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I did not set out to become an apologist for the costume designer but it seems that is what I have become after making a sideways move from working practice to Academia. The opinions and views that I express here are informed my forty-year career as a working costume designer in film and television.

It seems that costume design is a neglected area of serious study and perhaps even of basic understanding. Of course the viewing audience does not understand what a contribution the costume designer makes to the finished film, why should they? When I started moving in Academic circles I was shocked to discover that the costume designer was a completely unknown figure! Even in a school of design historians there was a presumption that all the creative decisions of a film were made by the director and on learning that I was a costume designer reactions varied from Oh what a glamorous job ! To and do you make all the costumes yourself? . And it would appear that the work of the costume designer is a mystery even to many who actually work within the film and television industry itself. Of course there are instances of a productive mutual collaboration between director and costume designer and I am happy to say that I have experienced this myself but I have also been aware of the instances where the producer knows that he has to employ this rather shadowy figure, the costume designer, without really knowing what it is that this designer does. And where the director simply does not have any interest in the clothing to be worn by the cast and abdicates that responsibility entirely.

However, the contribution of the costume designer should not be underestimated. It was the costume designer who reformulated the appearance of the Batman figure, building a rubber suit to disguise the weedy physique of Michael Keaton and in so doing, setting a template for the way in which the comic book hero is presented in the cinema and recognised by the contemporary audience. It was the work of the costume designer to put Colin Firth into a clinging wet shirt, creating an image that has since defined television productions of Jane Austen, and it is the work of the costume designer that has redesigned iconic figures such as Robin Hood in order to create a contemporary recognisable persona for successive generations.

The identification of actor with a role is so strong that the audience assumes that he is wearing his own clothes. This is particularly prevalent of course in a contemporary drama although that requires a design process just as much as a full scale costume drama. Invariably the clothes are regarded as an adjunct of the actor, as if they had invented their own appearance and no designers hand were involved. Deborah Landis, who has been working with Hollywood costume designers, writes, "Star power is so influential and pervasive that it becomes impossible for the public to believe that an individual was responsible for designing the costumes." There is nothing new in this, Anne Hollander has written how in the eighteenth century, "Also published were theatrical prints of individual actors and actresses, all dressed in costume. In the titles the name of the characters being portrayed was often omitted and only the performers name, sometimes the engravers too, but certainly never the costume designers".

This invisibility of the costume designer is what marks the difference between costume design and fashion design, although these worlds may overlap in the production of a film. The star, or the character will take possession of the costume, which is of course exactly what the costume designer wants, that those clothes should embed themselves in the narrative of the film and become an expression of character. Outfits designed by a fashion designer however, somehow remain in the ownership of that designer, they do not relinquish them to the character. A film designed by Jean Paul Gaultier contains obvious creations by Jean Paul Gaultier and the dresses made for Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* are beautiful clothes designed for the actress without any allowance for the character she was playing. A member of the audience could probably tell you that the star was wearing a dress by Dior whilst remaining blithely unaware that any hand had created all the other clothes in the film. A recent example of this is the recent contre-temps around the film *Black Swan* where eventually the costume designer, Amy Westcott, was forced to speak out in her own defence against the PR of the fashion team Rodarte

who appeared to be taking credit for the design of the entire film rather than the specific costumes they had created at Amy's commission. The press reports that Rodarte had got involved at the request of the director so it seems that he too was falling into the trap of confusing fashion and costume design and not having an understanding of what exactly a costume designer does.

I was interested to both highlight the position of the costume designer and to discover whether their status within the industry had changed over the last fifty years or so. I embarked with the support of the Arts University College, Bournemouth, on a series of recorded interviews with well-established British designers, some still practising and some retired, about their long and illustrious careers. I concentrated on designers working within the British film and television industry, as I don't want to replicate similar studies being undertaken by Deborah Landis in Hollywood. These conversations are meant to be a counterpoint to the living history oral testimonies recorded by Bectu, who in their extensive archive have only recorded four interviews with costume designers and none with wardrobe supervisors, costume makers or any other members of the costume department. Fascinating in many ways, my as yet unpublished interviews, held with both male and female designers, seem to confirm what I had suspected, that the status of costume design within the industry has declined simultaneously with the increasing feminisation of the costume department.

