Actor - Costume Relationship: Costumes as Live Scenery on Stage?

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Abstract

What is costume? Is it just a cover of the actor's body that reflects already known artistic functions of the costume on stage? Is it possible to add another function to the costume to the extent that it becomes indispensable? Material (fabric), body of the actor, design, gestures, silhouette, and movements can all be part of designing scenery on stage. Although costumes play a great role on stage, we sometimes consider them to be a complimentary element in the scene. But what if we used performers with their costumes to create the environments in which the events of the play take place and as part of the scene structure? The performer and his costume is the scene itself. 2D and 3D solid elements are now transformed into vivid, moving and live scenery / objects. Performer and his costume build the scene. How does the audience perceive this relationship / dialogue between performers and their costumes that form the stage design?

Keywords: Costume, live scenery, performing object, dematerialization, movement.

Introduction

The curtain opens. What we see are the sets. There is no actor/ performer yet. That means the play has not yet begun. But what if the sets we see are performers in costumes who create the setting and the environment? Will the audience perceive it the same?

Costumes are important scene elements that transmit certain values and messages to the audience. "All clothing used on stage is considered costume...they reveal the nature of each character embodying the psychological, social, and emotional condition of the character even before the actor utters a line." (Benedetto, 2012, p.99). In this paper, costumes are introduced from another perspective. They are clothing, masks, and other added parts worn by the actor, but are used as 'humanized' scenery and some set elements. They transform depending on their relation to the actor's body and are an important element on stage. They complement the events and build a dialog with the audiences and the actor.

According to Benedetto, (2012, p.100) contemporary costumes are considered successful if audiences do not notice them at all; however they must be intimately connected to the character. In this study, costumes must be noticed without making a distraction and are intimately connected to the set. They are conceptual and functional objects. We notice this in Julie Taymor's design of the woods in the musical 'The Lion King', as dancers create the elements of the forest with their carefully designed costumes. In Momix's performance, Botanica, as well, the performers are transformed into glowing shapes of birds and flowers. This paper discusses the importance of the costumed human body and his instruments as a communication system which emphasizes several aspects in the performance, and introduces my designs to make the matter more clear .

Craig (2011, p.167) wanted to diminish the presence of the actor on stage by hiding him with objects and suggested that actors should be replaced by large puppets (Uebermarionetten) because they, unlike actors, could not impose their own personalities on a production... he also covered the actor's face with a mask. On the other hand, Apia (2010, p.85) stated that the actor is the bearer of the action. Without him, there is no action, and consequently no drama... This paper discusses the value of the hidden actor inside a costume or mask. Being hidden doesn't mean that he is not there.

Could Sets be Indispensable?

The actor plays a great role in the performance. He is the one who transmits life and actions on stage. This confirms Jones, "A stage setting has no independent life of its own… in the absence of the actor it does not exist. The actor adds the one element that releases the hidden energy of the whole…(Jones, 2004, p.21) Sets are dispensable. Actor is not. But when could sets considered to be indispensable? Sets are essential in the scene when they add a new and important value in the performance. We can achieve this when the performer and the costume are unified, when he and the scenery become one unit. I suggest that we call it 'scenery-costume'. Adding the human factor to the scenery construction transforms it from solid parts

into live components in the scene, into a performing object, thus confirming the importance of the performer on stage and his essential role to the perceiver.

> Schechner (2013) indicates that a mask is more than a way to cloak the identity of the maker. A puppet is more than dead wood or flat leather animated by human actors. Masks and puppets actually constitute second beings who interact with human actors. These performing objects are suffused with a life force capable of transforming those who play with and through them. (p. 203)

Throughout the performance, we notice the relationship between the actor and his shaped costume and the energy shining through both.

Actor-Costume Relationship

Relationship can be defined as "the way in which two or more people or things are connected, or the state of being connected." (Relationship. Oxford dictionaries, 2015) This is the condition of our actor and his costume. Both are very close and intimate, and are closely connected to the extent that the actor is comfortable in his costume which is closely related to his body shape, parts (limbs, torso...) and movements. He can move freely without any obstacles. The costume design plays a great role in reshaping his body thus introducing new forms when he moves. It governs the final shape of the scenery elements.

