the spectator' (Barbieri, 2012) and, 'unravel the embodied meaningfulness of textile' within the broader context of the performance (Langlois, 2024, p. 20). As Carignan observes, 'Colour, pattern and texture are the very soul of fabric. When combined with

a garment's silhouette, it is the essence of character creation, evokes emotion, and captures our attention on stage and screen' (2024, p. 24). The textiles used to construct costume, and the way they are handled and treated, are what creates what Holt describes as 'the tension between the (three-dimensional) performing body and the (flat) garment' (2017, p. 47). They are also the intermediary between the transformation of the designer's ideas from a two-dimensional rendering, image or mood board into a three-dimensional, wearable costume. This, in turn, is made possible by the costume supervisor's in-depth understanding of the availability and properties of a broad range of fabrics, the application of the tactile knowledge and dextrous skill of the costume maker and the haptic creativity of the textile artist. As the materials are dyed and draped, cut and stitched, moulded and manipulated, printed and pressed, embellished and distressed, these specialist practitioners apply their embodied knowledge, making inanimate materials animate through their craft while giving a life and a history to the character before they even say their first line. However, condensing an entire personality into a costume is a challenge for the designer because, of course, people in real life do not consciously dress to transmit their personalities in such an obvious way; we are not over-simplified, one-dimensional stereotypes but are made up of a plethora of complex personality traits and a diverse compendium of lived experiences. Within this context, 'Textiles is an ambiguous concept. It is [not only] material, it is concept, it is language, it is metaphor' (Dormor, 2022, p. 1). This quote highlights how carefully the costume designer must combine and layer the materials of a costume to enable them to develop a more subtle, sophisticated level of nuanced specificity of character through the 'vestimentary topography' of their clothing (Vincent, 2002, p. 82). This silent, non-verbal language, hidden within the texture and weave of textiles, enables strands of the character to be intertwined to create a visual codified representation grounded in historical and current societal expectations and associations. This is one of what Monks describes as 'the less obvious ways in which costume does its work onstage, as a secret storyteller offering us a myriad of insights into the world of the play and its inhabitants' (2019, p. 8). For film, where detailed, close-up shots are also used to propel the narrative, the materials and decoration that are concentrated in specific areas of the character's clothing provide a secondary semiotic layer of secret storytelling potential, complementing the overall surface, structure and silhouette of the costume when viewed as a whole.

Combining materials in a variety of ways creates infinite opportunities for the dialogue of this language to develop; textiles in relation to a character's costume *always* means something, it is never simply decorative. Whether a beautifully tailored Victorian woollen coat or a pair of contemporary polyester trousers, a 1930s bias cut silk dress or a 1970s denim jacket, an elaborately embroidered seventeenth-century bodice or a simple white t-shirt, facets of the character will be ingrained within the elementary foundations of both its construction and its symbolic cultural associations. Conversely, character can also be communicated by the absence of material, in the parts of a costume that are no longer there, in the tears of a roughly woven broken down linen shirt, for example; the wounds helping to narrate its story and that of its owner (Bate and Garland, 2015, p. 409).

A useful way of understanding the role of costume within a performance is to consider its function as emblematic; by decorating materials we can create patterns and motifs which can be read as symbolic elements of the costume or help us to create a costume that is emblematic in itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) offers a range of meanings for the word emblem, all of which lend themselves to the analysis of the materiality of performance costumes and the role of textiles within this process. These include the older, obsolete definitions of the word as, 'An ornament of inlaid work' or, 'A fable or allegory such as might be expressed pictorially', to the more contemporary understanding of the term as, 'A figured object used with symbolic meaning, as the distinctive badge of a person, family, nation etc.' or, 'A picture of an object (or the object itself) serving as a symbolical representation of an abstract quality, an action, state of things'. It can also be used to denote a 'class of persons' or be applied to the individual person through 'typical representation' or the 'personification (of some virtue or quality)'. The costume designer has an in-depth understanding of the value of costume as emblem within the aesthetic performativity of the production. They are also aware of 'costume's liminal status as an object that exists somewhere between scenography and the body' (Holt, 2017, p. 47) and are able to predict how an audience interprets a costume on that body through the visual expression of colour, texture and embellishment. As Barbieri observes, 'Costume has agency as intermediary between performer and the spectator, not only through a visual response, but also a sensory one, projected via surface, colour, form, textiles, movement and weight' (2012).

