

# National Theatre

## Section introductions for the exhibition *Costume at the National Theatre*, by curator Aoife Monks

### **Costume at the National Theatre**

Costume is one of the first things that we see in a theatre production. And yet, the thought, energy and expertise that it takes to distress and muddy a uniform, construct a giant caterpillar, dress an actor in a corset in under 60 seconds or eliminate fake blood and real sweat from a beautiful silk dress is often invisible to audiences. Here you will glimpse some of the work of the National Theatre's Costume department and witness costume's journey from design to construction, sourcing and alterations, to dressing, repairs and laundry. The 46 people in the Costume team possess astonishing skills, deep expertise and an on-going commitment to excellence. This exhibition invites you into their world.

### **Before the Costume**

At the beginning of every production, the process of making costume requires extensive experimentation – and conversation. Designers, costume supervisors, makers, actors and buyers all contribute to the process of bringing a character to life through clothes. Translating designs into reality requires careful thought, sketching and drawing, collages and mood boards, making patterns, cutting fabric, scrutinising materials, experimenting with dye techniques – imagining a costume into existence.

### **Attention to Detail**

Costumes are made to be viewed from a distance, but up close they reveal intricate details – from perfectly tailored pockets, to carefully chosen buttons. These details tell us what a costume means for the people who make it, indicating the expertise needed to translate a design into a three-dimensional object, which must be built to last. Making is personal, and the makers care deeply about getting it right. They describe this commitment as 'having the fingers' for the work, and it is in their hands that we see the dedication to excellence that underpins their craft.

### **Managing the Stuff**

Producing theatre costume often relies on turning everyday stuff into objects of wonder for the stage. Amassing and managing this stuff in the right quantities at the right time constitutes a feat of logistics. After all, not every costume is made from scratch. Just as often, costumes emerge from the buyers' judicious sourcing of original vintage dresses, high street hoodies, military uniforms or ankle boots, all of which may be altered later in one of the workrooms. Knowing the right ecclesiastical supplier in London, or sourcing the perfect fabric from Delhi, is essential for getting costumes right.

## **Shaping the Body**

The shape and structure of costume matters deeply for its meanings on stage. Costume, after all, organises the contours of the human body. Makers pay as much attention to the inside of a costume as its outside, ensuring that the actor's body is proportioned correctly for the world of the show. Pants, Spanx, bras, panniers, corsets and girdles for both men and women, along with contoured body padding or pregnancy bumps, all play a vital role in changing the actor's silhouette in the right way, bringing their character to life on the stage.

## **Sculpting with Materials**

Makers have an intimate knowledge of how materials behave – and misbehave – on stage. The art of making costume props (all of the objects worn by actors on stage) tests the limits of these materials. Working with latex, steel, leather, fabric and wire, the makers draw on expert knowledge of these substances' capacity to impersonate other substances, or work in combination with other textiles. By doing so, these hats, jewels, swords, armour, unfurling wings, or growing ears, transform the body through miraculous feats of engineering.

## **Storytelling on Stage**

Every piece of costume is a quiet storyteller on stage. How else could we know that the characters have just come inside from a horribly rainy evening, or that their clothes are old and worn, or that they live in the 1780s, without the marks and prints on costumes telling us so? Through techniques of printing, dyeing and breaking down costumes, textile artists translate the mood and atmosphere of a scene, or the sense of time passing, or the particular status of a character, into new textures, colours, patterns, stains on cloth, and beautiful prints.

## **Costume in the Wings**

Changing costume mid-performance is an art in itself. In the wings and the dressing rooms, both before and during the show, the dressers help actors in and out of their clothes. Their precision backstage keeps the story moving on stage. In their carefully written 'plots', each dresser describes every action they must take over the course of a show with split-second accuracy. The shifts of time suggested by a play's narrative take place through changes of clothing, and the dresser's work helps to tell us these stories, invisibly, from the wings.

## **Caring for Costume**

Just like the characters (and actors) wearing them, costumes undergo a nightly odyssey on stage. They suffer real sweat and fake blood, rips and make-up stains, all of which require the expertise of the Running Wardrobe team to ensure that the costumes look the same night after night. Upstairs in the laundry room after the show has ended, these stains must be removed, underwear washed and dried, repairs made and shirts ironed. The costumes become pristine again, looking as they did at the very first performance, ready to go on stage once more.

## **Back in the Spotlight**

The life of a costume doesn't end when the show does. The Hire department's 90,000 meticulously ordered costumes are carefully repaired and made ready for reuse in new performances at the NT, as well as other theatres, schools and colleges across the UK, and for television, film and advertising. These rows of beautifully maintained bodices, armour and gloves anticipate new owners, but are also a testament to the shows that have gone, retaining the ghostly memories of their previous wearers.

This care for costume in the Hire department is echoed throughout the work of all of the Costume team at the National Theatre. They construct costume, adapt it, source and buy it, transform it, wrangle with it, repair it, organise it, clean it, preserve it, remember it, love it. The show may end, but the work of costume continues, with all the care and commitment, the skill and time that its secret lives demand.