

Exploring Theatrical Costume Design in Fashion: an Interdisciplinary Production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

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An effective design delivers a message to customers and meets their satisfaction. When students first enter a fashion design class, they face dual challenges: how to identify and analyze target customers' needs and how to develop a creative design message that reflects customer's life style. Students often examine only superficial information about their imaginary customers such as age group, sex, occupation, and social status without considering customers' needs of emotional status and physical necessities. In order to generate creative design, however, students need to foster the ability to imagine their customers' lives beyond the superficial information.

Character analysis in theatrical costume design provides a unique opportunity to practice in-depth examination of a person's life: psychological status, obstacles, life satisfaction, relationships, and so on. In an effort to nurture a rich imagination in our students toward customers' needs while engaging in a creative design process, a special topics course titled "Theatrical Costume Design" was developed for a collaborative theatrical production between two departments at our school: Fashion Design & Retailing and Communication Arts. This interdisciplinary course explored the process of theatrical costume design with focus on character analysis.

The objectives of this course were: 1) to expose students to a collaborative work process for a theatrical production, 2) to provide students an opportunity to practice design thinking process with the principles of theatrical costume design, and 3) to enhance students' creative design capacity by applying design elements to costumes.

The collaborative theatrical production between two disciplines was implemented in the two classes (17 cast members in the acting class and 10 sophomore/junior students in the costume design class) for spring semester 2015. Prior to the spring semester instructors from both classes met several times to discuss play selection, concept of design, timelines for rehearsals and fittings, theatre space, and budget. The instructors selected Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the final production.

Prior to spring semester, the design instructor also met with students to introduce the play, design concept, timeline, and research about design inspiration. At the meeting, students were asked to read the play and complete a scene breakdown form developed by the instructor so that they had enough time to understand the play structure, examine characters, and find inspiration for the production before semester started. On the first day of semester, each student was assigned to design costumes for two or more characters based on student's experience in design and construction.

Effective theatrical costume should help an audience "to identify the individual characters even before they speak and even if they are silent" (Jones, 2004). Thus, the lectures

during early semester focused on the principles of character analysis and its reflection in costumes. The students examined characters' traits including personality, psychological and social status, life obstacles, and relationships between characters. After being introduced to the fundamentals of theatrical costume design, they were asked to fill in a costume plot and a character description chart. As part of the form, students were asked to describe characters with only adjectives to convey each character's traits such as stubborn, strict, pressure, authority, and control. Based on the description of each character, students developed designs by using psychological effects of design elements (texture, color, shape, lines, etc.). For example, I talked to students about how to emphasize lines that reflect stubbornness, which color indicates authority, and which color scheme or shape expresses conflicted relationships or a romance triangle (Cunningham, 1989).

In the process of developing their designs, students met with actors to take body measurements and discuss how actors defined and established the characters in the storyline. After the meeting, design students revised their design details considering the specific physical characteristics of actors in order to enhance their looks on stage for an effective delivery of the design message. From this practice, students learned that designers should be able to incorporate a character's traits from the script as well as the body types of each actor into costumes by combining multiple elements of design. Group critique was another activity significantly influenced the process of student's design development. Based on extensive group discussions, students adjusted texture, colors, and shape of their designs to develop a harmonious ensemble of costumes that would appear on stage in the same scenes. The unique design process of costume—meeting with actors and having group critiques—provided students excellent opportunity to practice collaborative work with others.

Instructors from both courses conducted class assessments for the design students. The design course instructor evaluated design creativity, construction level, and participation of class activities. The acting course instructor evaluated if costumes met the character concepts and design creativity. Design students also were asked to submit a set of peer-evaluations as well as responses to self-reflective open-ended questions.

The final production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will open at the Framingham State University on April 24, 2015. Successful execution of this project is expected to result in implementation of a regular interdisciplinary course titled "Theatrical Costume Design" that will be offered by the Fashion Design & Retailing department. This project is also expected to increase the visibility of both programs within the university community and serve as a marketing tool for recruitment.

References

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