However, it is not only the outer fabrics of a costume that contribute to its emblematic quality and its role in characterisation. Many costumes are constructed from layers of internal supporting materials that help create the all-important silhouette, while providing a structure for displaying the exterior textiles of the garment. They may be less exciting or visually appealing than the outer materials, but they are crucial to the success of a costume as, despite never being seen, they dictate how the outer fabrics behave. This is mirrored in the way the undisclosed feelings or motives of the character, unseen by the audience, will nevertheless have an impact on their outward behaviour. Whether it is a padded suit, used to alter the physical shape of the performer beneath their clothes, steel boning inserted into a corset or canvasses concealed within a tailored coat, the complex layering of the physical costume reflects the multifaceted layering of a personality as it is presented to the audience in material terms; it becomes 'a metaphor for the building of a character' (Bate, 2023, p. 232). While providing an expansive canvas for the display of luxurious fabrics, certain structural underlayers, such as a crinoline, also create negative space around the wearer. This effect, coupled with the restrictiveness of certain garments and materials, will also impact on the physicality of the performer as they respond to their costume through intuitive movement and it becomes 'intertwined with the theatre space, where it negotiates light, movement, spatial relationships, other bodies and the scenography' (Barbieri, 2017, p. 169). In the performance space, the costume 'draws attention to the body, by what it reveals or conceals, through fit, by the way it organizes the body's composition and proportion. It can highlight or even generate gesture and movement' (Barbieri, 2012). In consideration of these thoughts, this publication will focus on how the use of textiles in costume design and construction can subconsciously relate signals to the audience and how the narrative properties of cloth and other materials within a costume context are, and have historically been, utilised within dramatic performance. The inquiry draws on a broad range of visual, physical and literary sources to produce a unique insight into both the historical and contemporary role of textiles within the realisation of performance costume in Britain, situating textiles within this study 'as a medium of communication with a fascinating complexity in its own right' (Langlois, 2024, p. 33).

In 2014, the *Fashioning Opera and Musical Theatre: Stage Costumes from the Late Renaissance to 1900*

conference was held at the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice. The call for papers suggested that although;

Costumes have always been a crucial component of any musico-theatrical event – defining characters, actions and beliefs, enhancing the sonic dimension of performance, and blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, the human and the fantastic ... the material traces of their histories have too frequently slipped through the cracks of our critical discourse.

(University of Southampton and Giorgio Cini Foundation, 2014)

This book attempts to resurrect some of these 'material traces' through the imaginative reanimation of costume for performance, using analysis of the textiles used in their production as a way of bringing the materiality of the lost costume to life. This is not a book about the history of textiles in and of themselves; there are many excellent publications that cover this topic (Gordon, 2011; Harris, 1993; Schoeser, 2012) as well as those that explain the science and properties of textiles (Banerjee, 2018; Fashionary, 2020). There are also several seminal publications offering a study of the history of European performance costume in theatre (De Marly, 1982; Komisarjevsky, 1968; Laver, 1964) and in Hollywood film (Nadoolman Landis, 2007, 2012). More recent textile related publications (Finlay, 2022; Hunter, 2020; Peterson, 2024; Postrel, 2020; St Clair, 2019) have emphasised the potential for textiles as a medium for exploring broader historical, social and political contexts and have highlighted this area as an often-overlooked aspect of human development, despite textiles being what literally and figuratively stitches our history together. As Vincent states, 'The material nature of clothing matters. Its weight, colour, fabric, cut, shape and texture are significant. The physical properties of dress are inalienable, inherent qualities, and they affect the meaning which cultures then ascribe to clothes' (2002, p. 25). Inspired by these works, and the many others that appear throughout the book, this publication compiles information from a broad range of primary and secondary sources, weaving them together to provide a study of the intersection of textiles and dress within the very specific context of performance costume. It is an opportunity to offer a unique perspective on this underrepresented convergence of research fields and contribute to both areas of inquiry. The work also highlights the changing relationship we as a society have had with textiles throughout history,

as their value has diminished in response to developments in mechanisation and globalisation;

We cannot even remember how only a few generations ago textile would be viewed and valued as a significant investment of time, effort and care: textile was a daily preoccupation, [it] asserted a certain kind of unavoidable presence as a site of material concern and care. The nineteenth century industrial revolution turned textile into one of the first machine mass-produced global commodities, a trend that has only accelerated since.

