Costume on Contemporary Stage

The stage costume has always been an important element of the performance throughout the entire history of the theater. Its role changed in accordance with changes that took place in the theater as a whole.

The theater costume as such that combines closeness to its historic forms and, at the same time, expresses the essence of the character appeared at the borderline between the age of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Beginning with the epoch of Romanticism, the costume becomes the means of telling the spectator about the character, about his or her social status, age, and temperament. Such approach to the costume existed almost up to the end of the 20th century, and it has begun to undergo changes only in the course of the latest decades.

However, although in the early 1900s these were separate attempts to create a new theater costume, the tendency became general by the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Its principal features were the desire to create a visual image in addition to the text and to use the quality and color of the cloth as an element of expression and not simply as an element of representation and to relieve the costume from its informative function as well as to enhance its emotional-expressive function.
As a matter of fact, this was a search for the image that was part of the theater that had entered a new stage of its own existence when the theater was forced to defend its special role in the system of contemporary artistic culture.

Although in the 19th and early 20th centuries the theater was practically the only kind of spectacle, this role was seriously contested first by the cinema and later by television, and at present by the rapidly developing electronic mass-media.

French director Louis Jouvet said in the middle of the 1930s:

… the greater importance attached to the plastic stage introduced a need for a more specialized approaching to staging… The problem arises because the public – which, we have to admit, is a cinema-going public – is used to seeing things much more than hearing them…¹

The stage and costume designers now turn to associations that are often far removed from a concrete plot, they search for the universal idea of the play in color and texture, in the flexibility or toughness of the cloth. Historic details serve as a hint at the character's qualities rather than at his belonging to a certain epoch. This tendency is characteristic not only of the creative activities of individual costume designers. It characterizes the process as a whole.
To illustrate processes taking place in the art of contemporary costume design, I would suggest paying attention to several plays staged by Israeli theaters for which the costumes were created by Anna Khruscheva, a graduate from the Institute of Theater, Music, and Cinematography in Leningrad (LGITMIC) (since 1993, Theater Arts Academy of St. Petersburg). She has been active in the Israeli theaters since the mid-1990s.

Her costumes combine the qualities of painting and sculpture and they form not only the character's image, but also the space around him. Nonetheless, in all her productions, the costume is not only the character's clothes, but also a plastic image, a spot of color in the general visual composition of the stage.

Theater Gesher's production "City-Odessa Stories" (1996) is the author's own adaptation for the staging of "Odessa Stories" by Isaac Babel (1894 - 1940) and it consists of a number of episodes united both by the place of action and by the character of the story-teller. According to the author's concept, this picture should resemble black-and-white photos that were brought back to life and had been made by a nameless photographer on the embankment of Odessa. This is why all costumes remain in a gray-and-white gamma, although each has its own bright color detail. It may be the tie of a dandy or the jacket lapels, or the vest of a young man, the sleeve-protectors of an accountant, the fur boa, and the rubber tubes of medical instruments that can be seen as a bright spot on the white gown of a medical nurse, or the snow-white blouse on the suntanned body of an actress, or the brightly red beard and hairdo against the dark background of the clothes of an Odessa stevedore. As the
The same principle acquires a different meaning in costumes created for staging the plays that belong to the world's classics. The costume designer sort of constructs a visual symphony with its main theme and its secondary themes; she produces a growth of emotional tension that leads up to a culmination expressed by means of space and color.

The staging of "Myth" (2002) by director Rina Yerushalmi in the ensemble "Itim" she had organized herself is based on texts by the playwrights of Ancient Greece who wrote them prompted by the myth about Atreus. The innumerous row of revenges in which the avenger feels he is not only right, but it is his duty to avenge turns into a chain of murders. The price of the revenge is the main motif of the performance. The director is not interested in where and when the action takes place. It takes place always and everywhere as soon as a person believes he has the right to kill another person.

The costumes made for the production of "Myth" are not tied to a concrete epoch. They have multifunction and multicolor qualities. The texture and color of the cloth play an important role. The cloths wave and fall down from bodies. The designer compares light and heavy cloths, soft and hard textures, covers the actor's body with the cloths that stress his movement or static. The costume details are connected by ropes, braids and buckles. The inner state of the character's soul receives material expression in the movement of cloth around the body. These costumes resemble a
snail's shell, and when a character is relieved from it he acquires new life and his actions and words acquire a new meaning.

