

"Great minds don't always think alike": Advocating for a Collaborative Approach to Interpreting and Re-constructing Historic Theatre Costume

Dr Veronica Isaac



Details from Terry's theatrical costumes [Ellen Terry Collection, Smallhythe Place]

# This is a presentation on a 'work in progress'

It will briefly outline:

- The background to the project (The Collection and Performer which inspired it, the doctoral research upon which it is founded)
- The team of experts collaborating on the project (the specialisms and input)
- The progress of the project to date (Challenges, Discoveries, Revisions to methodologies)
- The potential outcomes
- Further and future scope for wider applications of this collaborative approach



Photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in Cymbeline, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Victoria & Albert Museum.

# Ellen Terry (1847-1928)

‘Of Ellen Terry, the actress, Our Lady of the Lyceum as Oscar Wilde used to style her, what a series of wonderful pictures live in the memory. Ophelia. A pale shadow with bright hair, the perfect Portia, effulgent, golden, Camma of ‘The Cup’, beautiful exceedingly...a very pageant of fair women shown in the likeness of one fair woman.’ [Robertson, *Time Was*, 1931]



Terry as Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Circa 1878. [V&A Collections]



Terry as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Circa 1879. [V&A Collections]



Terry as Camma in *The Cup*. Circa 1881. [V&A Collections]

# A sophisticated understanding of the communicative power of dress and costume



Charles John Kean and Ellen Terry as Leontes and Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, Princess Theatre, 1856 [Victoria and Albert Museum]

‘There is something, I suppose, in a woman’s nature which always makes her remember how she was dressed at any specially eventful moment of her life, and I can see myself, as though it were yesterday, in the little red-and-silver dress I wore as Mamillius...’

[Terry, *Story of My Life*, 1908]

# An unusual level of control over her costume

‘Neither when I began nor yet later in my career have I ever played under a management where infinite pains were not given to every detail. I think that far from hampering the acting, a beautiful and congruous background and harmonious costumes, representing accurately the spirit of the time in which the play is supposed to move, ought to help and inspire the actor’ – [Terry, *The Story of My Life.*]



Ellen Terry as Viola in *Twelfth Night* at the Lyceum Theatre, 1884  
[Victoria & Albert Museum]



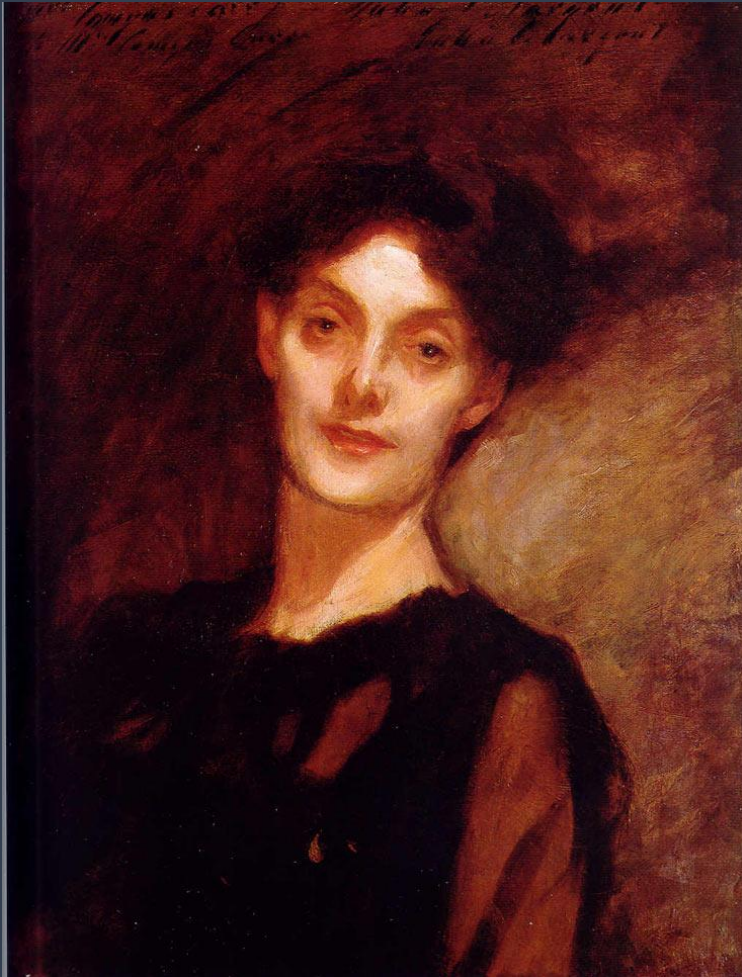
Terry as Marguerite in *Faust*, Lyceum Theatre, 1885 [Victoria & Albert Museum]



