

## Costume Re-Considered

From the scenographic model box, to the scenographic body, devising a practice based design methodology that re-focuses performance onto costume

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In this paper I articulate approaches and creative methodologies for the development of performance through the use of dress, whilst also considering ways to evolve dress through performance practice. I have developed and applied these methodologies to academic work. Specifically I will refer to work that has emerged through my teaching practice and in particular to the work of three of the students from the MA Costume Design for Performance, at London College of Fashion, which I wrote and established six years ago.

In the first instance, however, it is necessary to articulate the shift in approach and philosophical perspective that drove my creative development and my starting point as a practitioner and as an academic, and led me to set up the MA in costume design at LCF.

Since my training in the mid-80s and in the first ten years of my practice as a designer, the initial impetus at the centre of creative interaction with performance had been the design of the space as explored in scale theatre model. My degree in Theatre Design, gained at Central School of Art and Design in London (now Central Saint Martins), my practice in collaboration with theatre directors and opera producers and my teaching practice as a theatre design lecturer at Rose Bruford College in London had all reinforced the sense of the scale model of the theatre as the object around which initial creative dialogue in collaborative practice takes place. This is a specific imperative, as the model box and the set of costume drawings are the "contractual" requirements, to be delivered by a specified deadline, that theatre companies expect when they commission theatre designers. I have now come to realise that the compelling nature of the scale model, as an effective embodiment of the world of the performance, a miniaturised and controllable "play" world, can displace design processes specific to body and dress in performance. In traditional theatre design practice, the visibility of the body is hardly therefore

ever the starting point for the creation of the visual world of performance.

As I began to teach design for performance at London College of Fashion to costume, make-up and puppetry specialists, the traditional theatre design approach carried little currency with students whose creative focus was on the body. As a result, and in order to address the lack of debate around dress and performance, I instigated a research project titled "Designs for the Performer"<sup>1</sup>, which ran from 2001 to 2004, in which I exposed the creative process of selected cutting edge designers through interviews, exhibitions and master classes. The intention was to divulge and celebrate the voice of the designer of costume, alongside the rarely grasped extensive amount of thought, research and exploration that takes place, on several different levels, when constructing the performance universe through the lens of costume. Amongst those involved in this research were international visual artist Lucy Orta (working with Blanca Li on *Borderline*) and designer Elizabeth Jenyons (working with The Wooster group), both fashion-trained and whose work with pre-existing prototypes in rehearsal with performers was an essential part of the development of the performance. Lucy Orta extended this process by hiring choreographers and dancers to work with the objects she collected and created, to articulate their meaning through performance. Textile-trained Nicky Gillibrand articulated the metaphoric power of costume when she described how, in her *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a fairy carried her wings in a handbag, or Titania's dress being like a piece of night sky, or when she spoke about the inspiration she drew from looking inside old costumes.

A very clear sense of dress as being pre-existent to, and as an initiator of performance creation, as well as of the metaphoric, emerged from the dialogue with these three practitioners. All three had not been trained as theatre designers, but approached dress from a fashion or textile perspective.

Lucy Orta went further and transformed dress into contemporary art. The embedded meaningfulness of dress is a valid and valuable material to visual artists, who make use of re-contextualised dress as a complete work of contemporary art. With its symbiotic association with the human body, it becomes emblematic of the human condition. This is recognisable in the work of contemporary visual artists such as Rebecca Horn, Ann Hamilton, Helen Storey, Susie MacMurray, Beverly Semmes, Mimi Smith, Lucy Brown and Yinka Shonibare, to name but a few. The use of dress and the present / absent body as explored in the work of these artists becomes textual. It translates, visually and physically, ideas that can be read by the audience. The audience's own body is reflected in the work presented through identification in a shared humanity. Through dress or costume the body on stage reveals itself both as new and as personal, even intimate.

The visual power of dress is exploited in fashion, particularly as presented on the catwalk, as a site onto which to project dreams and aspirations, and even express anxieties and project nightmares. In everyday life, dress is the interface between the individual and the world. To the mnemonic, embodied device that is dress, one transfers emotions, values and a history. The tactile nature of dress engages the senses, enabling an instantaneous, felt understanding of its narrative.

