The Wear Project: identity and clothing in relation to costume design and education

Nadia Malik

University of Huddersfield

Abstract

When we meet a character in a performance, the implicit understanding is that they have existed until the point where we join their journey and will continue existing after we leave them. Their clothing tells a story, a history to the audience before we hear them speak and before any action takes place. As a Costume Designer and Lecturer, my awareness of costuming as an anthropological practice has led me to explore these principles using myself as the subject of scrutiny. For one year I am logging every clothing combination I go through along with memories, prices, locations and dates, in order to explore the conscious and subconscious clothing decisions I make and the stories, embedded in my clothes, that I am surrounded by every day. What does my wardrobe mean to me inwardly and reveal to my audience outwardly, and how does this 'me-search' extend my artistic practice?

The Wear Project will be a visual archive, a teaching tool, and a foundation for further academic research and writing through the questions it raises about storytelling, memory, dress and audience: a personal interrogation generating a critical framework for understanding the dramaturgical significance of costume.

Keywords: Costume, design, character, education, storytelling

Background and Inspiration

For several reasons in 2013, I had been thinking about my personal relationship with clothes: having to buy new sizes because of a change in body shape; experimenting with wearing a full change of clothes every day which had to have specific cuts and criteria to help relieve some skin allergy symptoms; giving clothes to charity that had meaningful memories, my memories, attached to them because I needed more space to fit other belongings into the flat I was living in. Browsing through the Metro on my daily commute I became increasingly frustrated with the 'What I Wear' page, where a very short interview of a 'normal' person accompanies a picture of them in their 'every day' clothes. I wanted to see an image of what the featured person really wore every day, and was comfortable wearing, rather than what

seemed to be an image of someone looking awkward in an outfit visibly constructed to reinforce current fashion trends and advertise that season's available fashion pieces. Around the same time I had also seen Deborah Nadoolman Landis, Senior Guest Curator of the V&A's Hollywood Costume Exhibition (2012), talking at various conferences. Deborah is a Professor at UCLA, an author of several books on costume and a Costume Designer with credits for films such as Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) and Michael Jackson's Thriller video (1983) - images so iconic that there is no need to reproduce them here. She would demonstrate what she called 'Deborah's Lesson' where she asks a volunteer to join her and describe the history of each garment they are wearing in order to demonstrate that our clothes, and the way we talk about them, tell us much more about our character than we think through the memories and stories embedded in them.

This quality of clothing is something that Costume Designers and Costume Makers know and understand through either costume study or through industry experience, but we also know this simply as human beings who are alive in the world. Whether one has a conscious awareness of it or not, we do not walk around naked; instead we make decisions about how we are going to dress every day so that we can negotiate the tasks that day entails for us. Whether we like it or not, we all project some kind of image and to some extent it could be argued that we are all 'performing' our lives through the image we create, comparable to the way we come across characters in performance. As Jaques tells us in Shakespeare's As You Like It (Act II Scene VII):

> *All the world's a stage,*
> *And all the men and women merely players;*
> *They have their exits and their entrances,*
> *And one man in his time plays many parts…'* (Wells & Taylor 1994: 638)

As articulated in the abstract of this paper, the implicit understanding when we meet almost any character in almost any performance, or a person 'in real life', is that they have existed until the point where we join their journey and will continue existing after we leave them. The clothing that character or person 'owns' or that a Costume Designer has chosen tells a *history*, a *story* to the world or to the audience before we hear anybody speak and before any action takes place.

The Wear Project Explained

The simplicity and clarity of Deborah's demonstration and my awareness of costuming as (among other things) an anthropological practice, has led me to explore these principles using myself as the subject of scrutiny, and I developed The Wear Project. For one year, ending in September 2014, I logged every clothing combination I went through. Each outfit was documented on Flickr (http://bit.ly/1kAYv74) with an accompanying 'memory moment' (see figure 1). Individual 'garment photos' and the history of each garment, how and where I acquired it, how much it cost, my memories of wearing it etc. were also recorded. Figures 2 and 3 tell the stories behind two of the garments worn in figure 1.

