COSTUMES IN THE LIMELIGHT

Introduction

Costumes are powerful objects, which carry multiple meanings and memories in their fibres. Through three connected blog posts, I will highlight the importance of costume for performance: revealing the insights they offer into the lives of the people who designed, made, wore and saw them. Commencing with Ellen Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress', moving on to Edwin Moxin's embroidered 'shorts', and concluding with Kitty Lord's carefully padded 'Symmetricals', I will showcase the information which these unique garments offer about the performer, performance, and audience, for which they were originally created.

From Actors to Acrobats: Drama and Spectacle on the 19th Century stage

As the 19th century progressed, an increasingly wide variety of dramatic delights were entertaining audiences across London. Whilst stage productions were not confined to London (indeed, many performers relied on touring productions in 'the provinces' for the majority of their income) the capital remained the focal point for new productions and celebrated performers, particularly during 'the Season' (October to June).

The passing of the 1843 Theatres Regulation Act meant that 'Legitimate drama' was no longer monopolised by the two patent theatres (Covent Garden and Theatre Royal Drury Lane) and by 1866 a 'boom in theatre building was taking place.'[1] However, this medium of performance (generally spoken drama and primarily tragedy, comedy and farce) retained its cultural capital.[2] As Katherine Newey has argued, theatres presenting 'Legitimate drama' retained a reputation for 'dramatic propriety and literary worth', attracting the social and intellectual elite.[3] Whilst operas, might prove an equally respectable mode of entertainment, the morality of the opera-ballet – specifically the dancers featuring in such performances – was suspected. Poorly paid, and lacking secure employment, both their 'diaphanous skirts', and the supplementary employment their poverty might necessitate, influenced public perceptions of these performers.[4] Even greater concerns surrounded 'illegitimate drama', which encompassed a much wider range of productions. David Mayer notes how, by the late 19th century, this category encompassed not only circus and 'music based entertainments', but also 'burlesques, extravaganzas, pantomimes, variety theatres, aerialists, acrobats, gymnasts, contortionists, cyclists, Indian club virtuosi and other [performers] exhibiting physical skills.'[5]

As Davis and Emelijanow stress, theatre going was not strictly divided on a class basis, and 'both theatres and music halls catered to mixed clienteles, sometimes within one building, sometimes according to neighbourhood.'[6] However, class, income and, to an extent, gender, certainly dictated your ability to access certain venues and forms of performance. Furthermore, until 1892, when the Lyceum became the first theatre to dim the house lights during the production, the auditorium remained illuminated throughout the evening.[7] Social ambitions might therefore play an equally influential role in your choice of entertainment: were you visiting a performance to see, or be seen?

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[1] Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880, ,* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001) *x,* 170.
[2] Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 19.
[3] Katherine Newey. "Dramatic and Musical Chit Chat": Theatrical Writing in the "Athenaeum" and the "Illustrated London" News in 1843. *Victorian Periodicals Review*. 23.4 (Winter, 1990): 169;
[4] Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women* (London: Routledge, 1991), 109.
[5] David Mayer, "The actress as photographic icon: from early photography to early film," *Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, ed. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 75-6.
[6] Davis and Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing, 1840-1880, x,* 170.
[7] Scott Palmer, *Light: Readings in Theatre Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 35.

These posts will examine three distinct forms of performance: Shakespearean Drama; Circus, and Music Hall. The analysis of each costume will highlight the specific costuming conventions operating within these contrasting performance contexts. Practical considerations (budget; movement patterns; venue) clearly influenced these conventions, but, as this discussion will show, they also reflect the expectations and socio-cultural background of their audiences.

