TWENTY-FOUR POWER SUITS:
A Retrospective Study of the Costume Designs for Congressladies, an Adaptation of Aristophanes’ Ecclesiazusae
A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF THE ARTS
in
THEATER ARTS
by
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June 2015

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ABSTRACT

“Twenty-Four Power Suits” by Ellen Howes

This thesis sets out to illustrate my process as the costume designer for The University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) Theater Arts Department’s production of Congressladies, Mary Kay Gamel’s modern adaptation of Aristophanes’ Ecclesiazusae. In collaborating with the director, the designer must create designs that help connect the characters to the world in which the play takes place, as well as reflect the tone of the performance. This thesis will examine the process by which I achieved the actualization of the director’s vision as well as explore the analytical layers beneath my designs. Throughout the chronological process, I will focus on the impact that my designs had in the satirizing of important political issues, the clarification of important plot points, and in paralleling Mary Kay Gamel’s modern adaptation to the original Aristophanic text.
INTRODUCTION

On the days when California’s state representatives have an important decision to make, forty brightly colored kitten heels strut through the doors of the California State Capitol building, scuffing the marble flooring and piercing the historic decorative carpeting. These women, speaking in representation for their respective districts, are the two senators and eighteen congresswomen that make up the female representation in California politics, and the twenty-one women whose wardrobes I’ve been researching for months.

I received word in fall of 2014 that my project for winter quarter 2014-15 would be to design the costumes for a modern adaptation of Aristophanes’ Ecclesiazusae entitled Congressladies. The original text, an ancient comedy written by Aristophanes in 391 BC, is a story that inquires, “What would happen if women took over Athens?” Aristophanes, known today as the father of comedy, answered this question with one of the earliest known uses of political satire, concluding that if women had political power over Athens, it would become a communist society with possessions belonging to the state and sex laws requiring the less attractive be serviced before the beautiful. Aristophanes’ true opinions on the matter of women in power remain unclear in most translations of the text and are widely debated upon among historians. But despite its questionable stance on women’s rights, Ecclesiazusae has aged surprisingly well, providing an entirely different perspective when placed in a
modern context. I believe the University of California Santa Cruz Theater Arts department decided to put this work of Aristophanes on the Mainstage theater in order to ask a question more relevant to the needs and concerns of women in 2015: Is the idea of women in power really so crazy?

**INTERNSHIP**

In the summer prior to designing the costumes for *Congressladies*, I booked a one-way flight to New York with the intention of working as an intern for critically acclaimed designer Candice Donnelly. At the time, Candice was designing costumes for the Roundabout Theater’s production of the play *Indian Ink*, a passionate love story written by Tom Stoppard. With her email address and two letters of recommendation from design professors currently instructing at the University of California Santa Cruz, I braved a move to a city I had never visited for an internship I hadn’t yet landed. I moved into a friend’s apartment in Brooklyn, claimed the foldout couch directly beside the front door, and arranged to meet with Donnelly as soon as she was available. After meeting, it was clear that Donnelly was as excited by the idea of getting some extra help with the production as I was to be in the presence of a professional New York designer. She handed me a copy of *Indian Ink*, and we began work immediately. Much of my time as an intern was spent working directly under the assistant designer. Like any twenty-something given authority over a young intern, Candice’s assistant was controlling and overbearing, often expressing herself with piercing
glares and a passive aggressive tone. Needless to say, surviving the summer was a challenge.

Though sometimes terrifying, the internship offered invaluable learning and growth experiences that would eventually inspire my confident approach to designing the costumes for Congressladies. One of the most difficult lessons I learned from New York City was to swallow the tears, stand tall, and do my job. I continued running errands around Manhattan, learning how Donnelly sources her costumes as a professional designer. I was enamored with Donnelly’s attention to detail and the ways in which she was able to communicate with the director, always saying, “Yes, I’ll try.” I found this approach to be the most efficient way to bring the director’s vision to fruition. The show opened in September 2015, and with it came praise and recognition for Candice’s designs and, for myself, a thicker skin, newfound confidence, and a more grounded idea of what it means to work with a director.

PRE PRODUCTION

I returned back to Santa Cruz in September, ready to take on any new challenges that came with the upcoming production. Having received little information about the unfinished script, and knowing that the play would be set in modern day Congress, I was uncertain which translation of the original text would be the best substitute to read in preparation for designing for this adaptation. I ended up reading two different translations of the text, as well as
having read a third translation previously in my undergraduate career. During each read-through, I recorded as much information about the characters’ physical appearances, personalities, interests, and relationships as I could find. For the most part, however, *Ecclesiazusae* is a performance written for a chorus and not with character depth as a top priority.