Ellen Terry as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Lyceum Theatre 1882  
[Victoria & Albert Museum]

# Alice Comyns-Carr (1850-1927)

‘Patience was always in favour of elaborate and pretentious gowns and had but little use for the simple designs I suggested.’ [Alice Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 1926.]



John Singer Sargent, *Alice Comyns-Carr* (1850-1927), circa 1889 [Speed Art Museum, Kentucky]



Terry as Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*, Lyceum Theatre, 1887 [Victoria & Albert Museum]

# Adeline Cort (Ada) Nettleship (1856-1932)

‘[...] A woman of intelligence, education and thought’ [*The Queenslander*, 1897]

She had a particular specialism in embroidery, both designing her own patterns, and training her staff to carry out such work under her supervision

– *The Queenslander*, 1897

Originally ‘[...] distinguished as an art embroiderer in the style of William Morris’ daughter,’ in response to the pleas of her clients, she expanded into dressmaking and has since established a reputation in publications such as *Harper’s Bazaar* as ‘perhaps the most unique dressmaker in the world.’

– *Boston Evening Transcript*, 1897



Carte de visite photograph of Nettleship, c.1880s.  
[Northampton Records Office]

# Ellen Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, 1896

## 'Radiant' and 'Full of girlish spirits'

“Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema did the designs for the scenery and dresses in *Cymbeline*, and incidentally designed for Imogen one of the loveliest dresses that I ever wore.”

[Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 1908]



Hand-coloured photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in '*Cymbeline*'. First performed at the Lyceum Theater in 1896. This photograph was printed and published by Window & Grove, 1896 and re-issued in 1906 (Terry's jubilee year).  
[Ellen Terry Collection, Smallhythe Place, Kent.]



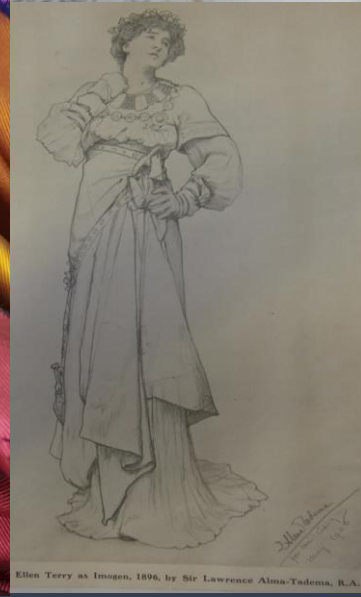
# A 'recontextualization of surviving remains'



I keep this fabric (coloured)  
white to the line the gown  
was made -  
Many soft pieces of silk -  
Brest coral leather Belt  
Sleeve of Amber - with smaller  
knives beads between Slices -  
Wreath of Apple-blossom -  
Snake Bracelets fifty loose  
neck sleeves to arms -  
Bustle Skirt crown with  
all-gold braid + golden



**The colours in the drapery are golden-leaf browns, beginning from the lightest leaf-shade and running to the darkest, then merging into the subtle reds of autumn leaves. Mrs. Nettleship herself made the whole of this drapery, and was three weeks doing nothing else. She says that it was the most difficult piece of work she ever undertook. With this blue dress, parti-coloured drapery, and amber necklace is worn a thick pink wreath of peach blossoms—not the peach blossoms as they first open to the uncertain gaze of May, but after the sun has been kind and touched them into a real rose. The sleeves of this dress are pleated from hem to wrist like the body of the gown, but the lower part fits closely to the arm by reason of thick gold colls, which begin at the wrist and reach to the elbow. Now, as to the trying on. Mrs. Nettleship says that Miss Terry is, of all her customers, the sweetest-tempered, the gayest, and the most easily pleased; in fact, what**



A selection of primary sources (press cuttings, photographs, sketches and original garments) from museum collections including University of Bristol Theatre Collections, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Trust.