Ellen Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress' (1888)

The glistening green and silver/blue dress worn by Dame Ellen Terry (1847-1928) as Lady Macbeth has entranced audiences since its first stage appearance at the Lyceum Theatre in December 1888. Amongst the illustrious figures present at the production's opening night was the painter, John Singer Sargent. The visual impact of Terry's entrance in this dress was such that he decided to immortalise the performance in a portrait of the actress **[FIGURE 1].**

Named for the iridescent bettlewings which covered its surface, the 'beetlewing dress' overshadowed the costumes of the other performers, including those of the title character: Macbeth. Reflecting on this visual contrast, Oscar Wilde remarked: 'Lady Macbeth seems to be an economical housekeeper and evidently patronises local industries for her husband's clothes and servant's liveries, but she takes care to do all her own shopping in Byzantium.'[8]

This costume certainly needed to make an impact. News that Terry would be appearing as Lady Macbeth had raised almost universal dismay amongst theatre critics, who argued that:

> […] there is a gentle womanliness about Miss Terry which makes it impossible to for her to utter convincingly such a speech as that hideous invocation to "thick night" and the Spirits of Evil. To read this and suppose that Lady Macbeth was other than diabolical and fiendish is impossible; and these are qualities to represent which is beyond the wide scope of Miss Terry's genius, great as it unquestionably is.[9]

It was therefore essential that Terry's performance overcame this scepticism, and her costumes played a crucial part in her ultimate success.

'Our Lady of the Lyceum'

Ellen Terry was one of most popular and celebrated actresses of her generation. She garnered this public affection, despite a professional career and personal life that directly challenged conventional Victorian morality and social codes: encompassing three marriages, two illegitimate children, and at least two long term love affairs.[10]

Immersed in the world of the theatre from her birth, she was the daughter of two 'strolling players,' Benjamin and Sarah Terry, and four of her eight surviving siblings also became actors. She made her stage debut in 1856 at the Princess Theatre, London, performing the role of Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale* alongside Charles Kean (1811-1868) as Leontes **[FIGURE 2]**.

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[8] Wilde's statement was recalled and quoted by W.G. Robertson in *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson.* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1931) 151.

[9] "The Real Macbeth," *Unidentified periodical,* ca. December 1888*,* Press Cutting, mounted in Percy Fitzgerald Albums, Volume V: 311, Garrick Collection, London.

[10] Terry outlines some of these events in her own autobiography, published in 1908, Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1908). Amongst the biographies which followed, Nina Auerbach and Joy Melville provide the most reliable account her Terry's life and career. See: Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (London: Dent & Sons, 1987) and Joy Melville, *Ellen and Edy: a biography of Ellen Terry and her daughter Edith Craig 1847-1947* (London: Pandora, 1987).

During a career which spanned over six decades, she spent time with stock companies; toured the provinces; performed multiple times in America; managed her own theatre and delivered an influential series of lectures on Shakespeare. Through her first marriage to artist G.F.Watts, and her subsequent six-year relationship with architect and designer E.W.Godwin, (the father of her two children), she also became increasingly interested by, and a central figure within, the burgeoning Aesthetic movement. Terry acknowledged the enduring influence of Watt's training on her understanding of art and credited Godwin with initiating her '[…] interest in colour, texture, effects of light on colour, the meaning of dress, and a certain taste for beauty which [she] never lost.'[11] This training had a direct impact on the clothing she adopted both on and off the stage, which signalled her enduring commitment to the 'cult of beauty' and her understanding of 'the art of dress.'[12] **[FIGURE 3]**.

She is now most famous for the twenty-two years she spent as the leading lady of actor/manager Sir Henry Irving's Lyceum Company. This position brought Terry international celebrity, and, at the peak of her career, a salary of '£200 a week' (the average weekly income of a leading lady was £25 to £40).[13] The success of their stage partnership stemmed from their mutual respect for the other's professional ability. Significantly, Irving appreciated Terry's knowledge of 'art and archaeology in dress,' whilst she recognised that he often '[…] had a finer sense of what was right for the *scene*.'[14] Indeed, as Valerie Cumming has discussed, although Irving decided '[…]the period in which the play was to be set and the tonal values of each scene', and the majority of the company's costumes would be made by the in-house wardrobe, Terry was free to work with her preferred designers and dressmakers.[15]

'Shopping in Byzantium'