Anna Khrushcheva works in various genres, from tragedy to musical, but she is especially interested in productions for which the costume is changed depending on the psychological state of the character.

"Medea" by Euripides in the Habima theater (director Robert Woodruff, stage designer Miriam Guretzki, 1998) became precisely such a production. The conflict between Medea and Jason found its expression in the symbolism of the color and texture of the costumes. Medea's black dress of an indefinite form and the yellow-gold dresses of women in the choir are the contrast between worry and quiet, between poverty and wealth, between the spiritual and the material. The contrast between black and golden already carries in it the idea of the conflict and of the forthcoming tragic end. Medea cannot be like the rest. All the rest of the characters are provided with historical details of various epochs, and only Medea remains in her out-of-time black clothes.

Creon, the king of Corinth wears something that resembles a military coat with epaulets and details of military uniforms of various epochs. He is the embodiment of the state machinery that confronts a non-ordinary personality at any place and at all times. Euges, the king of Athena is dressed in black leather and wears dark glasses. He resembles either a contemporary bodyguard or a provincial mafiosi, and only Jason who tries to enter the world of the establishment appears in an elegant tail coat and wears a tie.
The murder of the children takes place outside the stage. The spectator learns about it through the reaction of the choir, and then elements of military uniforms can be seen under the yellow-golden dresses of the female participants of the choir. Trying to enlarge the frameworks of the play, and give it a general nature, Anna turns to a method that can be fairly often found in the art of postmodernism, she does not simply quote what is already known. She quotes what has become a sign of the work of art by placing it into an unusual context and thereby changing the idea of both the text and the context. She dresses the Messenger who brings in the news about the death of the princess, Jason's fiancee, at Medea's hands, in the costume of Primavera from the famous picture by Boticelli. But this is not just a quotation. The Messenger wears a costume with one side burned. This is the Spring burned up, a symbol of humiliated humanity and Divine Providence that has punished both those who had committed the injustice and those who had tried to avenge the injustice.

A tendency can be seen in this production that can be also noticed in the works of numerous costume designers. The color acquires a function close to those used in the medieval mysteries.

But the system of medieval symbols is unknown to the contemporary spectator and the costume designer uses the color capable of creating associations at the emotional, subconscious level. We can say that contemporary theater creates its own system of symbols based on contemporary realities. Thus, in the contemporary productions of classic plays, all tyrants from Creon in "Antigone" by Sophocles and up to Macbeth and Richard III by Shakespeare look very similar. They all wear costumes that resemble military coats.
Even in "Ulisses from Itachia" by Ludvig Holberg (Aarhus Theater Company, Aarhus, Denmark director Sger Bonflis, 1999) costume designer Anett Hansen dressed the characters in uniform dress coats resembling the contemporary ones at the time of World War I and World War II.

The ballet theater has not escaped this influence. In the production of "Edward the Second" by Marc von Henning after Christopher Marlow (Choreographer David Bintley) by the Stuttgart Ballet, costume designer Jasper Conran, known as the designer of contemporary clothes, dressed knights in black leather sticking to the actor's body that made them look like modern bikers or rockers rather than medieval knights. The desire to make historic characters closer to the contemporary spectator and to divide them from the material environment to which they belong in order to move the events of the play to a different, universal level have both positive and negative features. The positive side is the creative freedom of the costume designer, the possibility to use elements of different epochs and to make the characters better understandable. The negative side: the costume deprives the spectator of the possibility to construct his own associations. Everything has been said and explained in the production. Who is kind and who is evil, who is positive and who is negative, who will betray and who will remain faithful etc. is known beforehand. Another difficulty concerns the relationship with the director who does not always see things in the same way as the costume designer and who may construct his or her own associations.

The role of the costume designer in a production can frequently be defined as of necessity unnoticeable. The costume designer dresses the character in accordance with
the requirements of the playwright and the director by trying to adapt to the actor's individuality. Anna Khrushcheva’s costumes change the actor's body, define his plastic.