(Langlois, 2024, p. 19)

This ongoing trend has resulted in the loss, and consequent undervaluing, of the traditional skills involved in producing fabrics and making clothes, leading to the rise of fast fashion and a throwaway culture disconnected from the people who make our garments and other textile products. This is highlighted by Liggett in the article, *Clark Kent vs. Superman: Unmasking the Actual Superheroes of Haute Couture*, who discusses the lack of recognition of textile artisans in the haute couture industry, despite there being an historical precedent for them being credited. He states that while, 'The illusion of handmade is commonly used by luxury brands to add value ... the hand skilled practitioners of fabric creation, so integral to haute couture are rarely acknowledged', adding, 'Social media coverage emphasises the personality cults of designers and celebrities, whilst hand skills involved in the creation of haute couture are ignored and often exploited' (2019, pp. 1–2). This phenomenon can also be seen within performance costume production, which reflects haute couture in its bespoke, handmade approach. It is unusual to find the work of the costume maker, costume supervisor or textile artist being recorded or attributed, as the designer is usually given credit for the overall collection of costumes in a production. There are examples of extant theatrical costumes, such as those in the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, where the maker's name is known because the costume has a label or because they were made recently enough to have kept the connection. However, this is sporadic and costumes are generally collected and valued on the basis of their connection with a certain designer, actor or performance. While acknowledgement of the craftspeople involved in costume production for film and television has improved in more recent times, with exhibitions of costumes from acclaimed productions, such as *Gentleman Jack* (2019–2022), attractions such as

studio tours for *Game of Thrones*, and publications such as *Game of Thrones: The Costumes* (Clapton and McIntyre, 2019), it is still rare to see a realistic representation of the quality and quantity of highly skilled work that goes into the creation of performance costumes. Costumes are still regularly overlooked in discussions of contemporary live performance, despite them being crucial to its aesthetic vision and narrative intention. As Barbieri observes, 'Little attention is drawn to costume by critics ... in reviews ... Yet images of costumed performers are routinely deployed as photographic representations of the performance itself, often serving as embodiment of its visual identity' (2012). Monks supports this observation by stating that, 'the materials of theatre are so often seen as merely "serving" the illusion – and are frequently treated by critics and scholars as the merely decorative, or as the unfortunate but necessarily material component of the theatre event' (2014, p. 176). An exception to this is the *Costume at the National Theatre* book, also edited by Monks (2019), which was accompanied by an exhibition of the same name. Together they shine a spotlight onto each area of costume realisation within a large theatrical setting, highlighting the vital skills of the various roles within the costume production department as they translate the costume designer's vision. In a more academic context, research group *Constructing Costume Histories*, led by Dr Veronica Isaac and Dr Jade Halbert, has hosted events which encourage speakers who are undertaking new research 'at the nexus of costume, making, and history'. Their current research project, *Illuminating the Value and Heritage of Making Costume in Britain*, endeavours to establish 'the central role of costume making and costume makers in the long and vibrant history of British performance'. The objective of the project is to 'inaugurate the first tangible and enduring record of the haptic and ephemeral issues unique to this overlooked but critical creative sector' (*Constructing Costume Histories*, n.d.). With this in mind, another aim of this book is to highlight the work of the craftspeople involved in the material realisation of costume throughout history, enabling us to 'recognise the skills and agency of those without historical recorded voices' (Davidson, 2019, p. 24).