The level of control Terry exercised over her costumes and the interest she took in this element of her performance was unusual, and makes her 'costuming practice' particularly significant. Throughout her time with the Lyceum Company, she had her own costume designer and from 1887, until 1902 (when Terry left the theatre), Alice Comyns-Carr held this role. Like Terry, Comyns-Carr wore Aesthetic dress, she also shared her belief that whilst it was essential that costumes did 'not look wrong in their scenes', it was also vital that '[…] both the form and the colour of all stage dresses must be governed by the individual actor's appearance.'[16] Working in collaboration with the dressmaker and costumier, Ada Nettleship, they created costumes which embodied the Aesthetic preference for garments which defied fashion and drew inspiration from the past to create styles that celebrated 'the natural form' and celebrated the 'individual.'[17]

The 'Beetlewing dress' was certainly one of their most spectacular creations. Using Terry's personal copy of J.R. Planché's *History of British Costume* (1847 edition) as the starting point for their research, the silhouette of the dress evoked gowns from the early medieval period (c.1100–1300): specifically an engraving taken from a brass of Clothilde, Queen of the Franks, in the Notre Dame Cathedral (attributed to Eugène Viollet-le-Duc).[18] **[FIGURE 4]** Having 'cut out the patterns [for the dress] from the diagrams in the wonderful

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[11] Ellen Terry, "Stage Decoration." The Windsor Magazine (Copyright by S.S.McClure Company in the United State of America, 1911) 74.

[12] For more information about the Aesthetic movement and Aesthetic dress, see Stephen Calloway, Lynn F. Orr, and Esmé Whittaker, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement, 1860–1900* (London: V&A Publications, 2011) and Mary Eliza Haweis, *Art of Dress* (London: Chatto&Windus, 1879).

[13] In fact, most West End actresses were fortunate to earn as much as £10 a week and other performers working as ballet dancers or in productions touring 'the provinces' earned significantly less. See: Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 7 and Davis, *Actresses As Working Women,* 26.

[14] Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1908) 157.

[15] Valerie Cumming, 'Ellen Terry: an Aesthetic actress and her Costumes' Costume 21 (1987), 70.

[16] Terry, *Story of My Life*, 69; Terry, "Stage Decoration," 88.

[17] These styles are discussed in more detail by Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the 19th Century* (London: John Murray, 1974) and Kimberley Wahl, *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013).

[18] Emma Slocombe "Lady Macbeth at the Lyceum." National Trust Historic Houses and Collections Annual 2011 (London: National Trust, in association with Apollo, 2011) 10.

costume book of Viollet le Duc', Nettleship (together with her team of makers) then crocheted a fine yarn formed from **'**a twist of soft green silk and blue tinsel,' sourced from Bohemia, 'to match them.'[19] As both Comyns-Carr and Terry would have been aware, the strands of metal thread running through this crochet ensured the costume looked particularly magnificent in the 'thick softness of gaslight with the lovely speaks and motes in it.'[20]

However, despite the eerie glow offered by the crocheted blue tinsel strands running through the costume, Comyns-Carr was concerned that the dress might not be 'brilliant enough.'[21] Contemporary fashions, specifically the beetle-wing cases used to embellish elegant evening wear, provided the solution, and thousands of these shimmering wing cases were hand-sewn across the surface of the dress.[22] This, together with the further addition of 'a narrow border in Celtic designs, worked out in rubies and diamonds' at the hem and sleeve cuffs, completed the costume.[23]

When fully dressed for the role, a wide metal belt encircled Terry's waist, a veil (held in place by a circlet of rubies) covered her head, and two long plaits twisted with gold hung to her knees. The ensemble also included 'a cloak of shot velvet in heather tones, upon which great griffins were embroidered in flame coloured tinsel.' This heather coloured cloak was a last minute replacement for the vivid blood-red cape originally designed for Terry. The latter had been appropriated by Irving after the first dress rehearsal – who - recognising, the dramatic impact of this 'wonderful splash of colour' - decided that it needed to be reserved for Macbeth! [24] **[FIGURE 5]**

A costume fit for 'A Temple of Art'