Dress in fashion discourse has been considered as a costume for a role, in the "dramatisation of identity" (Entwistle & Wilson, 1998, p. 108), played in the performance of the everyday. In theatre performance, however, the written text, the director, the performer and the space are often the principal starting point in the creative dialogue, with the costume designer often waiting to view the scale model before committing to ideas. The role of the costume designer, unlike that of the visual artist or the fashion designer, can be relatively de-centralised from the initial creative impetus. However, costume design practice exists in the creative negotiation with the writing, the director, the performer, the space and the audience's imagination. Costume realisation requires the designer to bridge between the conceptual and the practical, the physical and the metaphoric, involving other specialist creative collaborators, such as pattern cutters, tailors and print and dye specialists. In this collaborative mix, decisions about dress by the designer, made as part of the design process, determine how the performance will be perceived by the audience. However, the costume itself, the image created, is primarily identified with the actor, rather than its designers, by reviewers and theorists alike (Monks, A., 2009), unlike fashion and fine art practice.

This identification of dress and the body of the performer can be problematic. Yet it can also offer creative



1,2,3. Clio Alphas's costume made use of latex as a metaphor for skin. The only sound in her performance was the latex, creaking, stretching, swaying and crumbling onto the floor, amplified by microphones placed on the stage and reminiscent of an interior voice of protest. Photo: Alex Traylen.

opportunities when performance is reframed within the perspectives delineated by post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann, H. 2006), which articulates performance in a way that does not prioritise text, performer or space, making space for new ways to engage with dress and performance, allowing new methodologies to be established.

In the desire to create costume work that embodies the text and becomes itself the text, I have looked closely at the body-centred acting training ideas of Jacques Lecoq (Murrey, S. 2003) and Eugenio Barba (Barba, E. & Savarese, N., 1991) which are drawn from a range of theatre practices from Commedia dell'Arte to traditional Asian theatre, and that has led me to explore a movement-based approach to the development of costume. An intimate and very specific relationship exists between costume and the performer in the traditional Asian theatre practises. Here costume can be perceived as a symbiotic performing partner or even a prosthesis for the actor. (Barba, E., 1991, pp. 218-226)

The search for methods of design that visually and spatially make use of the body as the primary object of performance found corresponding application in the methodologies of Jacques Lecoq's Laboratoire d' Etude du Mouvement (LEM), a laboratory for the study of movement. In LEM the creative work takes place between the rehearsal room and the workshop, in a continued dialogue between space and the plasticity of the participant's own creatively engaged body, extended and fragmented through the interaction with elements of design, which are created in response and in anticipation of movement. Participation in a LEM workshop in 2005<sup>2</sup> spoke volumes to me about the role of embodiment in creative costume practice, whether implicit or explicit.

If a crucial element in my research is the creation of methods that prioritise the visually engaging and expressive body of the performer through costume, then the designer needs to enter the rehearsal room as a participant and a creative agent from the very beginning of the process. The rehearsal space has replaced the model box as the initial space for the imagination in the experimentation while devising around dress and movement with the students on the MA Costume Design for performance. The result of this engagement with movement that originates in dress is evident in images 1, 2 and 3 which show Clio Alphas's costume, developed between the rehearsal room and the studio, in a creative exchange of ideas, propositions, transformation, experiments and rejections.

"This is not what I asked for", the title of the performance piece she initiated, was based on the character of the mother in *Slapstick*, in the novel by Kurt Vonnegut. The costume entirely made out of latex, reminiscent of

skin, represented, through gesture and movement, the rejection and, ultimately, acceptance of motherhood.

As well as prototypes, Clio Alphas brought with her into the rehearsal room drawings, storyboards, research and visual responses to the script which defined, collectively, the world of the performance as seen through her eyes. By the time she entered the rehearsal room, she would have done weeks of research work on the material available to her, from the script to the prototype, having considered other characters and having reframed them within the unique body centred perspective embedded in the MA course philosophy.

A key part of this engagement with the text is its deconstruction into often metaphoric "essences", "nutshells" and "themes", key communicators in the construction of the narrative experience, which are then explored and experienced through movement and through sensory, practical, studio-based, prototype-based and contextual research processes. The resulting intimate relationship with the text through this multifaceted approach means that the work is "fashioned" by the experience, the text is "worn", "experienced", "seen" and "felt" on the body, as is the movement that emerges from it.

For example, the character in "This is not what I asked for" reflects the essential rejection of her human condition, both through movement, her gestures of pulling away at her skin / dress as well as through her costume, which she experiences simultaneously as hers and as "other".