I have been asked by young women if I have ever suffered from the male chauvinism of the film industry and the answer is no, because I was in the department where women were not just tolerated but expected to participate. The feminisation of costume now seems so complete that in the increasingly rare instance of there being a male costume designer, the rest of the crew will automatically assume that he is gay, even if he is not. John Bloomfield who designed the costumes for Robin Hood Prince of Thieves talks very amusingly about the way in which, as costume designer, he, a straight heterosexual man, automatically assumes the cloak of homosexuality that goes along with the costume department. In this way a male designer can safely be placed into the female ghetto without posing any threat to the more overtly masculine departments of camera, lighting or even production design.

Of course, the costume department is concerned with clothes, and we all wear clothes, it is impossible to get away from their domestic overtones. Sewing and textiles are traditionally regarded as "Women's work". Rozsika Parker famously opened the windows onto the hierarchical and gendered value system of the visual arts in her work and it would seem that because of the domestic and intimate nature of clothing all costume workers are by default women. Nowadays the reduction of the size of the costume team means a breakdown of the department hierarchy and that all members of the costume department are inevitably concerned with laundry and intimate garments and they have assumed the role of Wendy to the Lost Boys of the film crew. Most of the other departments are predominantly male, and I am sure other speakers will be discussing the difficulty of entering those departments during the course of the next few days. In fact I recently met a young student who had made the conscious decision to study costume at AUCB, having no great interest in the subject but seeing it as a way into the film industry. The costume department it would seem, represents the feminine, the domestic and it is commonplace that they have to do the directors laundry for him as well as providing sunhats or wellington boots for the crew as the weather dictates. It is by no means unusual for the costume designer to be approached by a crewmember to deal with a ketchup stain on his shirt. I think that that same chap would hesitate to approach the DOP with a request for a new light bulb. But clothing, of whatever period, is so intrinsically a part of everyday life, after all everyone gets dressed in the morning, that it is not valued.

It could be argued that costume designers are their own worst enemies. When met with impossible demands they somehow make miracles happen and it seems that if you do not articulate all the difficulties involved in meeting these demands it looks easy and if it looks easy it is undervalued! I think that the costume department could learn some valuable lessons from others about placing a higher value on their work and demanding respect it deserves. But, of course, they are mostly women and its only clothes ...

Whilst recording the interviews I have learned that this situation has polarised in recent years. Even when I started work in the late 1960s there was a considerable hierarchy, the costume designer was supported by a team of assistants, wardrobe supervisors, dressers, stand by and maintenance workers. There was a balance of men and women, maybe there were rather more women, but there were certainly male figures working not just as designers but also as supervisors, wardrobe masters, tailors, and dressers to the male stars. Unless one is fortunate to be designing an extremely big budget film this structure has virtually disappeared. The costume department has now become so streamlined and pared down by budgetary restraints that the few remaining members have to perform multiple roles and it seems that the men have been pushed out by the less forceful and more inexpensive female workforce. This is a situation lamented by one of my interviewees, the veteran designer Julie Harris who has designed costumes for Gainsborough films, Carry On Films, The Beatles films and won an Oscar for Darling in 1960. During my interview with her she was very vehement about the shrinkage of the costume team and way in which little or no respect was now afforded to the designer. In contrast she showed me her scrapbooks from the 1960s. These are her own personal books, press cuttings about her which appeared in newspapers, mainstream newspapers not trade publications, chronicling her activities, the journeys she took, the parties she attended and of course also gaining publicity for whatever film she was working on at the time. There are photographs of her, looking very glamorous, getting on a plane to Paris, or a shopping expedition to Harrods. It is as if Julie was regarded as a star in her own right, an employee of the studio system she was valued as an ambassador for the studios and accorded the relevant status. After such a world of limousines and bouquets no wonder Julie felt the loss of status given to costume design so keenly, and she designed her last film in the 1980s. It is inconceivable that any costume designer should be accorded such attention in the present system. The costumes will be used by the marketing department as a publicity tool in order to raise the profile of a film but there often has to be some determined bullying to get the costume designer credited. This, again, brings us back to the beginning, it is impossible to conceive that any one hand was responsible for the costumes. In fact another interviewee relates how all his costumes for the film Troy were put on exhibition at the British Museum, wonderfully displayed on mannequins, giving all the names of the actors.

But nowhere was there any mention of his name, no credit at all.