# The Collaborating Team

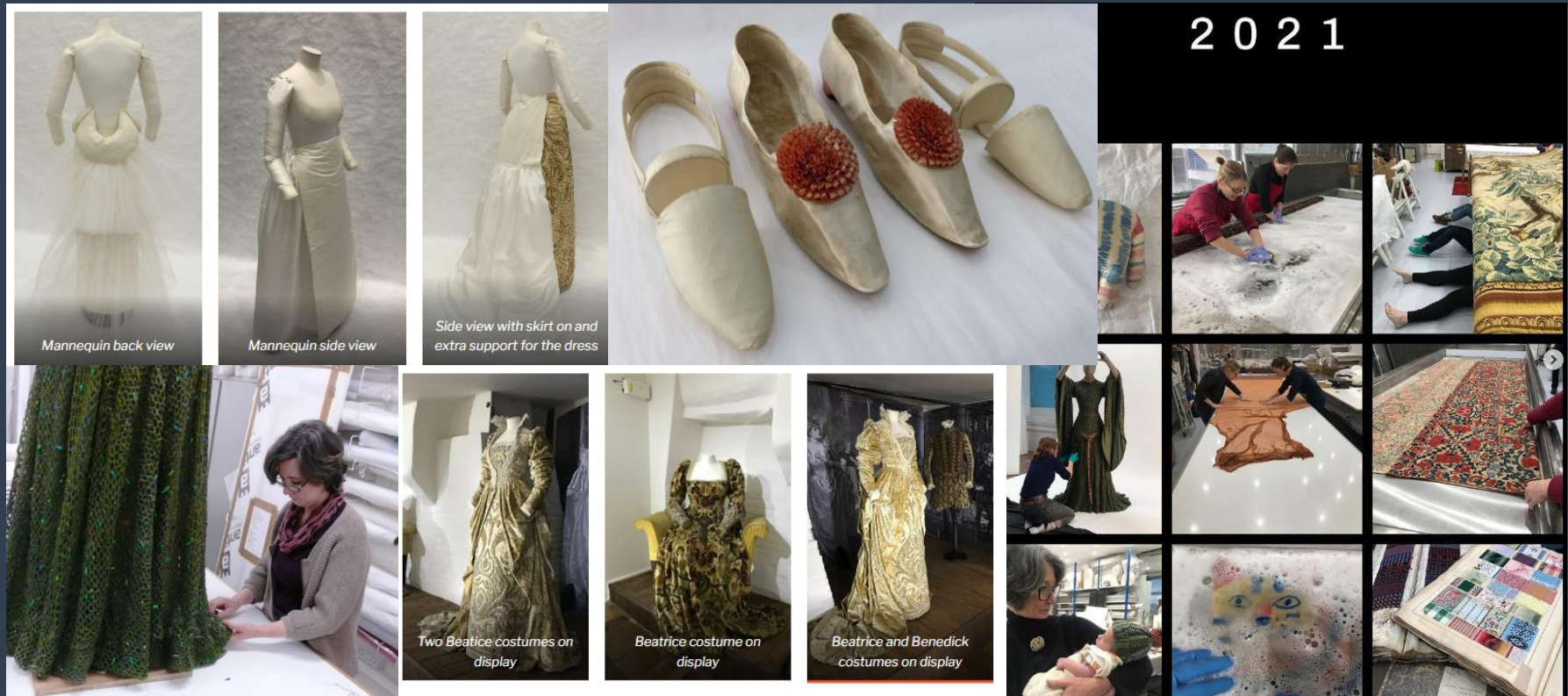
- Experts from the National Trust: including Susannah Mayor (House and Collections Manager at Smallhythe Place), Siobhan Barrett ACR (Textile Conservation Advisor) Eleanor Black (Collections and House Manager, Sissinghurst)
- Specialist Dress and Textile Conservators: Zenzie Tinker ACR and her team at Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd (have been working with the collection for nearly two decades)
- Specialist Dress and Textile Mounter: Janet Wood ACR (Costume Display Consultant)
- Specialist Costume Maker and Researcher: Rebecca Morrison (Former Costumer Maker, now Doctoral Researcher, specialist in recreation)
- Academic Researcher: Veronica Isaac (specialist knowledge of Terry and her evolving costuming practices)