## 1.2 Chapter Overview

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2, *Textiles in Theatrical Performance*, encompasses an overview of textile design within costume for theatrical productions in

Britain, from medieval mystery, miracle and morality plays through to the twenty-first century. This is followed by Chapter 3, *Textiles on Screen*, a summary of the development of textiles in costume for film and television across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This chapter addresses technological advances, their impact on how materials and surface decoration are read by the audience in this medium, and the differences between the aesthetic and practical considerations in the implementation of costume textiles for filmed versus theatrical productions. Because of the porous nature of the way film and television are consumed by the audience, and the way in which their histories are intertwined, the scope of this chapter reaches outside Britain to include influences and examples from the USA. These two chapters document the role of texture, colour and decoration in costume in relation to characterisation and representation, and explore how textiles are used to enhance the 'semiotic function of the costume' (Bakewell, 2018, p. 114). Examples of costumes from seminal performances are highlighted throughout, further supported by case studies exploring the work of significant costume designers, makers and textile artists. The historical overview will also reference political and social contexts, developments in textile science and technology, and advances in the way live and filmed productions are performed. Due to the historic British theatrical convention of appropriating traditional cultural clothing as costume, this chapter also contains some content and images that represent racially insensitive attitudes of the period and historical costume approaches that characterise cultural stereotypes. The author and publisher do not endorse these historical attitudes but present and analyse them because they are relevant to the discussion and reflect the reality of the time.

Running in parallel to the history of textiles in costume is the continuous reinterpretation of the clothing of earlier periods, an ever-evolving practice seen throughout the history of performance in the design, construction and decoration of historically inspired costume. Many dramatic performances evoke an earlier historical era through storytelling, setting and dress, however, while an historically inspired theatrical costume must be convincing on the stage in regard to characterisation, because of advances in textiles production, changes in manufacturing methods and the accessibility of certain materials, it can never be a truly authentic reproduction. From attempts at historical accuracy, through to the inventive use of fashionable fabrics mixed with unusual materials and modern techniques to create an original reimagining of the past, costume

practitioners are often challenged to portray the illusion of detailed, expensive and elaborate historical embellishment. Another recurring theme is how limited budgets, availability of materials and time restraints have led not only to innovative approaches to costume realisation but have also resulted in the longstanding convention of reusing, recycling and repurposing costumes and materials, long before the more recent calls for the implementation of sustainable and ethical making practices across the performing arts.

Chapter 4, *Textiles in the Costume Industry*, documents the typical journey of the creation of costumes for a performance, viewed through a textile lens. It focusses on how textiles are sourced and enhanced by the various practitioners involved in a costume's production, from initial design concept through to its completion. The chapter begins by exploring the creative work of the costume designer as they research and develop their costume concept, while considering material choices in terms of colour, pattern, texture, decoration, weight and drape. This is followed by an account of how fabrics are sourced by the costume supervisor and buyer, before they are given to the costume maker to be transformed into a finished costume. The work of the textile artist is then examined as they dye, print, paint and break down the costume. Finally, current concerns around the sustainability of sourcing and producing textiles for costume are addressed. Chapter 5 concludes the study by reflecting on the historical and contemporary role of textiles within costume for performance.

### 1.3 Consideration of Terminology and Research Sources

Within this inquiry, the term *textiles* is used to denote the cloth used to construct the main body of the costume including woven, knitted or felted fabrics, or materials such as plastics, leather and metal, as well as any decorative techniques applied to them such as dyeing, printing, painting, embroidery and other fabric manipulation and embellishment methods.

Where it has not been possible to include an image of a visual source that is being discussed, where available, the catalogue number and location of the artefact have

been noted to allow the reader to access it should they wish to. As Chapters 1 and 2 progress, the availability of primary sources gradually evolves from two-dimensional documentary records, through to images such as portraits and costume design renderings, before extant material examples finally become available for study. This difference in available research sources requires a flexible approach to the interpretation of them when investigating each era. Relying on written sources to explore the materiality of an object can be problematic and, in terms of two-dimensional visual references, the first and most obvious challenge is that a costume depicted in a painting or drawing is flat while a constructed garment is not. This means that;

Regardless of how beautiful the rendering or how erudite the text, we cannot truly imagine how the costume behaved within the performance on the moving body within the wider scenographic context; we cannot rely solely on a two-dimensional rendering or subjective account written after the fact to fully understand the complexities of the three-dimensional object.