In order to better understand the perspective from which *Ecclesiazusae* was originally written, it was imperative that I look into the history of Athens and the politics surrounding Aristophanic times. In doing so, I found that Aristophanes wrote *Ecclesiazusae* just shortly after the end of the Peloponnesian War and during a time of short-lived oligarchy, and was very much aware of the controversy that his work would cause. In fact, Aristophanes was quite fond of politically controversial theater, and often wrote works that have since been referred to as “agitated propaganda,” a form of propaganda meant to rouse audience members by presenting largely exaggerated and biased takes on political issues. The director expressed a strong desire to maintain this agitated approach to the political propaganda in Mary Kay Gamel’s modern adaptation in order to more closely parallel the original intent of *Ecclesiazusae* in *Congressladies*.

The production was set to take place in the UCSC Mainstage Theater, a combination proscenium arch and thrust stage. Though uncertain about the overall direction of the production, the director was fairly certain that it would include both musical numbers and group choreography. Early discussion with
the set designer confirmed that his designs would parallel Washington DC and ancient Greece, and involve pillars for actors to hide behind and interact with. The set design was a clear indicator that actors would need to move a lot. From a costuming perspective, this meant that either the costumes would need to be dynamic and forgiving, or actors would need to utilize the restrictive qualities of the costumes to their advantage. I later learned that the cast size was twenty-four and that the director wanted every cast member to have a congresswoman costume for large chorus numbers. The budget was limited, which meant that the twenty-four congresswoman suits would likely need to be sourced from local thrift stores to save money. In order to make all twenty-four thrift store power suits fit the color palette and aesthetic I would eventually design, I would need to start researching, sketching and sourcing early.

ISSUES OF FASHION IN POLITICS:

In the process of researching the wardrobes of the current California Congresswomen, I learned that among the countless struggles consequent with being a female politician in a male-dominated society is the consistent pressure to properly present her physical appearance. While male politicians rarely have to consider more than what tie matches his white collared shirt, female politicians tend to have to pay closer attention to how they present themselves. In her 2007 book *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, Sophie Woodward details the pressures and struggles that women go through when deciding what to wear
each day. In some chapters she focuses specifically on working and professional women, “The social expectations that are part of the work environment produce a conformity that impedes women’s ability to freely express themselves.”

(Woodward, 144)

The pressures to blend in are as present in the average working office as it is in politics. Women in congress often experience pressure to modify their appearances and behavior in order to either fit the mold of a congressman or to function as something for the male gaze to fixate on. As Jennifer Epstein describes in her 2014 Politico.com article entitled, Keeping up Appearances,

It might seem like a superficial issue, but it can have deep resonance. And the consequences of clothing choices are only amplified by the exponential growth of social media, where everyone can be a fashion critic and where criticism from the right people can shape news coverage. (Epstein)

The public puts an especially harsh gaze on the wardrobes of women in politics, setting them to higher standards than those expected of men. These gendered inequalities permeate more than just United States politics but also bleed into the realm of comedy. Too often the comedic sphere favors male comedians to female comedians based off of a deeply ingrained discomfort with women being anything but sexual. It was therefore important for me to take these pressures into serious consideration when designing for this production, and give both the real and perceived women on stage the power, attention, and comedic resonance that they deserve.
FIRST MEETING:

I went into my first meeting with the director with research regarding women in politics and a deep understanding of Aristophanes’ original text. The meeting lasted a short five minutes and though he didn’t have much information about the direction of the script, it was evident that the director was deep in the process of developing a concept for the show. The notes that I recorded from the meeting read as follows:

- NUTTY congress women with BIG hair
- men in 1960s lingerie
- sexy togas (Greek Porn)

It was unclear how these elements would work in context with one another, but the mystery was inspiring nevertheless.

RESEARCH

After our first meeting, and with very little information about the plot or script of the modern adaptation that Mary Kay Gamel was writing, I had little to go off of besides aesthetic. For this reason, I decided to focus more closely on research as inspiration for this production in lieu of character development or clues from the script. My designs were heavily influenced by the ways in which the circumstances of the original text, set in ancient Greece, interact with the modern reimagining of the text in California Congress.
ANCIENT GREEK COMEDIES:

My research into the comedies of ancient Greece highlighted a few main fixtures that defined the costuming of the time. For example, ancient Greek theater often utilized masks and padding in order to exaggerate and denature certain physical characteristics of the comedic characters, thus furthering the comedic effect. Costuming at the time was also heavily affected by the fact that female roles were being played exclusively by men. Therefore it was the role of the costume to facilitate the transformation from male to female.

