

Origins and significance



Among the elements of theatre, the costume is perhaps the actor's most intimate physical tool during his performance. It completes the actor's character, depicting his age, gender role, profession, social class, personality, from which he could draw more depth into his performance. And without the actor or narrator verbalizing it, the costume gives information as to the period/era, geographic location, season or weather, and time of day of the performance, thus making the costume an integral part of an entire production.

In addition, the costume helps establish relationships between characters (mother and daughter, or servant and master, for example) and illustrate a character's emotional state, as in Chekov's *The Seagull* where Masha wears black to reflect her melancholy (Baranger, 2006). Sceno: graphy, a theatre design website, expounds on costumes in theatre as "the final jigsaw in a complex character," further detailing that it "is the personal expression of a character and within the world of a story it can also be used to create the collage that becomes theatrical design.

The role of costume takes on greater meanings depending on the performance... but also becomes part of the theatrical 'picture.'" The idea of using costumes in theatre can be traced from the ancient Greek times, with only the actor, manager, director, or wardrobe person was responsible for clothing worn on stage giving little attention to the unity of visual elements (Baranger, 2006). The use of costumes did not originate in just one place, however. In the different parts of the world where theatre is a significant part of the culture, costumes were used to identify the good from the evil, the human from the spirit or animal.

Often, masks completed the costumes. In Ancient Greek drama, the actors wore large masks with exaggerated expressions. These masks fell into two general categories: tragic and comic. In Rome, masks were used in comedy and pantomime. During Renaissance, the *commedia dell'arte* made extravagant use of half masks covering the eyes and nose were used (Encarta, 2006). In old Asia, where the traditional pageants employed shiny and colorful costumes to portray the royalty, masks were required to represent the kings, princesses and grotesque characters.

Japan has various and unique types of costumes, sometimes depending on the kind of theatre. In the No theatre, the costumes were intricate, formal and imaginative, usually bold in color and design, and made for a certain actor, and each had specific rules to follow. Kabuki costumes, on the other hand used big wigs and many different types of mask styles to match the character (Thinkquest, 2006). In Japanese theatre, color was used a lot to depict the emotions of a character: red for passion and super human power, blue for jealousy and fearfulness (Thinkquest, 2006), and so on.

In Peking Opera, the actors wear long cuffs called water sleeves which they flick about to express emotions; warriors are identified by their heavily embroidered satin coats (Fisher, 2007). In India, several types of dance-dramas exist, the most popular of which is the *kathakali*, of which plots come from the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The performers wear brightly colored makeup in symbolic patterns and beards made of paper, and costumes comprised of layered wide skirts and disk-shaped headdresses (Fisher, 2007).

Ancient Roman actors, on the other hand, developed a kind of code that would tell the audience about the character just by looking at them: a black wig meant the character was a young man, gray meant he was an old man, red wig meant the character was slave; a white robe meant the character was an old man, a purple robe meant he was a young man. Color, in the modern theatre, is also used to illustrate moods: black means depressing or evil' white is purity, red is passion or anger, blue is cool and tranquil, magenta means royalty, green is peace and hope (Richardson, 1996).

The role of costume in the modern theatre has not changed so much in the overall impact of a production. References Barranger, M. S. (2006). Theater. Microsoft® Encarta® 2007 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation. Mask. (2006). Microsoft® Encarta® 2007 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation. Richardson, S. (1996). WPI Technical Theatre Handbook. Retrieved November 9, 2008, from http://www.gweep.net/~prefect/pubs/iqp/technical_theatre_handbook.pdf. Scenography. Costume Design. Retrieved November 9, 2008, from <http://www.sceno.org/articles/costume-design/> Sorgenfrei, C. F. (2006). Asian Theater.

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