And so there seems to be a circular pattern, the costume department becomes smaller, the hierarchy within the department becomes less defined, wardrobe and costume become conflated and the workforce becomes feminised. As the rates of pay get lower, and working conditions get worse, less men are attracted to the costume department. At AUCB with around 200 undergraduate students spread over three years there is a grand total of four boys. They are being prepared for work in the real world in that they are in a minority, lone figures in a female environment.

Whatever pay levels are stated in the Bectu charts over the past few years the actual amounts paid have been declining simultaneously with numbers of staff being reduced. It is not unusual for the costume department to be reduced to the designer and one assistant, calling on dailies for extra support on busy days. Simultaneously budgets are shrinking and I am of course, extremely prejudiced in my opinion that a male line producer will invariably underestimate the actual cost of providing costumes whether they come from a charity shop, a hire firm or are manufactured specially for the project. Because after all they are only clothes.... This year's Oscar nominees had to make supporting statements concerning their designs and it was interesting to read Jenny Beavan, a British designer, was the only one to discuss the difficulty of dressing a film without enough money, of how she and a miniscule staff had had to improvise on a woefully inadequate budget. There is also the now widespread practice of using Trainee labour for no money, or petrol money, as a way of bumping up the number of costume staff. This is unfair to the trainee, often a recent graduate who will in fact just be exploited, asked to do a variety of jobs for which they are not really prepared and a way for production companies to shave their costs even further. Costume departments in particular seem to have adopted this form of cheap labour because after all, they are only girls, it is only clothes and anyone can do it, how hard can it be! I would contrast this with the hair and makeup departments who seem to be much stronger, more prepared to fight for staff levels, proper rates of pay and realistic budgets. Their work is more visible, they do not occupy the liminal position of the costume designer, they can be seen

to be doing their work and their more visible presence is reflected in higher rates of pay. In contrast a costume presence is rarely welcomed on the set, regarded as little more than a nuisance by the rest of the predominantly male crew and frequently exiled to a corner away from the actual shooting. Their function is reduced to holding umbrellas and warm coats for the cast. In an industry where the team clustered around the camera think that they are the only ones actually doing any work it is easy to see how the costume designer and the costume department can be elbowed out of recognition. The majority of costume work is backstage, preparatory work, washing, ironing, sewing and mending. The costume department will be one of the first to arrive in the morning to set out all the costumes, and often the last to leave at night after collecting them all up and preparing them for the next day. And they get one of the lowest rates of pay with no overtime. Because after all, they are only girls and they are only clothes.

I could contrast this with the production designer who remains a more Masculine figure, commanding more respect, larger staff levels and certainly higher rates of pay, in a reverse situation to costume, this remains true even if the production designer is a woman. The feminisation of the costume department is reflected, as I have said, in the number of applicants for specialist undergraduate courses and the lack of boys coming into the industry does not mean just fewer male designers but also fewer boys working as assistants, as costumiers, as costume makers. A workforce of weary, underpaid young women is reminiscent of the Victorian seamstress simultaneously exploited and enjoyed by the superior masculine factory owner. As a costume designer it has become an integral part of the job to fight not just for ones own status and pay, not only for the costume budget but also for the reduced costume team to be treated with some degree of equality with other workers. The Skillset statistics reveal that a significant number of young women have left the industry between 2006 and 2009 and that in general these were women under 35. One young woman of my acquaintance entered the industry against all advice after graduation, has recently decided to give up after three years when she has worked consistently but has never earned more than £100 a week. She had graduated from a specialist degree course at Edinburgh and is the envy of her peers for having "succeeded" in the industry...but only made possible by the subsidy of her parents and the sacrifice of her independence. Skillset figures reveal that 5,000 women have left the industry in those three years compared with 750 men, although the girls are better qualified they are paid less than men. Feminisation in itself is possibly of little importance but the concomitant lack of status is more worrying. It is time for the young women in the costume department to start standing up for themselves, difficult in an over crowded profession where the threat of replacement can be a very potent weapon, and it is time for production companies to start valuing the contribution that good costume design can contribute to a film or television production and begin to close the widening gender gap in the UK film and television industry.

Sources:

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Bournemouth University.

Women and Hollywood blog Melissa Silverstein.

Kate O'Conner exec dir and deputy CEO Skillset gave figures at UK Broadcast Video Expo in Feb 2011.