In this way, the designer of the performance (as opposite to the designer for the performance) creates a three-dimensional world for the body in movement that tells a story – either inherent to the script or emerging out of the script – in space and through time. The process necessary to this exploration is navigated through extensive research, and visual responses that are personal, explored through drawings, as well as samples and prototypes. These are developed through the use of the designer's own body as well as on the stand.

As the audience perceives the story visually, the physical and visual experimentation inherent to the rehearsal process assumes an even greater importance. In the rehearsal space and in the studio, in the collaborative work with the performer, the designer should see the work as through an audience's eyes and should be able to experience objectively the textual exploration through costume as if they see their own work for the first time.

In the rehearsal interaction experienced by Panagiotis Lampranidis in his piece, devised around Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (figures 4 and 5), Miss Havisham's physicality and age are put into relief by the skeleton representing her past, grabbing her around her



4, 5. In Panagiotis Lamprianidis's performance, the skeleton of her past stalks and imprisons the main character. Accurate and in-depth historical research, as evidenced in the pattern of the sleeve and in the original lace on the costume, met with the perceptively imagined visualization of her psychological state as represented in her costume and the gestures that are invited by it. Photo: Alex Traylen.

chest like a corset of ribs, with the spine and pelvis dragging behind her. This was emblematic of promised and unfulfilled love, frozen in time.

From rehearsals with the prototype emerged the desire to extend the costume metaphor through gesture and to include a moment of literal heart-break when Miss Havisham pulls out her heart, now turned into stone, from the bodice of her tattered wedding dress, and shatters it in on the stage floor. Here, the secondary body of the emblematic skeleton layers onto the real body of the performer clad in an old wedding dress and makes it credible for her stone heart to shatter on the stage floor. Like Clio Alpha's latex skin costume, the metaphoric values of dress and materiality enabled the communication of ideas that would have otherwise been described through reams of text. Here they are expressed visually and physically instantaneously through dress and gesture.

The development of a design methodology that privileges the visibility of body and embodiment finds parallel expression in philosophical readings around the body and movement. My shift of perspective was clear in reading sociologists Helen Thomas's *Body, Dance and Cultural Theory* (2003) and Joanne Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (1999).

I came to recognise how the design-studio-based methodology of the "contractual" scale model box and set of costume drawings enabled me to both control and express the relationships and narratives that made up the world I was creating, acknowledging historical philosopher Foucault's "power / knowledge relationships" (see

Thomas, H. 2003, pp. 44-51 and Entwistle, J., 2000, pp. 16-26). These relationships explained to me the body as discursive and, constructed by social forces and controls, that, when visualised in performance, are of great importance in the representation of narrative structures. For example, age, class, gender, profession and hierarchies of individuals and groups are clearly pinned down through a final set of costume drawings. In the predetermined scheme set out by the designer to construct and communicate relationships and characters, these notions ultimately transfer to the costumed actors on stage. The tools of the theatre designer – the storyboard, the set of costume drawings – are about exploring those power relationships between the elements, making use of ideas that visualise resistance and opposition, in order to communicate dramatic tensions within a world in which the play can unfold.

The distance fundamental for the designer and the creative team to gain an overview of the whole world of the play, reflected in a set of costume drawings and a model box, offers the designer a useful way to exert their power over the visual elements of performance, in terms of composition and planning. Equally, it enables the designer to manage the complex systems that are inherent to creative processes within collaborative structures.

Whilst focusing on perceiving the body within technologies of domination and within structures, the sentient / sensory individual can be neglected. A methodology of performance creation based on dress and embodiment cannot ignore the individual, the intimate and the person-

6. Vasiliki Giannoula's rhinoceros is evoked through the movement it inspires, hunched over and distorted by its enormous back, created by the enlarged cloning of the suit image and through the neck-less head, buried in the extended shoulders. The make-up emphasizes the de-humanization created by the costume and movement. Photo: Alex Traylen.



al. Constructing the visual world of performance from a distance, in miniature, fixed through the model and costume drawings, as part of a design studio-based process, ought to be balanced, if not preceded, by an awareness of the importance of an interior sense of embodiment and a physical presence of the sentient designer.

In seeking a more empowered and open-ended creative approach to what the costumed body can do, the spatial corporeal quality expressed in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, M. 2002) engenders in me a sense of my body as my key design tool. In particular, by considering the effect of physical workshops together with reading Merleau-Ponty's influential theories, I have become more aware of how perception operates in the here and now, through our own living, experiencing, and spatial bodies. The designer is the first audience to the inspirational material with which she interacts, and it is by harnessing the experience of these perceptive moments of interaction that imaginative responses make themselves available to her.