Figure 1

Garment Photo – Dusky Pink Knitted Scarf

2 Euros, Encantes market, Barcelona, July 2013 with Aby on an early morning bargain/vintage hunt rummaging through an enormous pile of clothes on the floor. I remember being impressed with how fluently Aby speaks Spanish now. There was a choice of two scarves a less fluffy thinner one which I preferred the colour of or this dusky salmon pink wider fluffier one. They were only two Euros so I bought both. As I continued to rummage with the scarves in my hand I caught the tail end of THE BIGGEST SPIDER I HAVE EVER SEEN crawling under a piece of furniture right where I had just been standing. Its back end was shimmering blue in the heat/light and I was too stunned to panic and the spider disappeared so quickly that I wasn't sure if I had really seen it. It was so hot so early in the morning and there I was buying winter scarves. It gets caught a lot on the Velcro fastening (that doesn't fasten) of my brown corduroy bag and I fear for its life. I have no preference between the two scarves now I have worn them both so much. This one is particularly bouncy and warm though.

Figure 2

Garment Photo – Beige Calvin Klein Checked Jeans

Free from mum and dad, 28th December 2013. They had cleared out the remains of the runaway tenants from the dance studio underneath dad's office in Manchester - they had left a big pile of clothes/costume and fabric so Gabi and I routed through the box when we were at mum and dad's for Christmas. I am surprised at how well cut and made these are as I normally find it very hard to buy any kind of trousers that fit me well and feel right. By some miracle they fit and feel perfect. The previous owner has cut 2 inches up from the hems at the side seams and inside-leg seams to make the trousers more boot-cut, instead of actually unpicking the seams, which is REALLY IRRITATING. Surely that is a simple enough task for anyone? Sigh...I fixed the fraying before I wore them properly for the first time. Dan calls them my Rupert The Bear trousers. Very funny.

Figure 3

From a cursory read of the text and images in figures 1, 2 and 3, one could potentially know, or at least infer some of the following: Information about my family background, location and relationships; information about my job/skills/salary; personality traits and things which might be important to me; people who I care about; something about my partner and our relationship; my sense of humour; sexual orientation; shopping habits; body issues; etc.

Some of the information is simply surface information but I would also consider some of it to be core parts of my identity and my existence in the world. However, all of the information that one could infer as a reader/audience, is gleaned from one picture of someone in their real clothes in a real life situation, and an edited description of the two garments worn. Those are the mechanics of The Wear Project, but what does this project do or mean in relation to costume design?

Relationship to Costume Design

For me, the most fascinating thing about this project is the conversations and emotions that it has generated, from reconnecting and reminiscing with old friends, to being genuinely surprised by the immediate reaction of those who I have told about it. Invariably people want to share their own stories and the reasons for their clothing choices of the day and people appreciate the opportunity to remember events they had forgotten and discuss feelings about things or people through talking about their clothes. In this way, dress could be used as a way to instigate a form of mental processing or reflection on situations or relationships. Conversing about clothes because of this project has started a closer connection to those around me and provided an instinctive way for me to start to think about how humans make sense of the world, our relationships, our behaviour, our physicality, our idiosyncrasies and our memories. As a Costume Designer and Lecturer, the affective aspect of clothing is not a new concept to me, but using my own body and wardrobe as the subject for this exploration does provide me with a more innate and direct understanding and appreciation of the potency of apparel 'in real life' in relation to the contribution of costume and the choices of a Costume Designer towards character-building and storytelling on stage or screen where reality, or an imaginary world, is distilled and refined for an audience. One could say that the job of a Costume Designer is to be the visual link, through or in collaboration with a Director, between an Actor and an audience for that short period of time when a character comes to life in a performance and, if that is the case, then The Wear project in similar ways is a directly distilled version of a section of my life that can be examined, dissected, reconstructed, filled in and retold as the 'audience' chooses.

Questions About Value and Impact

The Wear Project is currently unfinished. The individual garment pictures are uploaded so the year-long technology and logistics part of the project is at an end, but the backlog of writing is still to be completed and the analysis and reflection is still to come. So what potential value and impact will this project provide on completion?