(Bate, 2023, p. 233)

While it is possible to read texture and drapery within a picture, 'Two-dimensional evidence for a three-dimensional subject can be misleading'. While a skilled portrait painter can portray the difference between velvet and satin, a sheer lace and a heavy fur, as Arnold adds in *The Handbook of Costume*, 'The textural quality of the brush strokes can blur seam lines and the grain of the fabric. Details may be obscured by layers of dirt and varnish, while restoration may have falsified the evidence' (1973, p. 8). The portrait is also often an idealised version of the sitter and the clothes they wear, and it can be difficult to distinguish between clothing worn as costume (in the fancy dress, theatrical and ceremonial sense) and fashionable dress. This can be seen in the variety of motivations for commissioning a portrait and how these are translated through the clothing worn within them. A 'power portrait' might reinforce 'royal status with ermine trimmed clothes ... symbolic references [and] ostentatious wealth', or through 'formal wear' such as a ceremonial uniform; the sitter might wish to invoke an earlier era by reviving a past portrait or be depicted wearing fancy dress; they may wish to be represented in 'Specifically coded costume, for example, Roman and Greek heroic costume with laurel crowns or armour'; or be depicted as 'Travellers, intellectuals, writers' in the appropriated garb of another culture

(Rideal, n.d., p. 3). The subject of the painting may also be captured wearing garments styled or chosen by the artist, sometimes from their own collection, rather than the sitter wearing their own clothing. Examples of this can be seen in the recent *Sargent and Fashion* exhibition at Tate Britain (2024), which displayed selected portraits by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) alongside the clothing worn in them, thus demonstrating, 'how he translated those garments onto canvas, and the ways in which he emphasised or elided certain elements in order to achieve his artistic aims'. Sargent 'accumulated a collection of garments' and 'was very opinionated about what his sitters wore (often vetoing their initial choices!) and would pin or drape their garments ... changing details as he saw fit' (Finch in Radclyffe-Thomas, 2024). As will be seen in subchapters 2.3 *The Court Masque* and 2.7 *The Nineteenth Century*, portraits, prints and engravings of performers in costume offer a valuable point of reference for understanding textiles in costume during these periods but their 'staged' quality may provide a more stylised representation that favours the projected image of the sitter or performer, rather than a realistic depiction of a costume in action.

The extant costume design drawing can also be misleading; while often taken as evidence of the costume itself, it 'cannot be read as an accurate representation of the finished costume, being that it is a rendering of the idea conceived before its creation'. The costume constructed from it may have altered considerably through its interpretation to allow for the practicalities of the body and the performance (Bate, 2023, p. 235). The extant costume garment, however, enables a more direct engagement with the physicality of the constructed costume and, where surviving costumes are available for examination, they have been used alongside supplementary evidence to highlight costume design and creation through a material realisation of the practice. Examination of surviving garments, or archival photographs of them, enables a deeper, more tangible understanding of pattern cutting approaches, the craftsmanship involved in the costume's production, the materials used in its construction, and the application of embellishment techniques (Bate, 2023, p. 227). As Mida and Kim note in *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object Based Research in Fashion*, when examining such garments, we can appreciate;

The multifaceted narratives embedded within these objects. In observing and handling clothing that was created and worn by others we see, touch and smell the past. We feel the texture, weight, weave,

and body of the cloth. We witness the shape of the construction, the patterns of the stitching and the placement of the decoration. We hold the past in our hands.

(2015: 62)