In the development process for *Rhinoceros* (figure 6), based on Ionesco's play, the suited office clerk became very quickly the symbol of conformism, a theme central to Ionesco's absurdist social critique of acquiescence to Nazism. However, during extensive playful interaction with oversized men's suits, which dwarfed designer Vasiliki Giannoula's small frame, the idea of the multiplication and enlargement of the bodies / suits became meaningful, and spoke about bureaucracy and the autocratic hierarchical structures that hold workers down, dwarfing them.

The physical movement that emerged in the rehearsal space was about executing meaningless and repetitive tasks within a projected grid-like lighting pattern. What the costume succeeded in doing was to capture visual, spatial, physical and movement qualities of the character, being weighed down by a restrictive social system, in which the image created by the performer and his costume was rendered animal-like by its de-humanisation. Equally the animal form is evoked through the resulting costume and the movement it inspires, hunched over and distorted by its enormous back constructed by its enlarged cloned suits, through the neck-less head, buried in the extended shoulders, embodying a myopic, small brained rhinoceros, hoofed by its own shirt sleeves.

In the relationship between narrative, movement and dress, the meaning of the male suit is given new potential interpretations in Vasiliki Giannoula's piece, where elements of male dress acquire animal characteristics through their re-reading in the context of this piece of absurd theatre, whilst building on readily understood notions of dress and social conformity.

These three examples of costume-based theatre were developed as part of a performance which was staged at the Lilian Baylis Theatre, in London, in December 2009, over two nights. The performance title was "Revolutions in Costume" and its aim was to put across the revolutionary concept of embedded narrative into costume and the construction for performance working outwards from it.

By looking closely at these three costumes, I have attempted to explore how the creative potential of an embodied perspective in a rehearsal-room based design process gives access to the language of the body through dress as embodied metaphor. As such, costume and body become a continuum. Through the costume, the body is extended and multiplied; it can build on its anatomical qualities as skin and bones. Simultaneously and symbiotically costume becomes secondary body, a prosthesis, an agent and a performer.

1. 2002, *Designs for the Performer* was a series of exhibitions which toured nationally and internationally, as part of 2D>3D Theatre Design Exhibition, Millenium Gallery, Sheffield and Prague Quadrennial, June 2003 then in Fashion Space Gallery, LCF, London. The exhibition of Nicky Gillibrand's work won the Gold Medal for Costume Design at the Prague Quadrennial 2003.

2. Complicite has been responsible for bringing Pascale Lecoq and Krikor Belekien from Ecole Jacques Lecoq from Paris to run a two weeks LEM workshop in London. I have published a paper titled *The Application of LEM to the Teaching and Practice of Costume Design for Performance* in 2007 and co-curated an exhibition of the work resulting from the 2005 workshop in which I participated.

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## Περίληψη

### ΑΝΑΠΤΥΞΗ ΤΗΣ ΘΕΑΤΡΙΚΗΣ ΠΑΡΑΣΤΑΣΗΣ ΜΕΣΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΕΝΔΥΜΑ: ΜΙΑ ΝΕΑ ΣΧΕΔΙΑΣΤΙΚΗ ΜΕΘΟΔΟΛΟΓΙΑ

Στην ανακοίνωση αυτή διατυπώνω ορισμένες δημιουργικές μεθοδολογικές προτάσεις για την ανάπτυξη της παράστασης μέσα από το ένδυμα. Αναφέρομαι στη δουλειά τριών φοιτητών μου στο MA Costume Design for Performance στο London College of Fashion. Εκθέτω επίσης συνοπτικά μέρος της έρευνας που οδήγησε στη δημιουργία του μεταπτυχιακού προγράμματος και τις μεθοδολογίες που εφαρμόζονται σ' αυτό, συμπεριλαμβανομένου και του ερευνητικού προγράμματος «Σχέδια για τον ερμηνευτή», στο οποίο εξέθεσα τη δημιουργική διαδικασία για την επιλογή πρωτοποριακών σχεδιαστών μέσα από συνεντεύξεις, εκθέσεις και master classes. Από τη δουλειά των τριών εκ των δέκα σχεδιαστών, που όλοι προέρχονταν από το χώρο της μόδας ή του υφάσματος, έγινε σαφές ότι το ένδυμα προϋπάρχει της παράστασης και λειτουργεί τόσο ως εμπνευστής όσο και ως μεταφορά. Η αίσθηση αυτή με έκανε να αναζητήσω αντιστοιχίες στη δουλειά σύγχρονων καλλιτεχνών από το χώρο των εικαστικών τεχνών, όπως η Rebecca Horn, η Susie MacMurray, η Beverly Semmes, η Mimi Smith, η Lucy Brown και ο Yinka Shonibare, οι οποίοι βλέπουν το ένδυμα ως πρώτη ύλη για τη δουλειά τους και έδωσαν μια ευκαιρία για έναν τύπο παράστασης επικεντρωμένης στο ένδυμα, μέσα στο πλαίσιο του μεταδραματικού θεάτρου, όπως διατυπώνεται από τον Hans-Thies Lehmann.