I sit somewhere directly in between the complete openness of the cyber generation and a fervent attachment to my privacy, but I was driven to extend my own artistic, professional practice and thinking and put a whole year of my life on the internet in creating The Wear Project because of an instinct; a hunch that doing so might help me to understand what this thing called 'costume design' that I intuitively *do* actually *is*. I wanted to create something to do with the process of understanding and creating characters through choices that are made

about how they dress, about more deeply understanding my own practice and thus affecting or improving what I teach my costume students. This hunch came from a realisation that there is nothing like this to go to, in terms of thinking about costume and character in performance in general. Firstly, because costume is a burgeoning research area for which there is currently very little academic scholarship in existence. Indeed, Donatella Barbieri (Senior Research Fellow in Design for Performance, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London) calls this lack 'the vacuum in discourse on costume' (2012). Secondly and more specifically within this vacuum, there is little to go to in terms of an approach to understanding costume for performance from a more social, lived point of view. After a year of doing something practical and instinctive in making The Wear Project, the broad question it could help to answer through further analysis is: how does a Costume Designer distil and visually communicate meaning from a character's existence and how is that understood by an audience in performance? This is what we aim to do as Costume Designers, and this is what some of us also teach. However, costume design is an intuitive, collaborative, nebulous, meandering, interpretive process that I would like to try and get some way towards understanding more clearly in order to be able to explain it better to peers and colleagues and work on ways to improve my teaching. My instincts therefore around what the value and impact of this project might be are discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Basic Interest

For Christmas 2014 I was given two books, Worn Stories by Emily Spivack (2014) and Women in Clothes by Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits, Leanne Shapton et al. (2014), both of which find extremely engaging ways of presenting thoughts and conversations about dress and how we make sense of things, navigate relationships etc. I devoured them both and was immediately completely deflated and extremely excited: Worn Stories (Spivack 2014) is an identical version of my project in many ways i.e. a picture of a garment alongside the story of that garment; it even has an online site where anyone can upload a picture and an accompanying story. However, the entries are 'one-offs' from individuals, not an archive of a person or character over a period of time. Women in Clothes (Heti et al. 2014), centres on discussions and writing from various participants around a set of questions about one's relationship to one's clothing in general, which is similar to something I had thought of as a potential next step for The Wear Project. Someone else has, in effect, got there first on both counts, however there is no application of the information or discussion around clothing to costume design or performance in these two books. Furthermore, there is no analysis of the material; both books simply present stories and histories. There are, however, similarities in

approach, with both discussing clothing and its personal meaning and value, taking a cultural and social anthropology angle to explore character and personality through dress. The timing of these publications (2014) suggests that there is currently a perceived and growing value in this way of thinking through clothing and identity from those outside the costume industry or costume education. Therefore, The Wear Project may be an accessible way for those within the performance industry and costume education to apply some of things they might find or think about from viewing or engaging with the project, to thinking about costume and costume processes, as detailed in later sections of this paper. At the very least, those with any kind of sartorial curiosity might take a basic interest in The Wear Project.

Analysis and Value

In terms of costume design, rather than starting with a script and building up a character's life story, dress codes, private thoughts etc. as one would in collaboration through a typical rehearsal and design process, The Wear Project offers a chance to go through this design process backwards. 'A year in the life of', whether one actually knows me or simply sees me as an unknown character, is laid out in pictures and words. To put it another way, the show has already been designed. Using myself as the subject of the project does bring up immediate issues of authenticity. I decided to carry out this project, I set the parameters, and from the moment the first 'daily photo' was taken I knew that carrying out the practical elements of this project would be a part of my everyday life for the next 365 days, and beyond. How then, with this knowledge, is it possible for me to make choices which do not affect the construction and presentation of the images or the clothes I wear within them, thus making the images 'unreal' in some way, the very thing that I was trying to prevent? The short answer is that it is not entirely possible as I am inadvertently in the position of both director and performer. Through the act of asking someone to take a photograph, not only am I expected to look into the camera and smile but I mediate and control, or stage, which parts of my day are revealed through the times, locations and circumstances of each image, even though my original (naïve) intention was to avoid those types of choices and to simply 'be' in the pictures. Given that, I did find an attitude that could be seen to negate or at least balance out the choices I made each day so that the images remain as arbitrarily taken and presented as possible.