Furthermore, I learned that togas existed exclusively in Roman performances, whereas the popular equivalent in ancient Greece would have been called a *chiton*. While the toga is made of one long piece of wrapped fabric, a chiton is made of two long rectangles of fabric gathered at both shoulders and the waist. Still, the director had specifically stated “ togas,” so I wanted to be sure that I provided a variation of both Greek and Roman garment research. It was also important to focus on collecting images that evoked what the director referred to as, “ancient Greek porn.” This meant that I was collecting everything from images of Greek statues with chitons slipping off the subject’s shoulder, to modern pornography that utilizes ancient Greece as a sexually driven aesthetic.

After bringing a brightly colored, hyper-sexualized mood board (see fig. 1) to my second meeting with the director, I realized I was looking in the wrong
direction. The director was looking for a more relaxed fit for the chitons. In the original text, the chitons were used as a male disguise which allowed the women, usually excluded from political matters, to pose as men and take over congress. Consequently, the chitons were supposed to belong to the husbands of the congresswomen and therefore would need to appear masculine in some way. I then made a mood board with imagery of male specific chitons and togas for the director and I to reference. (see fig. 2) It was also important that there be a sense of unity between the chitons and the congresswomen costumes. With these details in mind, I decided on an assortment of simple chitons of varied lengths in the congresswoman color palette but a bit more saturated. I then had the idea that, in order to make the male chiton disguises look worse and thus make the plot clearer; I would pair the male chitons with masks that represented male political figures. I then created a digital rendering of this idea using Photoshop. (see fig. 3) Upon seeing the renderings, the director loved the idea of masks, and added that Groucho Marx glasses could be intermixed with the masks in order to create a “bad disguise” (which I will discuss further in “Drag”).

1950s/1960s LINGERIE:

Next I worked on collecting visual research for the lingerie scenes with the men. The original text of Ecclesia-zusae explains that the women have stolen their husbands’ clothes and the husbands are thus left to wear their wives’ nightclothes. In the case of Congressladies, the director expressed a desire for
1950s and 1960s lingerie. On top of the fact that the actors wearing the lingerie would be men, much of the humor here also stems from the fact that the lingerie belongs to the congresswomen. I wanted to choose pieces that were over-the-top and whimsical, and ended up leaning toward a combination of silk and feathers reminiscent of *Romy and Michelle’s High School Reunion*. (see fig. 4) This aesthetic read as hyper feminine, thus clarifying that the men on stage in feather lingerie were in fact supposed to be men wearing female undergarments as apposed to men portraying women (as in other areas of the performance). This was the constant struggle when dealing with gender roles in this performance, however I felt that the colors and textures in the lingerie would provide a stark contrast to the hairy, bulky nature of the male actors on stage.

CALIFORNIA CONGRESS:

I then moved onto the Congresswomen costumes, sifting carefully through pictures of Congresswomen in power suits shaking hands with “mom and pop” shop owners and schoolteachers in order to find the outfits that were more outrageous than the rest. I was specifically looking for the sorts of bright colors and hideous silhouettes that haunt Congress on the days in which the Congresswomen are feeling especially feisty. A two-piece lime green polyester pantsuit, a bright turquoise blazer that awkwardly rests three inches below the hip, and countless floral brooches the size of softballs were among the many pieces of rich visual research, which inspired the chorus of this show. I
eventually created a general mood board that reflected the direction for the Congress costumes, focusing closely on the color palette for the production as a whole. (see fig. 5)

In order to begin a conversation about the unfair association that society has with women in politics and appearances, I drew directly from the closets of all twenty-one California congresswomen for the color palette, eventually deciding on red-orange, hot pink, bright turquoise, purple, and lime green. The bright colors in the closets of modern day congresswomen reflect a need to compensate for the lack of attention paid to female politicians. While I drew directly from research in creating this palette, I was also prepared to deviate from it in order to exaggerate elements of character and satire and hone in on a broader issue: the unfair societal pressures placed upon the physical appearances of women in politics.

DESIGN CONCEPT: THE POWER SUIT CHORUS

When first given news that congresswomen would be the stars of the Mainstage musical this quarter, I had my doubts. Musical numbers are only as good as they aesthetically appear, and a chorus of twenty-four drab congresswomen was not the sort of aesthetic I or the director wanted for this show. In early discussions both the playwright and director expressed a desire to play with Aristophanes’ original intent (to present women in power as hysterical) by placing this issue in a modern context, leading the audience to
wonder “is this really what would happen if all of congress were taken over by women?” before concluding “of course not!” The designs would need to be exaggerated, reflecting caricatures of the congresswomen rather than literal depictions. This would aid the spectator in understanding the satirical nature of the production and its depiction of women in politics.

