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Precious?

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Since graduating from Liverpool Community College's Theatre Wardrobe course in 1994 Toni has also worked as a Costume Maker, Tailor and Wardrobe Supervisor for theatre, film, television and dance.

Liz Garland

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Title: *Precious?*

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Abstract:

The costume industry regularly utilises vintage clothing for performance in theatre and film. Reflecting on garments previously encountered during a career in this industry, the authors contemplated the lives and purpose of such items and their role within a working costume store. Discussion with professionals from various backgrounds evoked a wide range of questions and differing opinions surrounding the idea of value in this context, producing a subjective reaction with no definitive answer. This article contextualises these questions through the study of a single item of historical clothing currently used as costume, encouraging the reader to consider how the value of such pieces are perceived. The concept of the costume stock room as an accessible, living

archive is explored in relation to the recognised traditional archival structure of a museum store where conservation and preservation have priority.

Keywords: Archive; Costume; Sentimentality; Value; Artefact; Vintage; Association; Authenticity.

‘All things have a life and time line. With utilitarian things, the life of an object presents itself through the wear and tear of use [...] like African art, pieces of clothing are meant to be used until they are no longer useable. My desire to capture a moment in the life of a garment before it deteriorates is a way to understand each article of clothing and where it has been. When I photograph a garment, I find its essence through handling it and working with it over a period of time. Sometimes the soul of the piece is revealed by turning it inside out or backwards.’ (Ingalsbe: 2006)

Consider the use of historical clothing worn as costume for performance and the implications this has on the conservation and display of period clothing. Contemplate the concept of the costume store as a living archive and the changing relationship between costume and clothing in terms of preservation, performance, research and education.

If a collection of costumes in a museum is an archive then why not those housed in a working store? What is it that makes a costume stored in a museum ‘precious’, while a costume exhibiting the high level of craftsmanship of a talented costumier can often be found compressed among many others on a stockroom rail?

Costume stores contain a variety of garments and accessories previously used for performance. They are an important resource, containing a selection of both individually designed bespoke garments as well as new or vintage items which have been bought in. As a working archive its contents are continually transforming through their use unwittingly educating the audience through performance without the barriers of accessibility which often surround the museum artefact. A museum archive preserves items of significance, clearly catalogued as an aid for research and education. To quote Sue Prichard ‘Our remit is to ensure that these collections are held in trust for the nation, so that those who come after us can make sense of the past’ (Prichard, 2005, p152). Working in line with the Museums Association’s code of ethics they are obliged to make items available for research and public display. When acquiring an item a curator has to consider a list of ethical guidelines taking into account the cost of preservation and longevity of a piece as well as its importance in history. They must ‘Acquire an item only if the museum can provide adequate, continuing long-term care for the item and public access to it, without compromising standards of

care and access relating to the existing collections.’ Museum Association (2004). In preserving the originality of an artefact meticulous cataloguing records every process.

Artefacts within a museum, while a vital tool for understanding the past through research and display, only represent the time when they were first produced. Items in a costume store, although rarely catalogued, have a history that travels beyond this time, a relevance in the now and the potential for future development in terms of storytelling, offering an alternative approach to traditional archival object based research. By studying such a garment the field of enquiry can be widened to encompass the disciplines of design, costume craft, theatre, film, performance and acting as well as the initial history of a garment worn by an ordinary person.

Our understanding of the term ‘archive’, with its preconceived associations, determines how we judge the worth of an object stored within it. When we change our perception of what an archive can be, we re-consider value in this context. *Does the fact that we can touch, wear and perform in the clothes from a costume store make them seem less ‘precious’ because they are utilised and more accessible? Is it the ritual of donning a pair of protective gloves while visiting a museum archive that adds to the notion of an object’s value?*

What would be the implications of recognising a costume store as an archive full of precious things if store managers embraced the ethics of the museum curator, recording the journeys of costumes for future education and research?

While providing us with interesting stories, it may also have a negative effect, alerting store managers and theatres to the value of their stock and changing the perception of its use.

With so many theatres running at a deficit would this highlight a previously unconsidered commodity of monetary worth, rather than a resource to be used and accessed again and again until it is exhausted? By what criteria would they then be insured and who would make the decision about their future as ‘artefacts’? This enquiry questions and discusses the ethics of using a surviving piece of period clothing as costume, examining what the purpose of such a piece is: to be hidden away, preserved in a box with tissue paper, occasionally viewed by specialists or seen by a wider audience serving its original function; that of an item of clothing to be worn.

