



*RagTag: A Circus in Stitches.*  
Autoethnographic Costume Design Research for a Touring Circus Troupe

Jenny Leigh Du Puis, Cornell University

Keywords: Autoethnography, design research, circus

## Introduction/Background

Designing costumes for circus artists requires a balance of learned skills, experiential knowledge, open communication, and above all an eye for safety. The garments worn by these artists must not only fit an aesthetic theme for the overall show, they must also meet the functional needs required by the artists' movements, apparatus, and routine. Lived knowledge of these needs comes from communication with the artists themselves (Bicât, 2012) and can be augmented by an experienced designer. In this autoethnographic research project, I combine my extensive professional career as a circus costume designer and technician with academic training in apparel design to develop costumes for a small professional touring circus troupe, Cirque Us. The project includes design research with preliminary results from qualitative interviews and a focus group, along with field notes, info sheets, photographs, video, and audio recordings. All troupe members gave written consent, and the project is submitted with permission from Cirque Us.

The challenges of the project are: designing costumes for performers whose movements include interaction with apparatus, extreme ranges of motion, and the myriad of other functional challenges presented by circus performance; the parameters of budget, time, space; and the unexpected interruption of a global pandemic. The overarching research question is: How are costumes designed and created for circus artists? Sub questions include: How can store-bought clothing be adapted to meet the functional and aesthetic needs of a thematic circus performance? What is the communication process like between circus artists and costume designers? To answer these questions, I engage in analysis of qualitative research data in tandem with an autoethnographic process. As a member of the circus community and as a designer, I am in a position to be able to simultaneously communicate with circus artists while maintaining a researcher's perspective. Thus, an autoethnographic approach enables me to critically analyze my process while providing rich insights and design research outcomes.

## Process

My involvement with the troupe extends from the original cast *RagTag: A Circus in Stitches* in Spring 2019 to the remounted version in Winter 2020, with some new cast members and a few returning artists. To better analyze the overall project, I therefore divide it into three

Page 1 of 3

parts: 1) the Original Cast; 2) the New Cast; and 3) the Returning Artists. In the first part, I discuss the qualitative interviews and focus group information, and how I used my experiential knowledge to suggest and implement functional elements into the costumes, as well as provide information about working to create a balance between the functional needs of the show and the aesthetic tone of the theme. In part two, I present the process of working long-distance with new cast members to discover and meet their functional needs in performance clothing along with the logistical challenges related to costume shopping, fittings, modifications, and rehearsal observations. Part three is comprised of my observations and conclusions of working with the two returning artists, and how their costume experiences from the first version of the show informed their opinions of functional needs for the second version of the show. Finally, I discuss the design and research challenges of long-distance designing, and the unexpected obstacles presented and ultimate fate of the show as decided by the global pandemic of COVID-19.



Figure 1. 2020 cast of *RagTag: A Circus in Stitches*. Photo courtesy of Cirque Us.

### Conclusions

In this project, I engage with my academic and professional backgrounds as a student and a designer, a member of the circus community, and a researcher to situate my positionality and analyze my professional practice through a reflexive lens, as well as to give voice to the design research process involved in working with a small professional touring circus company. The challenges of distance, budget, time, and space are discussed, as well as the unexpected functional discoveries related to artist costuming needs. Qualitative data is used to inform costume design research, which is grounded in tacit and experiential knowledge related to career experience. Notes, journal entries, correspondence, photographs, video, and audio recordings are analyzed reflexively.

### Reference

Bicât, T. (2012). *Costume and Design for Devised and Physical Theatre*. Marlborough, UK: The Crowood Press.