Among the many challenges that arise from utilizing real people existing in the modern times as inspiration for a musical chorus is avoiding naturalism. Naturalism, from a design point of view, attempts to recreate the visual appearance of reality as precisely as possible. If the costumes of the chorus are too accurate to the individuals being depicted, they will numb comedic moments that are vital to the energy of the musical; however, if these exaggerated elements go too far, the chorus can lose track of the “real” qualities. Later in her article, Jennifer Epstein quotes Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson regarding her approach to dressing for the senate,

I certainly — and I think the women in the Senate that I served with — dressed not to have people think about clothes (...) We wanted to be well-dressed, obviously, and look businesslike and nice, but not anything like, ‘Oh boy, that’s a great dress.’ You want people to say ‘that’s a great idea’ and not ‘that’s a great dress.’ (Epstein)

Though this notion - that blending in is the best way to be considered equal - is popularly discussed among many female politicians, still every so often a lime green pantsuit makes its way into congress. This is because of what Epstein refers to as the “Burden of individuality.” (Woodward, 144)
This phenomenon became the basis of my design aesthetic for *Congressladies*. I found myself much less interested in the outfits that made these women blend in as I was in the days on which they decided to spray their supersized hairdos with an entire bottle of Aqua-Net to compensate for the fact that they regret wearing orange. In his 2010 book *The Actor In Costume*, Aioffe Monks explores how both audiences and actors interact with theatrical costumes. On the subject of the chorus, Monks notes that “actors are made uniform by wearing uniforms.” (Monks, 74) Here, Monks is stressing that even chorus members should be costumed with respect to the individual. I eventually decided to put every chorus member in the type of power suit that a congresswoman would normally use to stand out from the crowd, and to base these outfits directly off of existing outfits in the closets of the current California congresswomen. I then created individual mood boards for each of the congresswomen, focusing specifically on their most outrageous outfits. Moreover, this exaggerated, *hot mess* aesthetic stirs up a conversation about the unrealistic expectations placed on women in politics, thus creating an entire chorus of almost terrifyingly high maintenance political women.

**REHEARSALS**

As the rehearsal process began, actors began to work collaboratively, coming up with comedic bits and song parodies along the way. With each new
musical number there is typically at least a minor costume change or addition. Because of this, adds (additions to the pre-decided list of garments and accessories needed for the show) began to pour in at a rapid rate. Eventually, the only way to know what costumes were needed for whom was to attend rehearsals regularly. It was there that I learned of the multitude of adds and cuts, including but not limited to:

- Twenty-two ballet-style costumes that resemble aborted fetuses (for a musical number combating overbearing abortion controls)
- Twenty-two coat hanger “halos” for the fetus costumes (mentioned above)
- Four feather night gowns (in addition to two already expected)
- Six pairs of fishnets (for a congress themed version of “Gridlock Tango”)

While the same adds and cuts may have been made regardless, being present at rehearsals allowed me to communicate in person with the director about what these changes would mean for both the budget and the costume shop. Communicating in person allowed me the ability to more confidently respond, “yes, I’ll try,” to the director, thus aiding in the process toward a more collaborative production.

**FETUS COSTUMES:**

As a piece of agitated propaganda, *Congressladies* addresses important, controversial issues. One of the musical numbers, for example, addresses the
matter of abortion and the strict, invasive laws that infringe upon women’s right to choose what happens to their bodies. In order to give validity to an issue as serious as abortion control, it was imperative that the costumes reflect the satirical nature of the director’s vision.

Additionally, in talking to the director during rehearsals and in noting the choreography for the number, it became clear that the director was not interested in bloody, wrinkly, messy fetuses, he wanted them to look cute as to add to the satirical nature of the number,

“Think of me, please don’t abort me
let me have my birth
I know I’m just a cluster of tissue
but my life has worth”

(Gamel, 37)

The song is written as if it were from the perspective of an anti-abortion extremist and thus, in making the costumes clean, cute and pink, I helped aid in the satirical process. Anti-abortion protesters often use this tactic; exaggerating the human-like qualities of unborn fetuses, in order to make women feel guilty and to convince voters to vote anti-abortion. In exaggerating anti-abortion propaganda, the fetus number could spark a deeper conversation about these anti-abortion extremists and their relation to an overarching theme in the play, women’s rights.
The process of going about creating fetus ballet costumes was heavily dependent upon attending rehearsals due to the unpredictable nature of the headpieces the director wanted for this particular number. The director was interested in giving the fetuses “coat hanger halos” to imply that they were the result of an at-home abortion. This can be done simply with a few headbands and old wire hangers from the costume shop, however in observing the choreography, I learned that the actors would need to bend, roll, and reach their arms over their head. Eventually, this lead to a quest to find the sturdiest model of a “Coat hanger halo.”