The materiality of the object provides us with an alternative way of reading and analysing the history of textiles in performance costume, while providing an insight into the lives of the people who constructed and performed in them within the broader performative context. However, archived garments have much more to offer the researcher than information about production processes and techniques. In the article *Affect and Sensation*, Sampson states that 'garments in archives are both containers and producers of affect – an effect that, in part, stems from the bodies that wore and made them' (Sampson, 2020, p. 2). This quote gives us a sense of the power embedded in the surviving garment and its capacity as a conduit by which to explore past lived experiences, demonstrating the direct physical connection to the people who made and wore it. This connection is evidenced in its wear, the moulding of it to the wearer's body and the specific traces of its embodiment left imprinted on and in the remaining materials; the 'work of the performer ... may appear to disappear, but the imprint of that work ... continues in the textures, smells and shapes of the fabric left behind' (Monks, 2009, p. 140). Barbieri further demonstrates the rich potential of interacting with archived performance costume when reflecting on the *Encounters in the Archive* research project (2011–2013), which documented interactions between researchers and costumes from the V&A collections, highlighting how 'body-less costumes as both fragments of past performances and instigator of new ones, engaged embodied and inventive responses to their material performance' (2022, p. 14). The extant garment acts as a vehicle by which we can explore the connections between historical clothing and the bodies that inhabited them (Bate, 2023, p. 227) and, 'Stage costumes [in particular] derive this power directly from the close connection they make with their original wearer(s). This connection transforms them from a simple garment into a carrier of their "identity"' (Isaac, 2021, p. 69); they are 'indelibly printed' with the physical and spiritual 'ghosts' of their wearers (Hodgson in Isaac, 2021, p. 70).

The exterior surface of the archived costume is also 'indelibly printed', metaphorically and literally, with the identity of its maker(s) through the enduring physicality of the textiles, the colour of the dye and tension of the

weave, the individual stitches of the construction, repairs and decorative embellishment, printed patterns, painted brushstrokes and distressed fibres. However, care must be taken when interpreting performance costumes housed in archives. Away from the context of the stage, the costume will appear very differently; costumes that may have been dazzlingly effective when seen under stage lighting from a distance may appear crude when viewed up close, and the costume in isolation loses its aesthetic position within the intended cohesive design concept. As Isaac observes;

Costumes that do survive seldom conform to the researcher's vision of the original production. Not only are they likely to be damaged or faded and tarnished they also rarely live up to the exotic and dramatic images outlined in the original designs. To mitigate this disillusionment and to fully understand stage costumes it is essential to maintain an awareness of the original purpose of these garments.

(2014, p. 560)

However, for much of the history covered within this book, the realised costume is absent, meaning that a more nuanced interpretation is required to fully represent the 'ephemeral yet deeply material' nature of textiles within this context (Langlois, 2024, p. 5). The study of the history of textiles in performance is by its nature, as this quote suggests, both abstract and physical, tangible and intangible. However, the author's practice as a costume maker, coupled with an understanding of how to translate a two-dimensional costume rendering into a three-dimensional costume object, provides a unique perspective, with the ability to make informed judgements regarding the analysis of two-dimensional pictorial evidence; 'It is the maker-researcher who has the knowledge and experience to both read and analyse surviving garments and interpret the two-dimensional design drawing' (Bate, 2023, p. 237).

This innate visual judgement is enhanced by tactile memory, which allows us to imagine how a garment that we see during a screen or stage performance feels, despite us not being able to touch it. Langlois states that, 'Part of the paradox of textile is that it is both something we look at and something we wear on our skins. Textile is not just like a piece of paper: when looking at a piece of textile we immediately imagine how it would feel to touch it or to feel it on our skin' (2024, p. 44), highlighting the relationship between the performer and the audience in the immediate setting of the theatre or cinema. However,

this inherent tactile understanding can also be applied to the reading of historical performance, reimagining the ephemeral through our sensory recall; what Marks calls "'haptic visuality'" – a visuality that functions like the sense of touch by triggering physical memories of smell, touch, and taste' (2000). As adults 'we no longer need to touch a surface to understand and relate a sensation to a given texture ... We experience these textures vicariously when we see them *visually* represented' (Cunningham, 2020, p. 95).

Another consideration of conducting historical research in this area is that textiles have specific meanings within the social, geographical, technological and political landscape of their own period, meaning that the way we read and understand a character and their clothing now will be different than at the time of the original performance. As Peterson notes, 'Considering the role of textiles in any medium demands a simultaneous attention to the physical makeup of fabric as well as to its network of historical and cultural meanings' (2024, p. 6). Associations with colour, pattern, emblem and texture change, just as their means of production do, and these contextual connotations will transform further depending on the type of garment a particular piece of cloth is constructed into. These factors are taken into account throughout the study in the recognition of broader contemporary practices, innovations, ideologies and beliefs that may have impacted on the development and role of textiles within historical performance costume; thus acknowledging Langlois' statement that, 'Textile as a medium transforms how we traditionally understand cultural semiotics, material culture and digital technology' (2024, p. 5).

