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Benefits for Both: Connecting Textile and Clothing Collections with Theater and Costume Makers

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Benefits for both: Connecting textile and clothing collections with theater and costume makers

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Background: In the current economic climate, many university collections and museums are asked to justify their continued existence (Boylan, 2000). Demonstrating that they are meeting the home institution's tripartite mission of research, teaching, and service is considered essential (Arthur, 1997). Textiles and clothing collections (TCCs) are often utilized by researchers and in classrooms focusing on fashion design or historic dress within the apparel field (Arthur, 1997). However, costume designers have equal need for TCCs (Cunningham, 1989). In addition to visual and textual sources, costume designers examine historical artifacts to gain a richer appreciation of a period or place. While Welters and Ordoñez (2011) understood this, recommending outreach to theater departments in their monograph about academic TCCs, the connection between TCCs and theater makers is tenuous at best. The purpose of this presentation is to offer suggestions to university TCCs related to theater makers in order to advance their mission and to increase their visibility within the university and the community.

Method: This study, part of a larger project exploring the role of historical accuracy in theatrical costume design, utilized the grounded theory methodology to systematically collect and analyze qualitative data (Creswell, 2007). Sixteen Broadway costume designers were interviewed who granted permission to use their names when disseminating results. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data were independently coded for emergent themes by the researcher and an audit coder until an agreement rate of 81% was reached, above the threshold recommended by Creswell (2007).

Results: Themes emerging from the data revealed that costume designers rely on material culture in their research process for historically set productions. Designers emphasized the value of viewing artifacts to truly comprehend the logic of historical construction and "the magic of textiles" (Gregg Barnes). Designers felt that many aspects of historical garments were only discernible via artifacts. Susan Hilferty explained further, "you're looking at the feel of the fabric, you're looking at how it's being sewn together. You're looking for the grain, you're looking for the finish. You're also really trying to understand proportion." Beyond offering the opportunity to examine historical techniques, artifacts provide a connection to the overarching narrative of culture, as well as actual people, living in the past. As Ann Roth said, "if it's real, you can't get any better."

Conclusions and implications: Based on the conviction of these costume designers that studying artifacts is necessary in the design process and to facilitate the tripartite mission of research, teaching, and service, this presentation recommends that TCCs directly engage with the theatrical community, both inside and outside of the university setting. Though theater educators generally engage in creative scholarship rather than traditional academic scholarship, they too have need for extensive research, and artifact analysis is one avenue for knowledge. Professional costume designers and makers conducting research for historically set productions, both for a university's theater department or for local theater organizations, could be invited to view relevant garments in exchange for an acknowledgement in the production's program, which would increase the collection's visibility. For even more recognition, TCCs could display these garments in the theater lobbies during performances.

In terms of teaching, while historical garments are commonly utilized in apparel classrooms, theater students are rarely presented with such learning tools. Courses teaching not only costume design but also script analysis, directing, and acting could incorporate artifacts during the study of historically set productions. Material culture presentations to theater students would offer access to insight impossible to achieve through other means.

TCCs could approach community theater organizations to promote service and collaboration as well. Theater organizations often host backstage tours or question-and-answer sessions with performers. When a local theater produces a historically set production, a presentation of historical garments to theater patrons during the production's run would offer an opportunity for an educational event promoting both the theater and the TCC. Thus, engaging with theater makers in and out of the university will increase the TCC's visibility and advance its mission.

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