We eventually settled on simple, nude leotards and loose fitting tan and pink tops. These were paired with halos made of plastic hangers sprayed to look like metal and altered to be able to sit comfortably on the head without falling off during the ballet choreography. The result was almost adorable (see fig. 6), and consequently the costumes helped to reiterate the satirical and sarcastic approach to anti-abortion propaganda.

MOVEMENT:

Moreover, attending fittings allowed me better gauge the needs of the actors by watching the ways in which they moved in rehearsals, paying close attention to how resilient and forgiving the costumes would need to be. I found it extremely helpful to talk to actors during rehearsals as well, getting a sense for what they had been focusing on for their congresswomen impressions, as well as
for the ways they each individually needed to move. Both suit skirts and pantsuits generally restrict movement. For this reason, I would observe the actors during large dance numbers (such as “All my Congressladies”) in order to determine whether or not the restrictive quality of, say, a pencil skirt, would take away from the choreography or add to the ridiculous nature of a chorus of congresswomen recreating Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies.” The visual of a congresswoman’s skirt riding up (because of the high kicks in choreography) adds to the humor of the musical number. The idea of a button popping, a string of beads snapping or a wig falling off mid dance number is very Aristophanic and right on par with the aesthetic decisions of the Director. For this reason, I kept many of the pencil skirts and non-stretch materials in the show, further adding to the verisimilitude of the California congresswomen costumes.

FITTINGS

I’ll start by noting that the fitting room is a vulnerable place for both the designer and the actor. On one hand, the designer must present unfinished work. While it is very easy for a designer to look at a suit two sizes too big and know that it will fit perfect, this notion isn’t always so easy for actors to envision. Actors have to wear my work on their body and often consequently see everything in the fitting room mirror that they’re afraid audiences will see on stage. I have always empathized with these anxieties. The mere concept of allowing another human being to dress my body has always been and will
always be something I admire actors for putting up with. Clothing is a very personal piece of a person’s overall being for both physical and emotional reasons. Later in The Actor in Costume, Aoife Monks expounds upon clothing as a metaphor for the self:

Dress isn’t merely external decoration of appearance, but rather constitutes a deeply formative metaphor for being a person in the world. This metaphor is often contradictory, doesn’t necessarily add up, is frequently inconsistent and is often informed by the broader tensions and struggles in the culture over what being a person might mean or be for. Dress doesn’t simply reflect these tensions: it also produces them, and the theatre has been a vital place in which the metaphor of clothing has been invented, imagined and displayed. Theatre is a place where we learn how to make ourselves through clothes.

(Monks, 56)

The actor must give up control of the exterior self to the costume designer. In passing on this responsibility, they are also trusting that the designer will work with his or her body to create a costume that is either flattering or not (on purpose). Consequently, the moment an actor first tries on their unaltered costume is a moment that I believe will continue to give me anxiety throughout my career.

In the instance of Congressladies, however, the fittings went smoothly. I had actors try on suits that fit the style of the congresswoman they would be impersonating. Because many of my designs came directly from research, I found it very useful to show the actors evidence of the individual accessories and accents that made their congresswoman’s outfit unique. By showing, for example, the actress playing Barbara Boxer an image of Senator Boxer wearing
an identical rope necklace and brown leather watch to the ones that I provided in her fitting, the actress was able to start thinking about what these details say about Barbara Boxer as a person. Unsurprisingly, the sometimes boring, sometimes hideous outfits made actors take a second glance in the mirror and ask themselves “What kind of woman would I have to be to purchase something like this?”

ATTENTION TO DETAIL:

