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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Language and Culture of Costume Design

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Annie Julie Le

Committee in charge:

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair
Professor Eva Barnes
Professor Mark Guirguis

2018
The Thesis of Annie Julie Le is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Language and Culture of Costume Design

by

Annie Julie Le

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair

When we think of language and culture, we often think of our ethnical background, along with the influences from our society, history, media and the people around us. However, through my years here at UCSD, I have learned that there is a different form of language and culture in Costume Design.

Culture impacts how we think and language helps us communicate; both play a major part in us understanding one another. For each show that I worked on, I’ve had to learn a new language to speak to directors, actors, and costume technicians. The language that I am speaking of is not English, French, or Vietnamese but rather it pertains to the choice of words I use to communicate
my design. For culture, as a costume designer, we are always balancing between pop culture and historical culture.

Kyle Donnelly’s adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew(d)*, the play was set in a post-apocalyptic world where a group of women put of plays in exchange for food and water. Donnelly was highly influenced by her environment when she pitched this idea – requests in the department, politics, and the movie, Mad Max: Fury Road, which was very popular at the time. For the development of my design, I researched pop culture’s different ideas of post-apocalyptic worlds as well as the history of American stereotypes in women’s clothing and how it relates to their job (i.e. the waitress, the business woman, the stay-at-home mom).

In my pop culture research (film & television, modern art, comics, etc.), depictions of post-apocalypse worlds are often characterized by distressed clothing, dirt, make-shift weapons and recycling, which I used in my overall design. For each individual character’s look, historical culture was a major influence – the cut of a business suit jacket, the recognizable color and shape of a waitress uniform. Knowing both pop and historical culture helped me develop the language I needed to clearly convey my ideas.

To gain both the director’s and actors’ confidence, I had to educate myself and used terms they would understand by referencing things they are exposed to in their daily lives – film, art, music. I also focused on character development – the backstory, the mental and physical state, education and more. For example, Hannah Finn’s character story was that before the apocalypse, she was a high school dropout working as a waitress at a diner in a small town. She was poor, uneducated but funny and loves to make jokes. She was at work when the apocalypse took place, which explains why she’s still in her work uniform. Her character also wears a chest armor made from cans and uses a large ladle that has nails through it as a weapon (to mimic a mace), which
was inspired by things she would have found in the diner kitchen. Both the director and the actor loved the visual and emotional story created for the character and understood the concept that I was going for.

When presenting to the costume shop, I introduced the general post-apocalyptic theme, however, instead of talking about each character’s backstory, we spoke about construction, fit and function of each outfit. The language use when speaking to the shop is much more technical. I had to learn clothing and construction terminology – such as raglan sleeve, a gather, a blind stitch, etc. – to properly articulate my design. Using Finn’s costume as an example again, with the technicians, we talked about the history of the style of the uniform and how it should fit, where wear and tear should be, how distressed it should look and how the can apron should be constructed to look like it was home-made. Costume vocabulary and details are very important when it comes to the construction. I was very specific when providing Finn’s actions in the play and the technicians offered solutions to some clothing restrictions she was experiencing, such as adding a gusset to the underarm area of the sleeve to give her more room to stretch her arms up. Without knowing the proper language, we would have had a harder time understanding the needs of the show.

Marco Barricelli’s production of *The Green Cockatoo* was an entirely different language and culture from *Shrew(d)*. Barricelli and the actors has little to no knowledge of the French period and culture for which this play was written. To make is easier for them to understand, I provided historical reference images, such as paintings and French fashion plates, as well as research from pop culture (the movie, Marie Antoinette) to help familiarize the look. I also focused on colors to differentiate social class, and researched the French body (i.e. how they walk, stand, sit, hold an accessory, etc.) to help the actors fully embrace the period and help create a visual realistic piece for the director. All parties would want to know why I made the choices I made and having that
knowledge puts confidence in my answers and modernizing some costume pieces gave comfort to everyone, physically and mentally.

For this production, I had seven corsets, two dresses and two men’s coats built. The shop’s focus was on how clothing was accurately constructed during this time and learning about all the understructure need to create the silhouette of the period. Together, we studied period clothing patterns, use of fabric and embellishments. My design was a mix of historical reference and self-imagination and the language of period clothing helped both the shop and I to fully realize each piece. For Claire Roberson’s character, Severine, we exaggerated the width of her hips by using a larger bum roll to emphasize her status and wealth. From the cut of her dress to the intricate beaded lace, along with a wig and white face makeup, all these technical changes helped elevate her character further, while also being semi-period appropriate. A famous quote from Judith Dolan, “We don’t copy the period, we use the period.”

The language and culture of contemporary shows, such as Go. Please. Go, and (w)holeness, in my opinion, are more intricate and challenging. We deal with choosing our own outfits, what accessories to wear and how to do our hair daily, thus it is often difficult to separate fashion from costumes. This proven to be so while working on my most recent production, Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again. The director, Sean Graney, wanted the costumes to be motivated by what the actors wear in their daily life instead of what clothes the character they were playing would wear, thus blurring the line of fashion and costume. I did a background research on all the actors to learn their style while also trying to appeal to Graney’s taste in clothes. It was difficult navigating eight different types of styles, all influenced by their different cultures and the language used to speak to men verse speaking to women about clothes also came in to play.
However, another important factor was missing (which led to some miscommunication) and that was the generational difference between the director and the actors. Having allowed the actors the freedom to choose their own costumes, they introduced fashion that they are currently attracted to, one being the crop top. I learned that Graney dislikes the crop top because it reminds him of the fashion he grew up with in the 90s, which he thought was tacky, therefore, in his mind, all crop tops are tacky. Neither could fully understand why the other liked or disliked the crop top and it was because of this fashion cultural difference. I learned when speaking with the actors, I talked about how their individual style adds to the show, and with the director, I spoke of the group as an ensemble and how it visually relates to the rest of the production.

On the other hand, the shop technicians did not care for current or past fashion, rather we focused on detailing and visual effect. The colors of this show were red, brown and white, and the technicians helped me incorporate all three colors into each outfit without making them look too absurd or abnormal. Such an example would be in Mary-Rose Branick’s costume. Branick had a red polo shirt with brown corduroy overalls. She was missing white in her outfit and so we took out her brown zipper and replaced it with a white zipper. Having everyone in a controlled color pallet and changing minor details helped to push the clothes further to looking like costumes than ordinary street clothes. The language of costume construction was key in helping to make such changes.

Every show that I’ve worked on has provided me with a different experience and new challenges. The languages and cultures I’ve learned has assisted me in helping the director visualize the production, understand how it relates to the actor and the character they are playing and how to properly communicate with the team who builds these items. The language we speak
and cultures we learn is used to appeal to the visual, the emotional and the technical. Therefore, costume designers must be multi-cultural and multi-lingual to be successful.