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# Historical Accuracy in Costume Design: Experiences and Perceptions of Broadway Costume Designers

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Historical accuracy in costume design: Exploring a creative process

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**Background:** Millions of Americans see theatrical productions each year, every one of which displays performers clothed through some level of costume design (“Broadway,” 2016). All designs require research, but productions set in the past demand proficiency in the zeitgeist of the period, including the political, cultural, social, and aesthetic environment. When faced with such vast amounts of research, a common question is how accurately to reproduce clothing from the period. Few studies have been conducted to address the topic. In fact, there are few studies pertaining to costume design at all. The existing literature is almost entirely by working costume designers as textbooks and practical manuals. Costume designers depend on the communicative properties of appearance and the audience’s ability to understand intended messages, but they generally do not examine the underlying assumption that these processes exist. Within the apparel field, several theoretical perspectives support the conclusion that a garment can be the medium by which a message is sent from one person to others, including semiotics and symbolic interactionism. This study aims to fill this void in the body of knowledge by systematically examining the creative process of costume design for historically set productions and linking the process to established theoretical frameworks.

**Method:** The purpose of this study was to explore one aspect of costume design, the role of historical accuracy in American theater, according to contemporary Broadway costume designers. In this project, the sample consisted of costume designers who have designed at least one production for the Broadway stage. In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 Broadway costume designers found through an examination of design credits of the Broadway productions of the 2014-2015 theater season, through the researcher’s own personal associations, and via a key informant. Interview data were professionally transcribed verbatim and were then coded using the ground theory method. Transcripts from every fourth interview were independently read and analyzed by the researcher and an audit coder/advisor. A constant comparative method was employed throughout all stages of coding to collaboratively create a coding guide and to contrast incidents both within and between interview transcripts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An intercoder reliability rate was calculated as 81%, above the threshold recommended by Creswell (2007).

**Results:** Analysis of the interview data revealed that though each production is different, these costume designers approach historically set productions similarly. They begin with consideration of production factors, externally imposed on the designer and often predating the designer’s involvement with the production. These factors were classified into three themes: (a) *applicability*, the relevance of historical accuracy given the aesthetic contexts of the production and the culture in which the production is presented; (b) *attainability*, the possibility of achieving historical accuracy due to access to resources; and (c) *performability*, whether the movement of

the performers will be supported in historically accurate costumes. These factors in turn influence the implementation of four iterative strategies beginning with *incubation*, or creative thought. *Research* using textual, visual, and artifactual sources is the next strategy, followed by *role-playing*, when designers anticipated the attitudes of others to guide their decisions about costumes. Lastly, designers engaged in *historical manipulation*, the creation of a design inspired by, but not identical to, examples found in historical research, resulting in a cohesive costume design with an intended level of historical accuracy. Thus, each unique costume design can be located on a continuum of historical accuracy with artifact at one extreme and invention at the other, neither of which are possible to truly achieve.

**Conclusions and implications:** Based on the knowledge gained from analysis of interviews with Broadway costume designers, a model illustrating the costume designer's approach to a historically set production was developed. Conceptually, the model displays the sequential nature of the costume design process as a whole, while demonstrating the iteration applicable to certain stages. By graphically displaying the factors, strategies and results in a designer's approach to a historically set production, this model offers insight into a creative process rarely systematically examined. In addition, this model stimulated the derivation of a substantive theory of the process of incorporating historical accuracy into costume design:

*The higher designer inclination towards historical accuracy and the more favorable the production factors (i.e., applicability, attainability, and performability), the closer costumes will be situated to artifact on the historical accuracy continuum.*

The model and theory are limited and, like outcomes from any qualitative study, are not generalizable. Future research could expand the conclusions to relate to different populations facing different situations, thus expanding their explanatory power. Though previously unexamined in the academic literature, the role of historical accuracy in design – costume or otherwise – is a compelling issue with many potential applications.

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