Θέλοντας να δημιουργήσω κοστούμια που «ενσωματώνουν» το κείμενο, μελέτησα πολύ τις ιδέες των Jacques Lecoq και Eugenio Barba για την εκπαίδευση των ηθοποιών με βάση το σώμα, και τις προσαρμοσα έτσι ώστε να δημιουργήσω μια μεθοδολογία βασισμένη στην πρόβα και επικεντρωμένη στο ένδυμα. Άντλησα ιδέες από τη συμμετοχή μου, το 2005, σ' ένα εργαστήριο του LEM (Laboratoire d' Etude du Mouvement - Εργαστήριο Μελέτης της Κίνησης), το οποίο έδινε μεγάλη

- ENTWISTLE, Joanne (2000), *The Fashioned Body: Fashion Dress and Modern Social Theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
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βαρύτητα στο ρόλο της συμμετοχής του σώματος στη δημιουργική ενδυματολογική πρακτική. Διαβάζοντας τις φιλοσοφικές και κοινωνιολογικές προσεγγίσεις του ενδύματος – από τη Joanne Entwistle – και της κίνησης – από την Helen Thomas – με ιδιαίτερη αναφορά στους Michel Foucault και Maurice Merleau-Ponty, βρήκα ένα θεωρητικό πλαίσιο εργασίας που συνδυάζεται με την πρακτική.

Η πρακτική δουλειά που προέκυψε από αυτή την έρευνα είναι εμφανής στο έργο της Κλειώς Άλφα, με τίτλο «Δεν είναι αυτό που ζήτησα», που βασίζεται στο χαρακτήρα της μητέρας από το μυθιστόρημα του Kurt Vonnegut *Slapstick (Φαρσοκωμωδία)*. Το κοστούμι, φτιαγμένο εξολοκλήρου από λάτεξ, αναπαριστούσε με τις χειρονομίες και τις κινήσεις την απόρριψη και, τελικά, την αποδοχή της μητρότητας.

Στη διαδραστική πρόβα που παρουσίασε ο Παναγιώτης Λαμπριανίδης δουλεύοντας πάνω στις *Μεγάλες προσδοκίες* του Τσαρλς Ντίκενς, η σωματικότητα της Μις Χάβισαμ αναδεικνύεται μέσα από το σκελετό που αντιπροσωπεύει το παρελθόν της και που σφίγγει το στήθος της σαν κορσές από πλευρά, ενώ η σπονδυλική στήλη και η λεκάνη σέρνονται πίσω της.

Στην παράσταση για τον *Ρινόκερο*, βασισμένη στο θεατρικό έργο του Ιονέσκο, ο κοστούμαρισμένος κλητήρας γραφείου έγινε το σύμβολο του κονφορμισμού, κεντρικό θέμα στην κοινωνική κριτική του παραλόγου που ασκεί ο Ιονέσκο για την αποδοχή του ναζισμού. Κατά τη διάδραση με τα υπερμεγέθη ανδρικά κοστούμια, τα οποία έκαναν να φαίνεται ακόμα μικρότερο το ήδη μικρό πλαίσιο της σχεδιάστριας Βασιλικής Γιαννούλα, η ιδέα του πολλαπλασιασμού και της μεγέθυνσης των κοστούμιών υπαινισσόταν τη γραφειοκρατία και τις αυταρχικές ιεραρχικές δομές.

Και στις τρεις περιπτώσεις, έγινε δυνατή η μετάδοση ιδεών στους θεατές μέσα από το ένδυμα, ιδέες που διαφορετικά θα χρειάζονταν εκτενή κείμενα για να περιγραφούν και να διατυπωθούν.

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