Equally important as the exaggeration of the costumes for humor were the small details that turned the actors from staged characters into real congresswomen. These details were sometimes excruciatingly minute, for example the use of jewelry. In 1984, Laura M. Stone wrote a book entitled *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy* in which she explores in detail, existing evidence of costumes in productions of Aristophanes’ work during ancient Greek times. In this book, Stone describes the use of jewelry during the time of Aristophanes as essential, stating, “In the period of Aristophanic comedy, almost all Greek women wore earrings, and necklaces were also popular,” however she adds later that “the difficulty of viewing even large jewelry in the theater should be taken into account.” (Stone, 245) Stone isn’t alone in this notion. Nearly every piece of academic writing regarding costuming for theater stresses the importance of utilizing oversized accessories in order to make them visible from even the furthest of seats. My issue with this mentality was that the UCSC
Mainstage Theater, in my opinion, doesn’t have far away seats (I would later learn that being an audience member sitting a bit further back at a production of *The Congressladies* could mean getting served Jell-O shots by congresswomen in the aisles, feeling the impact of Maxine Waters’ riding crop cracking against the podium during the “No Abortion Controls” number and getting an up close view of a human fetus getting vacuumed out of the theater). It was the prospect of close audience participatory interactions that inspired the hyper-detailed approach to my designs. I made sure, for example, that Linda Sanchez, known widely for her involvement in Catholic churches throughout California, was wearing a cross necklace, and that Grace Napolitano had a silk flower on her lapel. These are the sorts of outrageously insignificant details that kept me continuously falling in love with *Congressladies*. It was a production that left nothing unsaid, and I wanted every outrageous line to come from what felt like a real congresswoman.

Additionally, only once I felt an individual actor's congresswoman costume was complete, I would have the actor stand tall and look at themselves in the mirror as I put the finishing touch, a tiny American flag pin on the part of their suit lapel or blouse that was most commonly found in the research I collected for that individual congresswoman. It is in this moment that many of the actors began to transform into real women in power, and these small details that convince audience members that real congresswomen are standing beside them. In reality, the pin would be an official Congressional lapel pin (usually
circular with either a district or California seal), but for obvious reasons these are commercially unattainable. The substitution of a small American flag provided viewers with a unifying detail that gave validity to the political standing of the twenty-four chorus members, authorizing them to be congresswomen.

DRAG

For this production, it was less important what the characters wore so much as what the clothes they wore symbolized to the audience. Aristophanes’ original script is centered on misleading and manipulative scenarios that are made possible through gendered disguises. The women, for example, take over congress with the help of male disguises (their husbands’ cloaks), and their respective husbands are left with nothing to wear except the undergarments of their wives. Costuming this scene becomes even more difficult when both female and male actors are playing the women dressed as men in congress. It was quickly becoming apparent that gender would play an especially large role in both the humor of the play as well as the audience’s understanding of the plot.

PADDING:

Using padding and particular garment shapes, I sought to transform the bodies of the young, gender-diverse group of actors into the varying silhouettes of middle-aged women in politics. This meant skirts that hit below the knee, neck
ruffles whenever possible, and bust pads sewn into each male actor’s congresswoman suit. The use of padding is hardly a costume trick unique to my designs, in fact padding played an enormous role in Aristophanic comedies. Because, in Aristophanic times women were not allowed on stage, male actors would often need padding in order to change their silhouette to look more like a woman in order to more clearly present the character’s intended gender. I wanted to be sure to incorporate padding (in the form of breast pads) in the congresswomen costumes of the male actors in part because of this historical relationship with Aristophanes, and in part to mold a feminine silhouette onto male actors, allowing them to go through a more thorough transition into a woman.

WIGS:

In order to make certain that the audience understood male actors to be portraying female congress members in men’s clothing, it was imperative that they wear both wigs in addition to breast padding. The director and I had addressed the use of wigs in this production during our first meeting. I learned then that the director had previously put on a smaller production of Ecclesiazusae at the University of California, D.C. (UCDC), and that they still had the wigs used in the previous production in their costume stock. After a short video chat with the UCDC costume shop manager and communications with our costume shop manager at UCSC, I arranged for the wigs (consisting of fourteen
mid-quality wigs assigned to individual congresswomen and female senators) to be shipped to Santa Cruz in time for fittings. Unfortunately, due to conflicts with shipping payment, the wigs did not end up arriving until a week before dress rehearsal. Once the wigs arrived, I lined them up on Styrofoam heads side by side in the “wig cage,” a stuffy, concrete room with no windows and a chain link gate for a door. Inside the wig cage, one can find an array of hair tools and products as well as wigs of every color, length, style, size, and quality. After styling and setting the UCDC wigs, I began searching through the wig stock to find wigs with a length and color that could easily be styled into the hairstyles of the congresswomen not yet represented by the wigs sent to us by UCDC.

It was important to me that both the male and female actors wear wigs and exaggerated makeup in order to avoid comedic favoritism in favor of the male actors in drag. By giving the female actors an oversized wig and lipstick that spills onto their teeth, they too can feel that their exterior has transformed in the same nutty, whimsical manner as that of the male actors in drag. This feeling of transformation (whether coming from a male or female perspective) is a very important part of becoming a member of an Aristophanic chorus.

