

Participants:

Dr Kate Dorney, Curator of Modern & Contemporary Performance at the V&A

Paul Bevan, photographer and visual artist

Cathy Haill, V&A curator and circus specialist

Amy de la Haye, curator and fashion historian

Claire Christie, costumier and senior lecturer

Nicky Gillibrand, costume designer

Charlotte Hodes, fine artist

Marios Antoniou, MA fashion student

Darren Cabon, fashion designer

Transcript:

Kate Dorney: Sixty thousand files of Arts Council material, ten thousand stage plans, twenty thousand stage designs, twenty thousand pieces of costume, three million photographs, two hundred venues where we systematically collect the programs, around five thousand production boxes of material, around two hundred and fifty thousand production files, about two thousand index cards detailing individual performances...

Paul Bevan: Architecturally, what I find quite interesting about this space and the way that it's laid out. It is sort of organised - I'm sure it's all terribly organised - and it also looks quite chaotic. But nevertheless there's a huge physical structure to the way this space is laid out and I think it's an interesting location in which to engage with knowledge, empirical knowledge.

Kate Dorney: It's the biggest collection of its kind in the world in terms both of its scope chronologically and in terms of the richness and complexity. We don't just collect theatre, dance and opera but also musical, circus, rock and pop and pantomime. From beautiful sixteenth century ballet décor and designs for a very rarefied audience to a twenty-first century pantomime.

Cathy Haill: The wonderful thing is that we've been given these trunks that Edwin wore; they were such working clothes and weren't kept in a way that many actors and actresses kept their costumes but if you look at the workmanship in them it's just beautiful, and this [referring to the embroidery in gold and silver thread] would obviously have shone a lot more. They would have been just worn just with a leotard.

Kate Dorney: We have about three million photographs, twenty thousand stage designs, twenty thousand pieces of costumes going from tiny bits of

paste jewellery and ballet shoes up to huge head-dresses and complete outfits. Everything from anonymous designers to Dior and Picasso and Cecil Beaton.

Amy de la Haye: Here we have a dress that Cecil Beaton designed for the stage production *My Fair Lady* which was shown in London in 1958. He was critically acclaimed for these costumes which he designed as a sort of nostalgic interpretation of dress from just before the First World War. I've never seen this before.

Kate Dorney: You're looking at the accumulation of only a century of collecting which is not very long in museum terms, but because of the subject matter it's lots of different people bringing their collections together. One man's collection of 18th century prints meets another man's collection of 18th century books which meets a solicitor's collection of carte-de-visite photographs from the 19th century. It's layer upon layer of material. The last forty years that the department has existed it's really just the very top layer.

Claire Christie: Evening Standard 1954... Fabulous Lady... this is obviously a 'special' on her...

Kate Dorney: Before we were a museum and when lots of people wanted a museum [of theatre], they started out by only collecting [material from] London and only collecting 'legitimate' theatre, completely ignoring musical and popular entertainment, the kind of things that people on the ground would understand. We were much more like a fine art style collection. Then gradually, in order to make us into a museum, people started to collect costume like the Ballets Russes Costume for example.

Nicky Gillibrand: That's amazing... isn't that just the nicest thing...it's beautiful... In a way it's quite amazing that it survived so long, you can't imagine that the designer thought they [the costumes] would still be alive with us now.

Kate Dorney: The founding collections of the museum are the result of Gabriella Enthoven who was an amateur actress, dramatist and society lady, who decided that there must be a Theatre Museum and she went round successively lobbying every museum and government, she did it for thirteen years, and then the V&A made the mistake of holding an exhibition of international stage design, and she pounced on them and eventually inveigled her way in with a collection of flat material and the V&A very kindly let her stay and let her employ two assistants from her own private income. She got no money, and she paid for everything she acquired, and during that period we acquired lots of really amazing 18th century stage designs, some very early material.

Charlotte Hodes: This is 'Italian Jupiter', late 18th century, wonderful. This is a wonderful, hand coloured print of different types of dances. It's like the whole world on a stage and everything is contained within it and although it suggests that it goes beyond the page, you get the feeling that this world exists here, that there's nothing else, everything you want to know about the world is all in

here.

Kate Dorney: [Regarding visitors to the archive] We have a pretty even split between practitioners and academics so if you include academics as right down to undergraduates. We have also set designers, costume designers, tv researchers.

Marios Antoniou: For my MA proposal I am working to the theme of the clown, performance and circus. I am looking to early costumes in order to draw inspiration, and my aim is to transform costume into contemporary fashion.

