GCSE
DRAMA
Costume design

8261

Teaching guide: costume design

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Introduction

Costumes communicate vital information about character and performance style to the audience. Costume designers must understand the details of each character, the setting and style of the performance and the practicalities of the actors' movements on stage. Costumes can be realistic representations of historical or contemporary clothing, or they can be interpretations, adaptations or inventions, depending on the needs of the performance.

Activity 1: The actor and the character

The relationship between the actor and the character is important in determining the style of a production. Sometimes, in naturalistic or realistic performances for example, the audience engage with the character as if they were real (called 'suspension of disbelief'). In other productions, the relationship is more complex: the actor might play a number of characters, or might comment on their character to the audience.

Different uses of costume can help the audience to understand the relationship between actor and character: for an actor playing many characters, a full costume for each might not be necessary and instead a process called 'minimal signification' can be used, where one item of costume can represent the character as a whole (for example, a top hat could symbolise a wealthy character or a crown could stand for a king or queen).

Consider the relationship between the **actors** and **characters** in a play you are studying or a piece you are devising. How could costume design be used to **support** this relationship?

Way in

Gather three or four items of clothing. Imagine that these are going to be used as stage costumes. Look at each item of clothing and consider the type of character who might wear it. Try to think about the **fabric**, **colour**, **fit**, **shape** and **texture** of the item: what might each of these tell you about the character and **why**?

Activity 2: Costume and character analysis

Designing costumes is not the same as designing clothes: costumes have a vital role in communicating a character to an audience. Begin by making a list of the sort of things that influence the way we choose our clothes. What factors affect our appearance and why? Using this list as a starting point, choose a character from a play you are studying and consider their characteristics and personality, as well as their historical and social context. What is the character's purpose in the production? What are the most important things about this character, and how could your costume designs communicate these things to an audience?

Discussion ideas

Not all costumes are made from scratch. Consider the resources you have available to you: are there ways that you can adapt everyday clothes or old costume stock to make new costumes? How will you make sure that you are still focusing on the character? In what period is the play you are studying set? How important is it to reflect that era in your costume designs? Where could you gather inspiration for your costume designs? What sort of research should a costume designer do? Hair and make-up are important parts of costume. Think about the hair and make-up for a live performance you have seen. How did they help you understand the play or characters better?

Activity 3: Using movement

Character is an important consideration in making costume decisions, but costume can also determine an actor's character choices. Different costume elements can change how an actor stands, walks, sits, or feels: wearing a corset, for example, will physically restrict an actor's movement. These changes can be used to develop a character. Collect together different items of costume - different types of shoes, capes and cloaks or a heavy overcoat, for example and experiment with how these items change an actor's movement. What sort of characters do they suggest?

Activity 4: Collage costume , hair, make-up and mask designs

Drawing and painting are not the only ways to produce a design for costume, hair, make-up or masks. Try collage as a different method to create your designs. Gather a range of magazines as a starting point. Select a character and perhaps use character analysis to decide on some of their key features. Look through the magazines, and select images that reflect your character. These do not necessarily have to be images of clothes, but other images can be cut into the shapes of clothes to show texture, colour or pattern. Collage also allows the designer to exaggerate a feature of a costume or highlight an aspect of a character, for example, an egotistical queen might have a huge crown.

Professional example: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents a lot of opportunities for costume, hair, make-up and mask design. The designer has to create a fantasy world in which fairies interact with ordinary people and all sorts of magic can happen. Compare the costume designs for the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Julie

Taymor with Headlong's work on the same play. How do these designs find different ways to create the magical atmosphere needed for the story? What solutions have the designers found to the challenges of the play, for example representing fairies on stage or turning Bottom into a donkey?

You can see photographs of Headlong's production here.

Julie Taymor's production was made into a film, which you can view clips of here.

Design tip

When designing costumes, don't forget to think about hair and make-up. These can be an essential part of creating a character. Some productions need accurate hair and make-up for their era and location: you can research hair and make-up from different periods. Other productions, like the versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* above, use hair and make-up to create a mood or atmosphere. It is very important to think about the reasons for the hair and make-up that you choose and to make sure that everything can be seen easily by the audience, even the people sitting in the back row!

Find out more…

The National Theatre has produced a series of videos on costume: try searching 'National Theatre costume' in YouTube.

The National Arts Centre of Canada, costume design resources:

artsalive.ca/collections/costumes/designer_role.php?lang=en

The American Association of Community Theatres costume design resources:

aact.org/costume-designer