Early on I would ask people to take a photo as and when I remembered that I had changed my clothing combination and this spontaneity went some way towards avoiding a 'set-up'. Further in, I would avoid having a photo taken at work in favour of waiting until an evening

event so that my clothing choices would be seen in the most diverse range of contexts possible. Even further in, those whom I saw daily would kindly surreptitiously take photographs when I was not paying attention. I settled into letting the project grow organically, reasoning that whatever choices I made were part of getting through the general turmoil of daily life, which could be considered to be everyone's 'reality'. I applied the same logic when writing the memory moments, thinking about the quality of the photographs and uploading the images. Despite an awareness that my subconscious may have played a sizeable part in my daily choices, I can say that the feeling was quite the opposite; I did not consciously or deliberately chose or chose not to wear something based on the knowledge that I would be photographed, if only through the increasing banality of the continuous year-long task. Therefore, what you see is as much of my 'reality' as it was possible to get: a visual record of my dress and a detailed map of the memories, stories and history embedded within them.

The next task is to analyse and unpick the costume, clothing or dress choices drawing from the theory and practice of many different areas of study including, psychology, performance, anthropology, phenomenology, identity, fashion theory etc. In doing so, I will attempt to make this unconscious or subconscious act of getting dressed that we do every day, a little more conscious, with the hope that some of the findings may contribute to the written theory of costume design and to developing my own professional practice and teaching; how to visually distil a life, using the body and dress, for an audience to understand. In academic terms, the analysis and reflection on The Wear Project is a personal interrogation generating a critical framework for understanding the dramaturgical significance of costume.

Application to Education

Alongside the completion of the memoirs, online writing and reading around the various fields of theory that could relate the psychology of dress to performance, The Wear Project may have some potential in terms of arts education. For example, it could be used as a teaching tool in other performance disciplines such as creative writing, directing, choreography, acting, storyboarding etc. When complete, The Wear Project will be a free online visual archive available to anyone who wants to write, create or teach from it with potential impact and value for others may remain unknown. For costume educators, the writing and pictures could be used dynamically to set tasks and present scenarios, encouraging costume design students to think, create, redesign, write, infer, distil, refine, exaggerate, adapt, draw or discuss character. The question may be posed, does this person

have an overall default way of presenting themselves in certain situations? If so what is the difference between what I think that might be and what others think? How does the idea of a character's default way of presenting themselves fit into costume design? The questions and ways of using the written and visual information to think about character are manifold, something I intend to explore, expand and document with students.

It follows from Donatella Barbieri's quote about the vacuum of discourse around costume that discourse around costume education is also lacking, or at the very least it goes unrecognised and undocumented for those that are involved in it, which leaves costume education 'un-validated' in an academic sense as yet, as was the case for fashion thirty to fifty years ago. In March 2015, I attended the three-day 'Critical Costume' conference and exhibition (only the second ever of its kind) held at Aalto University in Helsinki which brought together costume practitioners and educators from over thirty countries around the world. Here, presentations and personal communications clarified for me, that although there are more performance related university courses than ever before that include costume teaching either partially or wholly, there is an overall feeling of frustration across the globe in terms of the current perceived academic 'status' of costume and costume education.

It is a noteworthy occurrence in recent Western social history, that Costume Designers are beginning to become household names to audiences, such as Janie Bryant (of Mad Men and Deadwood fame) and Colleen Atwood (a long-time collaborator of Tim Burton). As the value and contribution of costume design to historical, social, anthropological, physical, psychological and cultural aspects of human existence are beginning to be recognised more by those outside and inside the performance industry and as 'costume' overall starts to become more valued as a field of inquiry in academia, it is crucial that the pedagogy surrounding the subject is monitored and shaped in order to drive future research, spanning both writing and practice in the field. For me, the analysis and use in teaching of this collection of data will be used as one facet of my wider PhD research; an investigation into the theory and practice of education in costume design (historic, current and future potential) with the intention of determining how to render the overall subject of costume more visible in both academia and the performance industry.

'We all have a memoir in miniature living in a garment we've worn' (Spivack 2014: 7).

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Memory Moment

Figure 2: Garment Photo – Dusky pink knitted scarf

Figure 3: Garment Photo – Beige Calvin Klein checked jeans