Communicating Character: The Costume Design for Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull*

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Costume design utilizes clothing to visually communicate key concepts by relying on social consensus between designer and audience about the underlying meaning of clothing choices. In theater, costume design is most often used to indicate the play’s time and place and to reveal aspects of the play’s characters, frequently by comparing them to each other.¹

Costumes designed for Iowa State University’s production of Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull* followed this purpose by reflecting residence and occupation, as well as gender, age, economic status, and dominant personality traits through the use of dress. This presentation explores the costumes of *The Seagull*, and their ultimate success in communicating nonverbal messages.

*The Seagull* is set in 1895 on a Russian country estate. The design process began with historical research, first using textual sources, such as Priscilla Roosevelt’s *Life on the Russian Country Estate* and *Russian Elegance* by Luisa V. Yefimnova and Tatyana S. Aleshina. Pictorial sources like the photographs of Sergey Prokudin-Gorskyy and the paintings of Nikolay Bogdanov-Belsky provided further visual context for the development of *The Seagull*’s costume design. The objective of the design concept was not historical accuracy, however. Not only does the play explore timeless themes like class conflict and beauty in decay, there was concern that the unfamiliarity of historically accurate fashions could confuse or distract audiences. Designer Parul Gupta advocated for “help[ing] a modernday [sic] audience form a more understandable link to the past,”² by presenting recognizable and familiar items even if they were anachronistic to the period being presented. To communicate more clearly to the audience and to enhance the

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timeless qualities of *The Seagull*, the production’s costume design incorporated both contemporary and historical clothing.

A comparison of two costume sketches illustrates the attempt to communicate character traits through the combination of historical and contemporary costume choices. The character of Arkadina (figure 1), the wealthy and dramatic estate owner, was dressed in the late Victorian silhouette with a modern bodysuit and anachronistic wedge sandals and plastic sunglasses. The costume of Paulina (Figure 2), the unhappy wife of the estate’s farm manager, was inspired by the farmers in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century photographs of Prokudin-Gorsky, and consisted of a cotton floral skirt, peasant top, and rubber rain boots. The details of the costumes of both characters, and of each of the other twelve characters in *The Seagull*, were chosen to communicate personality traits, and juxtaposing pieces representing different points in time helped to place each character in the world created for this production, a world distinct from the reality of the audience, yet containing familiar elements to help viewers understand messages imparted to them. Though the audience’s interpretation of clothing worn onstage is a subject for future research, this presentation examines how combining period and contemporary costume elements for the costume design of *The Seagull* allowed the costumes to visually communicate essential character traits.

![Figure 1. Arkadina, owner of the country estate and a famous actress](image1)

![Figure 2. Paulina, wife of the estate’s farm manager](image2)