> This confirms Schlemmer (2010): The transformation of the human body, its metamorphosis, is made possible by the costume, the disguise. Costume and mask emphasize the body's identity or they change it, they express its nature or they are purposely misleading about it; they stress its conformity to organic or mechanical laws or they invalidate this conformity. (p. 270)

Thus the costume and its lines and mechanism confirm the look of the actor hence creating the scenery piece which is a lifeless object until the actor wears it like ordinary costume. He does not carry it. If there is no actor inside, then the scene part will not fulfill the idea because the set must be alive, and this is what the actor creates with his relation between himself and the scenery costume, which is reciprocal. He transmits his input into the costume (object) which then shines and the audiences perceive it as a vivid piece of set. This relation can be seen between performing objects and performers. "The perceived investment of the inanimate with anima or spirit is affected through the convincing transference of a performer's energy to one or more of these figures and forms, endowing them with motion (normally), voice (if necessary) and presence (always)" (Francis, 2012, p. 5). Through the actor's/performer's gestures, movements or even facial expressions the costume/scene element is complimented. This means that these elements are now part of the 'scenery- costume' design, thus part of the scenography. The shape of the actor's body plays a great role in the design, too. Extending his upper limbs, the actor can add to the shape of the scenery part. Joining his lower limbs together results another shape or outline. This can be achieved with the design of the costume itself and its mechanism, if existing.

The environment and its elements on stage, rigid and solid scenery (2D and 3d elements) are transformed into live performers/objects. These can be arches, columns, fountains, couches, cushions, rivers, etc. . (Figure 1,2)

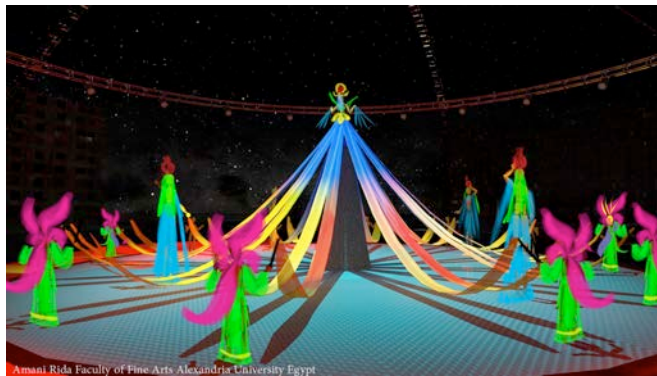Figure 1: Arches and columns showing details of historical style. (Rida, 2014)

Figure 2: Costume of 'Nile Maid' creating the Nile, lotus flowers holding and swinging ends of skirt to depict water meanwhile as if floating on it. (Rida, 2013)

Those are now performing along with other actors on stage. Through my suggested designs, we notice that the actor is sometimes completely hidden and other times visible. Some parts of his body could be revealed, such as his face or arms, or even his shape through the known human silhouette. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Human silhouette showing imaginative architectural details. (Rida, 2014)

This means, the performer or any evidence of his existence under that disguise must be traced perhaps even by walking. If he is completely hidden, he is still there shining through with his energy and presence. Not being seen doesn't mean that he is not there. Just to see the scenery moving or entering onto the stage, the audience connects with it and the perception is altered. There are actors inside the scenery or let us say, there are actors acting as if they are scenery. The shaped costume depicts architectural details of the place or even some elements in the scene. Actors enter the stage, they line up to build the scene. At the moment when they raise their arms or perform a gesture and move in a certain way, according to the choreography, they and their costumes are at the spot identified as arches or any other architectural elements.

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Figure 4: Performer and costume as a partition. Fabric showing tile details and other added parts worn on head. (Rida, 2014)

Other costume designs are only revealed and realized after a certain movement which transforms the costume into other scene elements such as a large cushion or a fountain. The actress (character) steps onto the stage wearing a dress, performs in front of the audience and in the moment she wants to lay down on a large cushion, she just lies with her dress on the floor. The relation between the actress and the dress is now altered. It is not a dress any more, but the lower part is transformed into a cushion on which the actress is laying. (Figure 5) The illusion here depends on the design of the dress, and the padded lower part, the posture of the actress and of course the imagination of the audiences.

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Figure 5: Lower slightly padded part of the costume transforms into a cushion when actress lays on the floor. (Rida, 2014)

The fountain reveals another design concept. The veiled performer enters the stage spinning in circles resulting the special sewn skirt to spin and be stretched so that when she sits in a special posture it is modified into a basin of a fountain. The veil is now conceived as if the water flushing out of the source into the basin. (Figure 6)
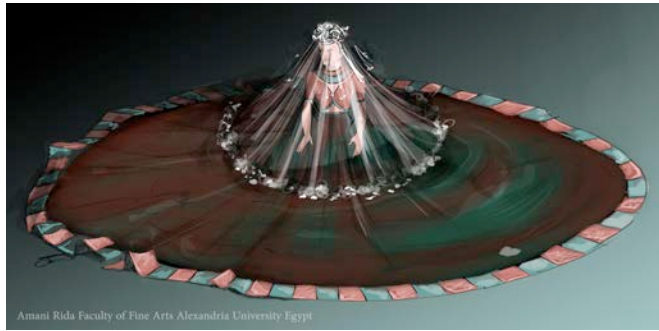
Figure 6: The costume of the actress transforms into a basin of a fountain and the veil is conceived as the flushing water. (Rida, 2014)