Irving was committed to establishing the Lyceum Theatre as a 'Temple of Art' and 'theatre of beauty.' [25]His anxiety for 'complete accuracy in every particular detail' of his productions, was such that he carried out painstaking research into the historical period and country in which they were set and '[…] would never accept anything that was not theatrically right as well as pictorially beautiful'.[26] To achieve this 'harmony', he was prepared to invest vast sums in scenery, costume and special effects, and the Lyceum Company became renowned for their large-scale and spectacular productions.[27]

The values promoted by the Aesthetic movement, specifically the emphasis placed on the beauty that results through 'harmony', and the inspiration which can be drawn from the past, fuelled a wider desire for theatre costumes which were 'archaeologically correct and artistically appropriate.'[28] In his 1891 article, *The Truth of Masks,* Oscar Wilde, reflected upon the 'desire for archaeological accuracy in dress' which, he claimed, 'has distinguished the great actors of our age.'[29] Archaeology was not, Wilde explained, 'a pedantic method, but a method of artistic illusion' in which 'costume is a means of displaying character without description, and of producing dramatic situations and dramatic effects.'[30] His writing demonstrated a keen

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[19] Alice Comyns-Carr, *Mrs. J. Comyns-Carr's Reminiscences* (London: Hutchinson, 1926), 211-212.
[20] Gaslight was still used in the Lyceum Company productions, even after electric lights were developed for the stage and installed in many theatres. Terry, *Story of My Life,* 173.
[21] Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 211-212.
[22] Cummings, 'Macbeth at the Lyceum' Costume 12 (1978), 58.
[23] Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 211-212.
[24] Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 212-213.
[25] Martin Meisel, *Realisations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 402-3.
[26] Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences,* 149; Terry, *Story of My Life,* 172.
[27] Richards, Jeffrey, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and His World* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), 5.
[28] Oscar Wilde, "Truth and Masks," *Intentions: The Decay of Lying. Pen, Pencil, and Poison, The Critic As Artist, The Truth of Masks* (London: Osgood, 1891) [Online edition, Project Gutenburg, Transcribed from the 8th edition published by Methuen and Co. in 1913]: n.p.
[29] Wilde, "Truth and Masks," n.p.
[30] Wilde, "Truth and Masks," n.p.

understanding of theatrical practice during this period and stressed the need for same harmony between set and costume on the stage as one would demand in a room, or picture.

The Lyceum Theatre, was amongst the venues which Wilde credited with exemplifying harmonious and archaeologically correct stage costume. Similarly, Walter Hamilton's survey of the Aesthetic movement (published in 1882) identified both Terry and Irving as actors whose 'intensity' earns them admiration from even 'the strict Aesthete,' noting that 'it is indeed at the Lyceum Theatre that Aestheticism in all its beauty can be seen.'[31]

This costume therefore had to fulfil a challenging set of design criteria: Firstly, it needed to reflect the eleventh century setting chosen for the play; on a practical level it had to suit Terry's body shape and facilitate her graceful movement; both Terry and Irving wanted a costume which aligned with the values of the Aesthetic movement and, perhaps most importantly, it had to support Terry's performance of this controversial role.

Comyns-Carr's aim had been to create a dress as 'like soft chain armour as [she] could, and yet have something that would give the appearance of the scales of a serpent.'[32] The crocheted 'chain mail' of the 'Beetlewing dress' encased Terry within iridescent 'armour' that conveyed her character's majesty and power, and yet retained sufficient signs of femininity and beauty to placate even the harshest of critics: A warrior queen to match a warrior king.

The visual impact of *Macbeth* is evident in contemporary reviews, which remarked upon 'the marvellous costumes designed by Mrs. Comyns-Carr' and declared Terry's performance to be 'a continual feast to the eye.'[33] The 'beauty' and 'picturesque' qualities of the scenery and costumes actually led many reviewers to soften their criticism of Terry's performance, as one commentator noted:

> […] difficult to deal with is the Lady Macbeth of Miss Ellen Terry. That it is convincing few will maintain. It is, however, divinely beautiful. The woman who, in a quaint and indescribably beautiful costume, read by the light of the fire the letter of her husband […] might have stood in the Court at Camelot, and gained the wondering homage and obeisance of Sir Galahad, as well as Sir Lancelot […] [34]

Legacy and Afterlives

Though critics remained divided regarding the success of Terry's interpretation, the public approved and the original production ran for one hundred and fifty nights. For many, *Macbeth* marked the pinnacle of Irving and Terry's professional partnership and it remained in the Lyceum Company repertoire for over a decade.

