

excerpts from "Appreciating Costume" by Lucy Barton.
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The costume problem for designer and actor is just as important when the play is *The Cocktail Party* as when it is *Beckett*, because the function of a costume is to give visual expression to the characters whom the playwright has created and the actors are interpreting by voice and movement.

Certainly an actor owes much to his costume and to those who designed and made it for him. The use he makes of this essential tool is up to him. For it is really not a costume until he is playing in it.

It must be emphasized that the actor in his own person has some rights that should not be denied him. The first of these is basic comfort: collars that do not choke, collar-bands that do not chafe, armseyes, cuffs, knee-bands that do not cut off circulation. The second is security: seams that do not split, hooks that stay on, zippers that run smoothly, hems that do not catch the heel. He has a right also to cleanliness" fresh shirts, collars and cuffs cleaned of makeup, clean wigs, well-dressed, fitting so that they neither slide off nor dig into the head. Obligation for the original built-in comfort rests with the costume workshop and for the upkeep presumably with the maintenance staff or a personal attendant. Even so, the actor who wants the best from his costume must respect it, treat it certainly as well as he would his own wardrobe and probably much better.

One lesson the actor must learn - and the costume designer has his share in teaching him - your craft or art is more important than you. For the benefit of an audience you are giving life to a personality who has existed only in words. For that purpose you will want to use all the resources at your command, not only voice and body, but the costumes that are their expression and extension. Theatre is the meeting ground of the arts, and he who works in it contributes his own part and takes strength from all the others. If the scenery, the lights, the costumes exist for the actor, he in his turn must take and use those elements by means of which he is enabled to express his share with his own artistry. A badly designed or made costume can detract from an actor's work; a sloppy, selfish, or inflexible actor can negate the best-designed costume in the world.

Let us grant that a designer of costumes is an artist, though some are content to call themselves craftsmen. Any person who has studied a script, diligently searched for the pertinent historical or social background, thought through the problem in terms of the characters, the actors, the materials and colors, submitted sketches and swatches to the director, and then supervised the cutting and making of the costumes has a right to consider himself a major contributor to the finished production.

For a costumer called upon to dress a play the procedure is always the same: become familiar with the text; get the director's point of view; find out the principal restrictions imposed by the ground-plan; visualize the period or the imaginary milieu of the action; study the actors; make and submit sketches and have them OK'd; shop; make or (supervise); and see the whole cast onto the stage in costumes satisfactory to the director.

A theatre-goer may be first attracted by the costume sketches on display in the lobby. Many people think that these are the measure of the costume designer's artistry; indeed sometimes they are independent works of art. They are not, however, the final product that should be judged. An architect is praised, not for his sketches but for the building itself; the stage costumer should be judged by the rightness of his costumes *on* the actor *on* the stage.

Costumes must do more than delight the eye. The business of costumes as of scenery, lighting, and music is to help the audience understand the playwright's intent. The costume designer will have brought to this problem everything he has: his knowledge of design, his familiarity with art and history, his acquaintance with fabrics, his dexterity in cutting and draping, his experience with color and light. His task is to help establish the mood of the play from the very beginning, to make clear to the audience the personality of each character and his relation to the others, to follow the changes in those characters and their relationships, and to leave in the mind of the audience a picture in harmony with the denouement.

In utilizing the various elements of design the stage costumer tends always toward exaggeration, because in the theatre everything is just a bit more so. That is true even in so-called naturalistic plays. In a modern, sophisticated comedy the playgoer who is intent on understanding costume will note that the drapery which seems to be just right on the leading lady's formal gown is, in fact, about twelve inches longer than it would need to be in a real drawing room. Often in "costume plays" a few inches more on an actor's high headdress or trailing sleeves underline kingliness or dignity.

All costumes are of the theatre; that is, they are a part of the total design by which the spectators are made to understand the author's intent. Successful costumes even in a modern play express in easily understandable visual terms the nature of the characters and the mood of the play. But when a designer creates costumes for a drama, he has some obligation to stick to facts, or at least to plausibility.

On the other hand, the costumer of a musical show is most successful when he gives the illusion of *un-reality*, when he makes of even modern dress something gaily absurd, something too exuberant for daily life; when he conjures from the past or from foreign lands costumes which have used fact merely as a springboard for imagination.