Lawrence Alma Tadema. Preliminary sketch for Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, 1895. Ellen Terry Collection.

# Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd

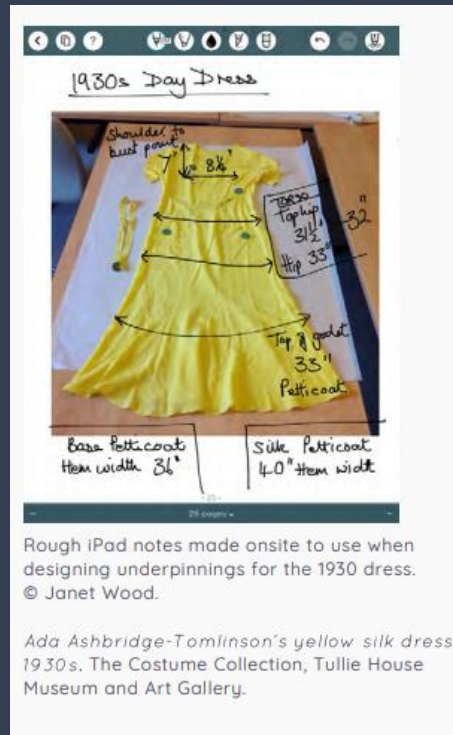
Zenzie and her team have been conserving and mounting Terry's costume for close to two decades. Through this they have gained an intimate knowledge of her changing body and the construction (and re-construction) of her costumes. Their own approaches to conservation and mounting have also evolved in response to the challenges presented by these complex garments.



# Janet Wood

Janet originally worked in fashion. She has translated her knowledge of construction and pattern drafting to her work as a conservator and now specialises in mounting garments for display.

Accustomed to creating toiles of fragile historic garments when commissioning bespoke mounts, she is re-mapping the original construction of Terry's costume to gather evidence for the recreation.



Rough iPad notes made onsite to use when designing underpinnings for the 1930 dress.  
© Janet Wood.

Ada Ashbridge-Tomlinson's yellow silk dress, 1930s. The Costume Collection, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery.



Janet Wood working on various items connected with Ellen Terry and on other mounting projects

# Phase 1: Mapping the Garment

## Key Challenges:

- The fragility of the costume (risk of overhandling)
- Tracing stages in construction and re-construction
- Finding a suitable fabric to trace the shape of the skirt panels
- Documenting the evidence gathered
- Interpreting the evidence uncovered

We are working together to refine a suitable (and repeatable) methodology for gathering and documenting the evidence required to produce a blueprint for this – and future – recreations



Above: Mapping the skirt panels using silk organza.  
Below: Interior of the bodice. Showing construction and staining.

# Next Steps – Creating a Toile

- In order to draft an accurate pattern for the skirt, Janet Wood realised it would be necessary to create a toile of the current costume.
- This toile will serve multiple purposes: Providing a blueprint for further recreations; becoming a ‘copy’ which can be manipulated and handled and preserving a physical record of the original costume and thereby a starting point for future patterns, a tool for display



The cotton voile toile created to map the interior of the bodice. © Janet Wood, 2022.

# Toile to re-creation

- To make the recreation a further collaborator will join the project – a researcher with a background in making stage costume: Rebecca Morrison.
- Rebecca trained and worked as a costume maker and is currently studying for a PhD into the working life of the English mantua-maker during the long eighteenth century at the Queen Mary University London in collaboration with Victoria & Albert Museum.
- Her investigation considers the mantua-maker's business practices, relationships with clients, and other needlework trades. She is also exploring their technical skills, using evidence from extant garments, and seeks to answer further intangible questions through the practice of reconstruction.
- Rebecca will translate her current research and making skills to recreate this stage costume. She will use Janet Wood's patterns, and work in consultation with conservators, curators and researchers



Left: Rebecca Morrison with Janet Wood in Zenzie Tinker's Conservation Studio, Brighton examining the original costume



Above: Searching fabrics which are suitable for the recreation, Goldhawk Lane, London.