This is precisely what happened in the production of "King Lear" by William Shakespeare in the Camery Theater of Tel Aviv, 2007 (director Robert Sturua, stage designer Meyron Shvelidze). In all sketches the characters are depicted in movement, and the movement is directed toward the spectator, they are sort of moving toward us. The characters run, jump, get down to the stage on a thick rope, climb up on a high construction erected on the stage, and appear from an opening in the stage floor or fall down on the floor. The characters' plastic arts are stressed by the color and mass of their costumes and assume the quality of a painter's strokes with his brush on the picture's canvas. The color of the costumes changes from the blue-gray of long-worn clothes at the beginning of the performance to copper-golden at the end. There are only two white spots on the stage: Cordelia's and Edgar's costumes. Their difference from the rest of the characters is stressed simply and expressively. Cordelia wears a short white dress and her plastic are stressed as childish. She is barefoot, while her sisters near her are literally chained in their gray-blue costumes resembling contemporary ones and she becomes a light spot on the stage in the direct sense of the word. The same concerns Edgar in white shorts and sports shoes. His appearance is a contrast to his stepbrother Edmund's who wears tight leather trousers and an equally tight jacket. As the action develops, the costumes become its material expression. Regan and Goneril who obtained power appear in dresses that sparkle like military coats. Edmund who headed the army wears a massive static military coat sparkling with copper colors. The Jester who resembles a punk with red hair sticking out like a
cock's tail entering the stage on one roller skate at the beginning is deprived of his cock's feather and of his roller skate at the end. The image of the red-haired Jester disappears, and what remains of him is a tired elderly man trying to help his king. Lear himself who appears at the beginning in a worn out costume that used to be luxurious in the past appears at the end wearing a cheap linen shirt of a poor man.

Anna Khrushcheva pays special attention to the costumes of Lear's knights. At the beginning they stand in a row on the left side of the stage with their backs toward the spectators. They stand without movement dressed in wide clothes of rough cloths that resemble military cape-cloaks with helmets on their heads. The helmets that cover a part of the face are a compromise between the knights' armor and the helmets of today's soldiers. They are the embodiment of the force on which alone absolute power can rely. These soldiers are robots, and at the end they are the same robots that now serve another, different power, and this change is marked by the change of the cloaks' color. The change of the cloth of the characters' costumes from mat to sparkling, from dull colors to those that are bright marks a change in the character's status in relation to the power and becomes the materialization of the character's psychological state.

A certain danger arises at this point. Each costume in the sketch or on the photograph of a character appears expressive and extremely characteristic, but when the characters come together in mass scenes, these qualities result in overloading the scene itself both by the color and texture of the cloth. Moreover, the director and the actors do not always use the possibilities of the costumes to the end and then the artistic value of the costume designer is lost and sort of hangs in the air finding no full-scale development in the action on the stage.
This happened to a certain degree in the production of "King Lear". Director Robert Sturua's concept consisted in the idea that a people controlled by a tyrant loses all humanistic experience acquired by humanity and the tyrant's control changes people into a blood-thirsty, lustful herd. Following this idea, the costume designer thought of some cloth on which the most famous and recognizable pictures of the epoch of Italian Renaissance that have become the expression of the world's humanistic philosophy and its artistic sign would be written in a monochrome gamma. However, these pictures resulted divided, cut into pieces in each particular costume and only fragments remained as material symbols of the humanistic culture that existed in the past. This could happen either because these imaging quotations were simply not visible on the stage, or else they were not developed and stressed by the director, so this metaphor became futile.

Anna Khrushcheva's interesting and original ideas require an adequate director's solution. She has no permanent theater to work for and no permanent director with whom mutual understanding could become the basis for such a full-scale development of the potential that exists in her sketches.

The theater costume has acquired new qualities and a new role during recent decades. After a period of strict historic features followed by various attempts to make it more modern, the costume is getting out of the frameworks of being simply the character's clothes and is becoming a spatial expression of the concept of the performance. As a matter of fact, a search for a new quality in the image-tied solution of the performance is going on, and Anna Khrushcheva's creative activities reflect in a fairly precise way the processes taking place in the contemporary art of the theater.
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1 David Whiton. “Stage directors in modern France”, 1984, p.4