Historical Accuracy and the Communication of Theatrical Costume Design
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The field of theatrical costume design is based not only on the necessity of literally clothing the bodies of performers but also on the use of that clothing to non-verbally communicate factual and emotional aspects of the production’s characters. Communication in this sense is defined as “the production and exchange of meanings.”¹ Per Jakobson’s communication model, costume designers approach a character’s appearance as a message they encode with shared connotations² and they explicitly adapt their designs to best enable audience understanding. This is especially true when the production is set in the past. As costume designer Jess Goldstein advised, “The costume designer’s job is to take a period and find a way to make it look accessible” to the modern eye of the audience.³

The purpose of this presentation is to explore contemporary theatrical costume designers’ perceptions of how historical costumes affect the success of non-verbal communication. Sixteen Broadway costume designers were interviewed about their approach to historically set productions and their experiences with historical costumes. Emerging from the qualitative analysis of transcribed interviews was the attitude that the stranger the historical aesthetic to modern eyes, the more likely communication was to suffer. Many designers believed that in order to interpret the costumes’ messages correctly, viewers must have some kind of personal relationship with the clothing, and that integrating aspects of the contemporary aesthetic within the historical framework would help to forge that relationship. Therefore designers often intentionally synthesized the historical and contemporary aesthetics into a blended design

² Ibid.
concept that references both past and present. However, communication would be diminished if historical accuracy were compromised to too great an extent. When inaccuracies are too blatant, confusion is the result. Designer Ann Roth cautioned that a certain level of accuracy is necessary for the audience because “they will notice it and then you’ve stopped the progress of the story.”

Considering that Americans view media an average of 13.6 hours per day and every one of the performers in television shows, films, advertisements, web programs, dance pieces, and theatrical productions is in some kind of costume, costume design is remarkably understudied. This research explores costume design through the perspectives of contemporary theatrical practitioners, the methods they utilize to strengthen the non-verbal communication of costumes for historical productions, and the negotiations they make within the creative design process to achieve that goal. This study provides a foundation to broaden the reach of costume design into the discipline of appearance communication and will extend academic research to forms of clothing not typically considered part of the apparel field.

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