When watching cross-dressed performance, the audience might say, “that man is a woman”, or “that woman is a man”. And, as they sit in the auditorium for the length of the production, they agree to believe this statement while also seeing doubly the “man as a man” or the “woman as a woman. (...) Perhaps, when spectators leave the theatre they believe that those “men” and “women” will go back to their dressing rooms, take off their costume and makeup and change back into their rightful sexed identity. But perhaps they also leave with the faint suspicion that actors have been altered by the act of dressing-up.”
This transition from male to female furthers the overarching transition from an actor into a congresswomen caricature.

OVERSIZED SUITS:

Costuming actors in drag offers as many technical difficulties as it does aesthetic advantages. As in any production of Ecclesiazusae, one of the greatest challenges with this production was convincing the audience that the male actors on stage were instead women dressed up as men. Originally, the idea was that the chorus of congresswomen would be wearing their husbands’ chitons. Though vigorous historical research could be done to make sure the chitons were both period accurate and masculine, modern audiences, not likely experts on subtle differences in ancient Greek dress, could mistake the chitons for dresses and thus fail to recognize an important plot point; that the women stole their husbands’ clothing.

Later In her book, Stone expounds upon the topic of male disguises in Ecclesiazusae, noting that;

The plot of Ecclesiazusae is also constructed around a transvestite disguise. In this case, however, women dress as men, and this presents a more complicated problem, for here we have male actors dressed as female characters in male disguise. The actors’ female costumes must be realistic, while the male disguises are unconvincing and transparent. (Stone, 411)
In order to achieve this effect, it was imperative that the chitons, seemingly gender neutral, be switched out for something more recognizably masculine in order to help guide spectators through the plot.

The chorus of chitons were eventually cut from the production and replaced with oversized men’s suits. Suits (especially ones of varying and ill-fitting sizes) could easily be pulled from stock, alleviating budget constraints. Because the suits were presumed to belong to the husbands of the congresswomen, they were not supposed to fit perfectly. This allowed the costume shop to focus more closely on alterations for the congresswomen suits (which were becoming more and more abundant). “The humor in the Ecclesiazusae as a whole,” Stone stresses, “depends on the incongruity of the female figure in male clothing.” (Stone, 225)

This made fittings astonishingly easy. I would simply pinch the shoulders of the suit to be sure the shoulder measurement of the suit was at least two inches too big, choose a belt and tie, and (if necessary) mark where we needed to hem the slacks in order to avoid tripping during dance numbers. Considering little to no other alterations would be needed for this particular section (most suits in stock are a number of sizes too big for the predominantly tiny cast of actors, and were perfect for what we needed them for) hemming the cuffs of the slacks was hardly an issue for the shop, especially in comparison to what was once twenty-four builds.
Additionally, the oversized suits would be paired with a mixture of masks of various male politicians and Groucho Marx glasses. This gave the effect of a bad disguise, thus guiding the audience in understanding the gender intended for certain characters.

TAP SHOES:

We soon realized that we could utilize the tap shoes (which we had already purchased through another division of the budget) in place of men’s shoes for the congressmen disguises, thus further alleviating budget constraints. Typically, tap shoes are used for large dance numbers (as in “Drone Strikes”) as well as for light-hearted comedic effect. This was also true in the case of Congressladies, as the sound of tap shoes filled the theater at moments when neither music nor dance numbers were present. Unsurprisingly, Aristophanes intended for a similar comedic effect. As Stone explains in the chapter entitled “Footwear,”

“Ecclesiazusae points out another comic possibility in the use of men’s shoes by female characters: the heavy stride, unusual for women, which the ἐμβαί produces. This stride is further exaggerated by the improper fit of the shoes and by the vigorous dancing of the comic chorus.” (Stone, 225)

Clearly the director and I were onto something, as the comedic effect of twenty-four congresswomen scurrying across the stage in male suits is undoubtedly heightened with the addition of tap shoes. For example, when the main
character, Nancy, says “We’ll put women in charge!” the entire chorus of congresswomen scream in unison and run wildly around the stage, causing a roar of tap sounds. This is comedic both because of the sheer loudness and intensity of the sound bouncing around the theater, as well as because of the relationship between the male suit and the high pitched, weightless sound of tap shoes.