Designing Movement: Live Scenery-Interactive Scenery

> Dramatic space is psycho-plastic space, which means that it is elastic in its scope and alterable in its quality. It is space only when it needs to be space. It is a cheerful space if it needs to be cheerful. It certainly cannot be expressed by stiff flats that stand behind the action and have no contact with it. (Benedetto, 2012, p. 44)

Live scenery, that is the actor and his shaped costume, moving around the stage. Audiences see a moving arch or a moving column. Walking scenery. But not only that. Besides lighting and sound effects gestures and movements blow life and soul, and express the mood of the scene, hence are part of the scene design. Above that, they send messages to the spectator and other information about this place or even fulfill a trick like morphing the elements or transforming them from one shape to another with the help of the performer, the material, fabric, movements and the design and system of the costume. Like modern digital interactive scenery, live scenery can also interact with the actor confirming or complimenting his mood and dramatic actions. It also interacts with the audience. Live scenery reflects the mood of the scene. They also interact with the events.

This leads us to the importance of the movement and its design. When there is movement there is life. Through movement, rhythm is created, too. The costume is surely complimented with those elements, too. Movement can be a substitute to wind. The actress with her wide sleeves window shaped costume moving her arms back and forth indicates a windy night. A wavering window indicates the weather or perhaps the state of mind of the scared character. The walking walls narrowing and moving towards the character expresses his fear or hopelessness. The choreography and the movement and gestures of the performer are essential in to transmitting the message to the audience.

Functional and Conceptual Costumes

A functional costume is designed to fulfill a certain function and to operate like a particular item. It can be an arch which is high enough to let the actor enter through, a window through which he looks, or a cushion on which he sits. The same is found in Momix's performance, Baseball, where the performer is dressed as a giant baseball.

According to the Dictionary of Contemporary English for Advanced Learners, conceptual means dealing with ideas, or based on them. Consequently the same dictionary defines conceptual art as technical art in which the main aim of the artist is to show an idea, rather than to represent actual things or people. Scenery costumes are conceptual, too. They interpret aspects in the events such as, "libration" (Figure 7) and "the state of being in a vicious circle" (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Wings shaped arches of the kings foyer from Tawfeek Elhakeem's "Sheherezad". Sheherayar is imprisoned in the place and wants to liberate himself. (Rida, 2014)

Figure 8: Closed arches of the kings foyer from Tawfeek Elhakeem's "Sheherezad". Sheherayar is imprisoned in a vicious circle. (Rida, 2014)

Materials

The 'scenery costume' is a costume which is designed and treated so that its relation to the actor is like normal costumes. The actor wears it like other known costumes but with added parts and elements to transform it to a convincing scenery part. The material used, ranges from normal fabric to any material applied in ordinary stage crafts provided that it is a suitable light material. Wearable technology could of course add to the design and its implementation is essential to fulfill the wow effect and any other special effects.

Conclusion

Why live scenery? Performers connect to their masks, puppeteers connect to their puppets. They blow their energy through them thus transforming them to live animated objects. So does the actor with his shaped costume which is made out of materials, and subsequently is considered as an object which is designed with the shape of scenery parts (objects). The actor along with the live scenery creates a communication system between the performance and the audiences. It improves the experience of the spectator and enhances the conception process. The actor's movements, gestures and costume design add information to the scene and create the mood. They also reflect what the character thinks as if we watch the performance through her eyes. The actor's facial expressions could be a design element in the scene. When there is movement there is time. Time is also another scene element which is added. It adds rhythm to the performance.

Using live, moving scenery, we don't have to care about shifting scenery process anymore. To build the set, all we have to do is let the performers enter the stage. When the action is over, the performers leave the stage and the set disappears.

When the scene is consisted of only actors wearing costumes depicting the scene elements, then we can see it from all angles. There is no set pieces which hides the actor, because the actor is the set piece itself. Thus the scenery costume can be used in designing the scene in the arena stage. (Figure 1)

Live scenery is not the same every time we build it for the performance. Unlike the solid scenery which is built every night, the live scenery costume is every night different than the night before, because it depends on the human body.

Finally, using costumed actors to build the set dematerializes it. It sends a message: The world shouldn't be so materialistic. The actor being trapped in the scenery could also mean that we are still trapped in the material world.

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