# Conservation Treatment forming part of the ‘recreation process’

Using conservation techniques developed when conserving Terry's famous 'Beetlewing dress' – specifically the belt – Jamie Robinson (a member of Zenzie Tinker's team) will be creating accurate moulds of the metal decorations which feature across the bodice of the costume from *Cymbeline*.



Left: Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline* and a detail of the related costume. Right: Details from Terry's costume for *Macbeth* and an overview of the full ensemble (with matching cloak)



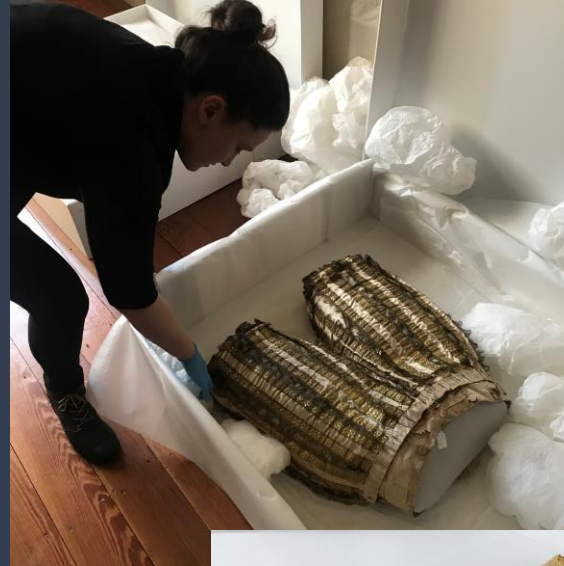


# “The power of the actual object”

[Pearce, *Object as meaning: or narrating the past*, 1994]

## Conserving the costume

- Although the original costume is too fragile to display mounted on a figure, could be stabilised for display and storage on a padded support
- Aim to raise funds to carry out a treatment which makes it safe to display the original costume alongside the recreation
- The mount also aid storage and future examination for research



Left: A padded display and storage solution created by Zenzie Tinker and her team of conservators.

Right: A detail of the surviving costume  
[National Trust Collections]



# Returning the costume to the stage...

- Another aim is to share the recreated costume with a wider audience by casting a 'performer' to wear the costume on the stage, under lighting which evoked the gaslight originally used at the Lyceum.
- This would allow us to see how the costume interacted with the body, to observe how the fabric and construction appeared under lighting and from a distance, and to recapture and share an evocation of the original performance.

Clare Atwood. Painting of the exterior of the Lyceum Theatre. c.1900.  
[National Trust Collections]

Photograph showing the interior of the Lyceum Theatre as it was under Irving's Management ca.1878-1902.  
[National Trust Images]



# Key benefits of cross-disciplinary collaboration

- Vast potential for future projects centred on collaboration and recreation
- Uniting otherwise disparate pools of specialist knowledge offers new perspectives on objects and facilitates innovative approaches, interpretations and solutions
- Collaborating with makers and conservators makes it possible to apply re-making methodologies otherwise outside researcher's skill sets
- Employing this methodology (and drawing on ideas advanced in Hilary Davidson's 2019 article, *The Embodied Turn*) is providing unanticipated insights into the way this garment may originally have been constructed. Also learning about its interaction with the bodies of the individuals who created and wore it
- New ways to document and share evidence preserved in a costume which is actively breaking down and is otherwise very unlikely to be on public display – certainly not mounted on a figure



An overhead view of the costume before conservation. Both the sleeves and skirt are shattering and incredibly fragile. © Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd.

# THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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Constructing Costume Histories - <https://www.constructingcostumehistories.co.uk/>



Photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in Cymbeline, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Victoria & Albert Museum.