If a costume held in a museum archive is considered too precious to be worn and handled, what is it for? Does a piece of clothing have any value or significance if nobody uses it?

Is it our duty to preserve these pieces now, for the education of future generations, or should they be enjoyed while they still have a working life?

What is the value of such a piece when it is used as part of a performance rather than preserved in a museum? What gives these objects their meaning and worth; does sentimentality determine the value of such a garment?

Inspired by the study of photographs of a single garment, the reader is encouraged to examine the issues surrounding the use of vintage and period clothing worn for performance, and discuss the importance of these garments in various contexts: to imagine the journey this particular garment has taken so far, as well as the value gained by its association with a certain actor, designer or performance; through its life in a store where it lives as an archived object and its career on the stage and screen where it becomes part of the character's narrative.

We invite you to consider a 19th century coat (see Figure 1) which is described as a 'very rough, very faded, greenish, patchy, worn 1880's morning coat, edged with faded braid' (Chapman: 2014). It is by modern standards in a sorry state of repair having faded dramatically, bleaching to a pale green, leaving a shadow of its original colour under the collar, lapels and pocket flaps (see Figures 2). There are a variety of obvious repairs with many visible stitches and areas of darning (See Figures 3). The lining is threadbare in places showing several different mending techniques and patching (See Figures 4 5).

Is the poor quality of some of the repairs deliberate, executed badly to imply that the character has repaired it himself or are they the result of an inexperienced hand or 'rush job', to adhere to the fast pace of a tight filming schedule?

How many people have repaired and maintained it and were they respectful of its antiquity, or was it merely seen as a 'tool of the trade'? Through their work, have they preserved it, enhancing its life and prolonging its career or have they caused further damage?

The coat has been loaned to us by Cosprop, a costumiers established in 1965, providing costumes for the theatre, film and television industries. They hold a substantial collection of costumes, both reproductions and originals, and offer a bespoke costume construction service interpreting specific designs.

We are informed that the coat has been hired out over fifty times and has recently returned from a seventeen week filming role in America, where it was used during the production of the 'Boardwalk Empire' television series. The production's designer and supervisor travelled to England to use Cosprop's services as they have a plethora of original clothing from this period, a primary resource that is unavailable in America in such large quantities. The recommended insurance value for the coat is £400. Since we know that items are hired at £50 for the first week

then £5 per week thereafter, we can assume that its current accumulative earnings exceed £2,500.

Records of the details of its early career at Cosprop are limited in terms of the performances it has appeared in. Since its inclusion in the store, its purpose has been to make money for the company and as such, it has not been viewed as an historical artefact which may be of interest to researchers.

Retrospectively, if it could have been predicted that it would survive to have such a long and varied life, would more effort have been made to document its social history; how do we begin to document its sartorial journey when much of the evidence is purely anecdotal?

Can we interpret some of its backstory without the benefit of a detailed cataloguing system that may be found in a museum archive?

In its own 'archive' it hangs on a rail in among over three hundred other coats from a similar period. In this context, is it deemed unimportant due to the multitude of similar garments in the store, its eminence only relevant once it is experienced in isolation?

When first encountering the coat its inherent character inspires many questions about its origin:

Who first purchased and wore it and what importance did it play in their life; was it worn for a special occasion or every day wear, a bespoke made-to-measure piece or one among many identical garments?

What was the class of the original owner and how much did it cost when it was new; was it affordable or did it 'break the bank', a favoured part of their attire or a forgotten piece of a large collection?

When it had served its original purpose, was it bestowed to a loved one or discarded; did the original owner care what happened to it when their need for it had ceased?

Discussion with Cosprop reveals that they have had the coat for approximately thirty years and that due to its present condition it may be imagined that that it was originally a high quality, upper class gentleman's coat, passed onto a servant and then through his family, before being bought or donated to be used as a costume.

As costume makers we appreciate the value of this garment in a particular way, through the skill used to produce it originally and its value in educating us in terms of the cut and construction of the period. We also recognise that its natural wear and tear is an effect a costumier would struggle

to achieve on reconstructed garments through artificial methods, a timely process of 'breaking down' requiring specialised expertise.

How much does our own knowledge and history determine perception and sentimentality towards something so old and broken yet still beautiful?

Is its charm enhanced because we can see how much it has been loved and restored by so many different hands?

Is it because we can see the value of the garment, as a costume, knowing how difficult it would be to replicate? What stories do its wounds narrate and would the same feelings be generated by using a reproduction?

