The Symbol of the theatrical color costume

To give us the chance
to interpose our judgment
Brecht

This communication is an attempt to understand the complexity of the color symbol of the theatrical costume as a tool of communication between the stage and the spectator. Why is it that specific color so important and what is its connection with the characters of the play. Contrary to certain tendencies which argue that we only know and construct the world through spoken language those who argue that forget that there is another form of theatrical communication: the non verbal one.

One must not forget that the color costume is one of the non verbal elements of the mise en scene. Functioning as a dramatic signifier it creates a visual language which emphasized the connection between the color of the costume and the character of the play. The color also reflected the relationship between the characters giving information about their feelings.

The symbol of the costume's color is the choice of the stage director. The specific color of the costume demonstrated his understanding and interpretation of the plot emphasizing what ideas are vehiculated through the costume's color, ideas that have to be "read" by the spectator. In choosing the costume color, the stage director has to take into account the cultural historical context of the play as well as innovating new context based on his own interpretation.
Here lays the difficulty of the task, should the symbol sign be obvious as to be easily decoded or hidden leaving space to the spectator to decode the symbols according to its own sensibility and cultural background. This problematic task creates an open debate based on the ambiguity of the term color and symbol.

This is the issue that I will try to examine through two plays based on a thematic well known by any spectator who's culture is the Greco-Latin one. The color symbol will be considered as a semiotic system of signs having an aesthetic discourse of various significances reflecting the subtext.

The role of the character is creating through the color of the costume. The color of the costume plays an essential role in the non verbal code as it creates another subtext to be decoded by the spectator.

The costume color is acting as cultural significance which reflected the subtext. In its ability to transform itself into another narrative text as in the case of Helene in the play The war of troie will not be or in its translation in English Tiger at the gates by Jean Giraudoux, produced by the Haifa municipal theatre in 1987

Helene is wearing a sailor white costume symbolizing the fact that she was seduced by Paris while summing in the sea, This symbol can easily be decoded by the intellectual spectator while to the non intellectual one it can pass away
without noticing it. The color white is provocative as well as ironic as it is well known that the color white symbolize innocence, virginity. Ulysses declares that he can accept Helen return only if he can be given proof that Paris has respected her. The color white reinforce the irony of the situation as Helen is far from being an innocent virgin.

The color white has another signification as it has two poles, life and death thus, Helen holds in her hands Troy's destiny as we can see from Helen answer to Hector:

Helen "but you mustn't think because you have convinced me you've convinced the future….Let us go and get ready to return me to the Greeks we shall see what happens.

The color black is usually associated with darkness; it is used to represent destruction and death. Thus Cassandra black dress personified her ability to see the future in black color and to foretell the destruction of Troy. But again to a non well informed spectator it can be seen as a fashionable and sophisticated color.

This non verbal communication considered as a semiotic system of sign enable a communication in a sociocultural environment between the stage and the spectator as is the case of Hector costume as an Israeli soldier. The decoding is obvious to the
Israeli spectator it is reinforce by the oral narrative, although Hector is wearing a military costume he is a man of peace reminding of the late prime Minister Rabin

One may wonder was it consciously or unconsciously that the role of Hector was given to an arab actor or was it on purpose as Hector symbolize both war and peace and as such became itself a semiotic sign not only symbolizing war and peace but also the ambiguity of Israeli Arab political conflict.

It is interesting to note that in the narrative text Hector speaks of the color costume to be wear by himself and his sisters

Hector " we are going to give you back to the Greek we shall all be in golden armour with red skirts my sisters dressed in green".

In choosing the color green Giraudoux is creating intentionally an anachronism.
As it is well known that the color of the Greek world were red, ochre, black and blue Hector's red shirt symbolize power. The god of war Mars was wearing red clothes But RED symbolize also love. In spite of the fact that Hector is a soldier, he intended to give back Helen in order to win peace. Power and love this symbolic duality is represented by the color of Hector shirt RED
Green color symbolize destiny, the destiny of Hector's sisters. They were killed during the fights. At the first production of Antigone by Anouilh in 1944 the costume color were black and white all the characters were in black costume symbolizing evil (Creon and the guards) and death (Antigone) at the exception of Ismene wearing a white dress symbolizing innocence. The white dress reinforced by the spoken words shows Ismene disapproval of her sister actions.

The thematic in Antigone is the conflict between authority and morality. As the focus of the play is on Antigone therefore I will analyze her character based on the color of her dress which is in Nicolas Briancon production at the Theatre in America in 2003, neutral.

The internal dynamic is revealing by a visual dimension acting as much as verbal words. The information about the relationship between the characters is reflected by the color costume surrounding by men in black Antigone is like a stranger among them indeed she is a stranger by not cheering their political ideas.

Antigone is wearing a neutral color dress here the light is playing the role of the color. When she returns after having covered up the corpse of Polynices her brother, the light is brown the color of the soil and tradition according to the dictionary of symbol. When caught by the guards and send to prison her dress turn to a light grey blue suggesting her loyalty to her brother.
As Brecht said "instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must come to grips with things" Brecht Bertolt, (Brecht on theatre, London Methuen, p.23, 1964) thus, the color symbol help us to discover the inner motor of the play the use of a specific color engage the spectator into the theatrical event.

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