## 1.4 Conclusion

Text and textiles share the same etymological root, the Latin verb *texere*, which means 'to weave', and many of the expressions we use in our everyday language come from the vocabulary built up around the production of cloth; 'We follow the thread of an argument, spin a yarn, become entangled in a web, unravel a mystery', for example (Rigby and Tarbuck, 2022). That these expressions are so embedded in our everyday discourse demonstrates our long standing and deep-rooted relationship with textiles and yet we have come to take them so much for granted. We have forgotten their absolute criticality as a vital component of every aspect of our lives, including how they are, and always have been, embedded in the way we tell

stories. When we share a story through performance, the textiles that constitute the visible material form of the costume provide us with clues to aspects of a character's concealed nature. Even the word clue 'comes from an Old English term meaning ball of yarn that can be unwound to show the right path' (Finlay, 2022, p. 2), just as the messages hidden in the fabric of the costume can be unravelled and decoded. While the text of the script or screenplay offers the foundational narrative of the characters' story, it is the communicative property of textiles that provides the transformative subtext, translating the characters from words on the page into real people through their 'power to weave together worlds' (Langlois, 2024, p. 5).

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# *Textiles in Theatrical Performance*

## *2.1 Symbolism to Characterisation*

Live performance costume has always been dependant on the customs of the theatre of the period, the artistic ideals of the time and the expectations of that particular audience. However, the constant throughout this history is how the narrative properties of cloth have been continually employed as a semiotic tool to aid characterisation. Costumes were not always designed to enhance the text or to evoke empathy or understanding of the individual; as theatrical performance in Britain has advanced, there has been a progression in costume design approaches, from the simplistic representation of a character 'type', through basic colour coding and recognisable symbolic tropes, to a more individualised characterisation through the use of more subtle sartorial signifiers. As Craik, Leech and Potter note in *Revels History of Drama*, 'The idea that a king on stage need not be dressed on bona fide velvet robes, nor even in a kingly guise at all, is a modern one, born of an expanding textile trade and a new aesthetic of stage design' (1997, p. 145). Stage costume has always been subject to trends that have continually and often cyclically evolved, from fantastical eclecticism through to a more naturalistic and realistic interpretation or a highly stylised approach. This continuous tension between the strive for realism versus the call for a more interpretive translation can be seen throughout the history of performance costume, and is particularly prevalent in costumes that were designed and created as a representation of an earlier historical period.

The unavailability of period appropriate materials means that it can be difficult to convincingly represent historical clothing in performance, making true authenticity unachievable. The use of fashionable and, therefore, available fabrics, mixed with new, unusual and innovative materials to recreate the impression of period textiles, surface pattern and texture and embellishment has long been a mainstay of the design, construction and decoration of historically inspired theatrical costume. Period costume is also unavoidably and inextricably linked with modern aesthetic values and the associated understanding of a particular era viewed through the current political, social and artistic lens. This dichotomy means that costume often simultaneously represents both the period setting of the drama being staged and the era within which it is being performed; the theatrical and commercial conventions of the time of performance merging with the principles of silhouette, colour symbolism and figurative association from an earlier age.

The following subchapters will document these shifts in costuming attitudes, focussing on the material content, colours, textures and decorative techniques used in costume construction, and the messages, both intentionally recognisable and subconsciously subliminal, communicated through their design, rendering and subsequent realised materiality.

## *2.2 Mystery, Miracle and Morality*

Theatrical performances during the medieval period consisted of 'liturgical plays, religious processions, mystery plays,

miracle plays, morality plays, minstrel performances, farces, royal entries and chivalric pageants' (Cruse, 2024, p. 145). The mystery and miracle plays developed as representations of Christian bible stories and depictions of the lives of saints, and were used to promote doctrine to a mostly illiterate congregation (V&A Museum, 2025e). Morality plays followed as dramatic allegories, exploring the duality and fallibility of mankind. However, although generally categorised in this way to provide definition between the types of performance, they often overlapped in terms of staging, theme and character (Tydeman, 1994, p. 18).