When Terry left the Lyceum Company in 1902 she took many of her costumes with her, the 'Beetlewing Dress', or a version of it, included.[35] Since its first stage appearance in 1888, this costume has been mended; altered; re-made; worn by other performers and transformed into a 'museum object' in a pose which consciously recreates Singer-Sargent's 1888-9 painting.[36] **[FIGURE 6]** It was, and remains, a source of

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[31] Walter Hamilton, *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1882), pp. 31–32.
[32] Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 211-212.
[33] *Pall Mall Gazette,* December 31 1888: 4. Press cutting mounted in Percy Fitzgerald Album, Volume V: 330, Garrick Club, London.
[34] *Morning Post,* December 31 1888, Press cutting, Lyceum Theatre, Production Box, Macbeth, 1888, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
[35] Multiple versions of this costume (and several of Terry's costumes) survive. For further discussion of this specific example see Veronica Isaac, 'Towards a New Methodology for Working with Historic Theatre Costume: A Biographical Approach Focussing on Ellen Terry's (1847-1928) 'Beetlewing Dress', *Studies in Costume and Performance 2.2* (2017): 115-136.
[36] The costume is now part of the Ellen Terry Collection at Smallhythe Place (Terry's former home, now managed by the National Trust) – https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/smallhythe-place.

inspiration for other designers and performers: providing a reference point for Vivien's Leigh Lady Macbeth in 1955 **[FIGURE 7]** and, more recently, Queen Elinor's dress in the 2012 Pixar film, *Brave* **[FIGURE 8]**.

The 'Beetlewing Dress' is a significant object, which embodies the intersection between art, theatre and fashion in the late nineteenth century: Whether on stage, in a painting, or at the centre of a museum display, this is a costume which continues to captivate audiences across the globe.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth.* 1889. Oil on canvas. © Tate Britain.

Figure 2. Charles Kean as Leontes and Ellen Terry as Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale,* Princess's Theatre, 1856. Museum Number S.133:146-2007. © Victoria & Albert Museum London.

Figure 3. Samuel Alex Walker. Portrait of Ellen Terry, c.1877. Museum Number S.133:322-2007. © Victoria & Albert Museum.

Figure 4. Engraving of four Gothic Sculptures from Nôtre Dame de Paris, attributed to Viollet-le-Duc in Ellen Terry's annotated version of William Shakespeare, *Macbeth, a Tragedy: as Arranged for the Stage by Henry Irving and Presented at the Lyceum Theatre* (London, 1888), at Smallhythe Place, Kent. ©National Trust Images/David Levenson.

Figure 5. Window & Grove. Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, c.1888. Museum Number: S.133:427-2007. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Figure 6. David Brunetti. The surviving costume, which is now part of the Ellen Terry Collection at Smallhythe Place. Museum Number NT 1118839.1 © National Trust.

Figure 7 Angus McBean. Vivien Leigh, Lady Macbeth in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Macbeth,* 1955. © Royal Shakespeare Collection.

Figure 8. Original artwork for Queen Elinor in *Brave.* 2012. © Disney/Pixar

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Brief Biography:

Dr Veronica Isaac is a material culture historian who specialises in the history of nineteenth century dress and theatre costume. She is a curatorial consultant and university lecturer and is currently working at the Victoria & Albert Museum, University of Brighton and New York University London.

Her doctoral research focused on the personal and theatrical dress of the actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928) and was undertaken in partnership with the National Trust and the Victoria & Albert Museum.

She is currently investigating changing attitudes and approaches towards costume design between c.1789-1914 and wants to promote a new appreciation of the 'cultural value' of these garments and establish their status as objects which embody, and document, the distinctive contexts within which they were created.