As an article of clothing used for costume, the garment has clearly had a long career. Its present commercial value comes from its use, but this use causes its deterioration and will lead to its eventual demise. We are informed by Cosprop that its popularity is in its authenticity and although attempts are made to recreate accurate reproductions, without access to period fabrics, the results are rarely as satisfying.

There are obvious benefits of using an original piece of clothing over a re-construction in terms of achieving realism on the stage and screen. The quality of its natural ageing enhanced its career in a world of high definition and filmed theatre productions, its deterioration increasing its rental value and popularity.

What does it contribute to the performance for the audience, the actor and the costume team? What stories can it tell us and what stories has it told to others?

Why would a designer choose this coat and how can it aid the development of the designer's overall creative concept? What character does it suggest to them; has the coat itself become a character in its own right?

As it ages, how do its parts change? Are the artists who wear it made aware of its antiquity and can its authenticity help the actor to inhabit the role; enhancing the metamorphosis into character? Does an audience appreciate its originality and has it enhanced their belief in the characters the garment has helped to portray?

Bernie Chapman of Cosprop explains that it is increasingly problematic to find original garments for stock, with larger sizes being particularly difficult to locate. It is clear that original pieces of period clothing will continue to deteriorate through use and are therefore a finite resource. This

results in a contradiction: that as the coat becomes older and more damaged it also becomes more valuable.

For how much longer will this coat be suitable for performance and who decides when enough is enough in terms of its usefulness; what happens then?

Is it acceptable to let it deteriorate in this way or should it be preserved, encased in tissue in a dark drawer, analysed and restored by experts; what would be more respectful? Would the answer be different if it were the only surviving coat of its type?

If it were to be put in a museum, would it only then be seen by curators and researchers who seek it out, or would it be displayed as an interesting example of a part of ordinary life, educating the public about the social history of the period, its career as a costume forgotten?

Would it be of any interest to a museum, considering its current condition, or would its character enhancing decomposition be viewed in terms of a costly renovation?

The garment itself could be viewed as unremarkable a standard example of a coat from the Victorian period. In its contemporary time and environment, it would not have impressed or provoked a reaction.

How does social history affect decisions made in relation to preservation?

Being that designer fashion is more likely to be documented in its time, is it right that we should be more enthusiastic about preserving it, or is it more important to save evidence which may give us a glimpse into the everyday lives of ordinary people?

Could it be forced into prominence by an association with a famous actor or celebrated performance, put on display and visited by fans; would this difference in perception result in an increase in value? Would its originality and authenticity still be admired, or purely its association with fame?

Recently the 'Cowardly Lion' costume from the 1939 MGM musical *The Wizard of Oz* was sold by James Comisar of the LA TV Museum at auction for over 2.5 million dollars. Before he acquired it in the 1970's, it lay 'languishing forgotten in an old MGM building, before being rescued by a junk dealer cleaning out the abandoned building.' (Hollywood Reporter: 2014). Mr Comisar, who had

the costume restored and authenticated as the actual costume worn by Burt Lahr in the film, describes the moment during the auction when it came up for sale:

‘When the “Oz” costumes came to the block, a hush fell over the sales room. It was like a church in there. People were very respectful and reverential. There was a sense that there was a passing of the responsibility. [...] From a garbage bag to \$2.6 million, it was a magical journey.’ (Wall Street Journal: 2014)

There was a secondary costume used in the film which sold at auction for less than one million dollars. Although identical in every way it was clearly not deemed as ‘precious’ as it was only worn by a stunt man. (Evening Express: 2014)

What is our fascination with famous artefacts and their relationship with certain people and events?

Is it only through association and authentication that a garment becomes precious; the materials and craftsmanship involved in its production becoming a secondary factor in its valuation?

It is clear from this example the awe this type of memorabilia inspires by its iconic link and, despite the two costumes being identical, the value is clearly in the sentimentality and association, not the object itself. An emotion itself cannot be materialised into something of worth, hence objects are relied upon to take on the persona and to qualify for the value it evokes.

Although the coat, central to our study, is used by Cosprop for commercial gain it is clear that the value of this piece cannot only be measured by its monetary worth, which in itself is difficult to estimate given the amount of factors which must be taken into consideration. Each individual determines value in their own distinct way depending on a variety of influences and experiences. The emotions, feelings and questions the study of such a garment evokes gives it a value which is impossible to quantify and if there are no definitive answers...

What is precious?

Acknowledgments

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