The mystery and miracle plays were originally performed in church and grew out of living tableaux, becoming part of the church service as early as the fifth century (Fletcher Bellinger, 1927). By the end of the twelfth century, the performances had moved outside when they were 'gradually taken over by the laity, and ... given entirely in the vernacular. The number of short plays proliferated until they were organized into great cycles covering the whole biblical story from the creation to the Last Judgement' (Álvarez-Faedo, 1997, p. 189). The plays were staged on pageant wagons in some parts of the country and in specially built 'mansions' in other areas. Considerable amounts of money were spent on staging and costuming the performances, with costume a major contributor to this transcendental display; the 'Sheer spectacle' of the productions playing 'a vital role ... as a metaphor for divine power and glory' (Twycross, 1994, p. 48).

Costumes began as ecclesiastical vestments worn by the clergy, who originally played the celestial, saintly roles while holding objects and emblems in their hands to suggest their character and its attributes. Angels were also played by priests and choir boys, sometimes with the addition of wings (Komisarjevsky, 1968, p. 55). When the performances moved outside the church, priestly vestments were still the main costumes but any lay performers playing biblical, earthly characters appeared in contemporary medieval clothing with hoods, short pourpoints (doublets) or long, loose gowns. All roles were played by men, a female character indicated by the simple addition of a kerchief on the head (Cruse and Dufford, 2022).

However, although the clergy wore distinctive clothing, church vestments had originally 'derived from the everyday dress of ordinary people', their ancestry found in the clothing of ancient Greece and Rome. However, 'When the classical Roman dress began to be superseded by the barbarian type, the conservativeness of religion asserted itself by retaining these old-fashioned garments' (Norris, 1949, pp. 8–9); the clergy setting themselves apart from

their congregation by donning a form of clothing that had already become costume in the ceremonial sense. Vestments began to 'increase in richness' from around the tenth century and were made of silks and velvets 'enhanced with gold' (Owen-Crocker, 2024, pp. 108–109), an escalation of splendour which fed into the spectacle of the religious performances for the audience as, 'For most people in Europe, their closest connection with vibrant colour occurred in church setting where they were dazzled and overawed with costly vestments' (Biggam and Wolf, 2024, p. 2). The style of ecclesiastical wear worn during this period developed from Byzantine court dress and was influenced by both the styles of garment and influx of luxury textiles that reached Britain before and during the Crusades (Geczy, 2013, p. 18). During the medieval era, ecclesiastical wear also became imbued with religious symbolism as the vestments became more standardised, captured in their use of representative liturgical colours and applied decoration.

The history of Christian church vestments is complex. There are a variety of combinations and local variations, with the same garments often being called different names. However, in simple terms, early ecclesiastical wear consisted of a variety of robed garments worn in layers. The cassock, a long-sleeved gown, was the everyday base garment; it was 'predominately black' but 'cassocks in scarlet, green or blue were not unknown' (Barton, 2018b). The amice, a rectangular piece of linen, was placed over the cassock, around the neck and shoulders and held in place by ties around the body in order to keep the richer outer garments free from the grease of the neck and head. The alb was originally a belted white linen tunic worn over the cassock. It became more elaborate after the ninth century when it was decorated with 'embroidery and precious stones down the front seam; it was often of silk and the belt was enriched'. Apparels, separately constructed decorative rectangular panels, were also placed at the hems, necks and sleeves of the alb and of the dalmatic, a sleeved robe worn by deacons when assisting at the mass (V&A Museum, 2004a). The stola, a strip worn around the neck, was 'frequently adorned with crosses' and 'its edges were sometimes decorated with embroidery and bells. The chasuble, 'a decorative costume in the shape of a bell with an opening for the head' was worn for celebrating mass (Komisarjevsky, 1968, p. 55). This garment was sleeveless, open down the sides and adorned with a decorative Y-shaped band, known as an orphrey (Tortora and Marcketti, 2021, p. 80). The cope, a semi-circular cape, often highly decorated and fastened with