DRESS REHEARSALS

The most rewarding part of being a costume designer can also be the most nerve-racking. During dress rehearsals is the first time that the actors get to interact with their costumes and combine the internal character work they've done with their character’s external self. Moreover it’s often also the first time most individuals involved with the production get a chance to see the entire chorus of costumes on stage in context with one another. In the case of Congressladies, seeing the costumes interacting with one another caused me to make some last minute changes due to issues such as the balance of color, proportion or emphasis on stage. Aside from a list of aesthetic fixes, more often than not, the first dress rehearsal ends with a lot of rips, tears, lost earring-backs, broken glasses, and clothes that for no reason whatsoever, no longer fit after the fitting that happened earlier that week. These are par for the course with dress rehearsals, and, with the exception of one skirt that needed to be replaced mid
dress-rehearsal week due to a mild fabric tear, the repairs were mostly minor fixes, and were completed well in time for performances.

By the final dress, all aesthetic and technical issues with costumes were fixed, and I was, at last, able to watch the performance from an audience perspective. I was surprised to see positive aspects to my designs that I did not purposefully intend but that worked nonetheless. For example the assortment of colorful feather nightgowns worked well in furthering the boy band aesthetic for both “Talk like a man” and “I Like it Both Ways.” (see fig. 7) I was pleasantly surprised with the overall look of the male congress disguises. They turned out to be messy and ill fitting, communicating to the audience that these suits are disguises (see fig. 8). I was also impressed with how accurate some of the costumes were to the congresswomen (see fig. 9-10, fig. 11-12, and fig. 13-15) Lastly, I felt immensely satisfied with the look of the chorus in the last scene. (see fig. 15) Seeing my color palette laid out in sporadic bursts of saturation across the edge of the stage was rewarding to say the very least. I was able to actualize a chorus of costumes within my desired color palette and in agreement with my original designs despite the fact that most of the congresswoman suits had to be sourced from local thrift stores. It was in the last scene (and specifically during “One Day More”) that I realized I had created something so loud, controversial and offensive, that it was undeniably Aristophanic.
CONCLUSION

It is possible that in the duration of Congressladies’ run, only a handful of audience members noticed small details like flag pins, a cross necklace or an uncanny resemblance to Lois Capps, but it is in the rare instances in which they do, that the power of theater is most influential. By creating costumes that were direct recreations of outfits that exist in the wardrobes of the California congresswomen down to minute details, the actors could think of the detail put into in their costumes as small glimpses into the individual congresswomen’s lives. This approach authorized the actors to act as individuals despite being part of a larger chorus. Consequent to these thorough wardrobe recreations is a sense of exaggerated femininity and empowerment that the actors developed when clad in brightly colored power suits. This furthered the confident, energetic tone that California Congresswomen so often project, and allowed the audience to trust in the validity of the real (but exaggerated) political figure standing in the aisle next to them. While cartoonish, these characters are based on real women, and the history of restriction, intimidation, and gaze upon female politicians has led to neon pantsuits and supersized hairdos being considered part of the norm in a congresswoman’s wardrobe. In recreating the most outrageous of congresswoman outfits, I heightened the satirical impact of Congressladies, helping call further attention to many of the deeper, gender related issues addressed in this production. Composing the chorus of over the top costumes established a level playing field, allowing female actors equal
comedic opportunity so as to not be overshadowed by the male actors in drag.
Finally, the absurd, outrageous, and offensive qualities of my designs provided a
strong reference to the comedic nature of the original Aristophanic productions.
The costumes for Congressladies intensified feelings of agitation amongst
spectators, leading them to relief by the time that all twenty-four
congresswomen get shot in the end of the production, bringing down with them
any surviving belief that women are truly this insane.
FIGURES

Fig. 1. “Sexy toga” mood board by Ellen Howes. 2015. Photoshop.

Fig. 2. Male chiton/toga mood board by Ellen Howes. 2015. Photoshop.
Fig. 3. Early rendering by Ellen Howes. 2015. Photoshop.

Fig. 4. 1950s/60s lingerie/nightgown mood board by Ellen Howes. 2015. Photoshop.
Fig. 5. Congresswomen mood board by Ellen Howes. 2015. Photoshop.

Fig. 6. Production photo by Gabriel Carlos. Digital. Fetus costumes by Ellen Howes. 2015.
Fig. 7. Production photo by Ellen Howes. Digital. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.

Fig. 8. Production photo by Steve DiBartolomeo. Digital. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.
Fig. 9. Production photo by Steve DiBartolomeo. Digital. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.

Fig. 10. http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/06/06/house-ethics-committee-resumes-case-against-maxine-waters/. 2012.
Fig. 11. Production photo by Steve DiBartolomeo. Digital. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.

Fig. 13. Production photo by Gabriel Carlos. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.

Fig. 15. https://www.pinterest.com/pin/94083079686575671/. 2012.

Fig. 15. Production photo by Gabriel Garlos. Digital. Costume design by Ellen Howes. 2015.
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