Darren Cabon: There's so much about this that refers to Comme de Garcon. They did a collection in the early 90s which was all wool tailoring, not pressed at all. When the garments were cut and frayed and then put together without any pressing at all, you got this very same effect.

Charlotte Hodes: I've never actually seen a costume lying flat. I've only ever seen costumes either vertically or on people and in order to animate I have to sense that somebody was in it. My instinct is to project the figure into it and actually to put it vertically and try and imagine how the garment would function on a moving body. Even here, lying here like a carcass you really sense a sort of atmosphere and almost the kind of music and the ambiance that would be there, all that is contained within the garment.

What's interesting about embroidery from the point of view of a fine artist is that it is essentially not always a kind of linear process. Obviously you can block in areas but you have still got the stitch and the thread so it's very much like a drawing. It is a drawing really, it's a drawing with thread and that's what so thrilling about it. In the equivalent as a painting you can then see the drawn thread and then you see these wonderful rich, dense, sort of velvet reds as painted areas. I can project it as a painting.

[On drawing objects in the museum and in the archive] You undo the distance that you have when you look at an object in a museum. There is a kind of distance and an awe and quite rightly because these objects that we're looking at are absolutely wonderful and so one is in awe of them but I think that drawing allows you to get over that, so that you can look much more directly at the artefact and connect much more closely. You can almost say this is just you and the object and there's nothing between you.

Kate Dorney: [On viewing objects] It's a very rich world. You can see things on the internet and you don't necessarily have to come and physically see something. But usually what happens is that if someone comes in with a yen to see a particular thing it will be because they have seen it on the internet so there's a kind of reversed Benjaminian aura, the mechanical reproduction is not good enough you must come and worship at the real thing.

Amy de la Haye: I'm so excited to see this costume because I know it's pink, and I've written about it, but all the photographs are black and white so in my mind's eye it's still black and white and beige, so I've been really, really looking forward to seeing how pink the pink is. It looks much more artisanal

than I'd imagined, I'd imagined it was going to be modernistic and quite a smooth knitted jersey but it actually looks like something hand knitted that someone's grandmother could have made. And as dance costume actually it's quite surprising that it has survived when you think how much it would have been worn.

It's really exciting to see these costumes because they've come from possibly one of the most famous Diaghilev productions, *Le Train Bleu* from 1924, that was shown in London, Paris and Monte Carlo. For me seeing these is extraordinary because I have done a lot of work on Chanel and I've looked at her fashion collections and from everything I have read I believed that these costumes would be almost indistinguishable from the sort of sportive designs that she created for her fashion clientele in the 1920s but actually they are completely distinctive.

I have always known it was pink, because all the photographs you see contemporaneously are in sepia tones or in black and white, in your mind's eye, the costumes are in neutral colours and I think the biggest treat for me is to see quite how rose pink the pink is.

All clothes have got some sort of imprint of wear but the exciting thing about knitwear is perhaps more than any other type of clothing is that it adapts to the shape of the body and so it really is sort of entwined with lives lived and performances performed.

What's intriguing is the fact that this was a really high profile production but they still mend the costumes, whereas you might think the lead dancer would get new ones but it's mended all over which also really adds to the human connection of the garment.

Nicky Gillibrand: I can't believe I'm actually standing in front of them, sorry, it's quite an emotional moment. The back is just unbelievable; I love the fact the decision not to have a sleeve as a full sleeve of the beige grey wool. The fact that it is a two piece sleeve but they have done it out of two different fabrics, it is really interesting people don't often think like that.

I love the fact that it stops there [points at panels on the arm] and you've got a seam there, and a there and it's beautiful, it's really beautiful.

[Looking at flat costume on table] It's an unbelievable amount of clothing for a dance costume, plus he's got those giant boots on as well... I just want to see the whole thing on stage now really. This bit here almost looks like it's something that was a process, I suppose it's not quite finished, I love the pencil lines.

Kate Dorney: If you're a researcher you can access flat material in the reading room or the things that on display in the museum. You don't get to see all the things that are in deep storage or have access to set models or costumes or swords or a pair of acrobats' trunks, which for some people is very important - just to see the movement, how things changed, how they wear. It's very difficult to have access to those kinds of things.

Darren Cabon:...and interesting that all of the embroidery was placed on afterwards, after the construction of the garment.

Amy de la Haye: Is it silk lined all the way up?

Susana Hunter: I think the trouser are.

Amy de la Haye: So they wouldn't be itchy?

Nicky Gillibrand: It's got this all the way through, has it? Susana Hunter: Yes, it's a multilayered skirt.

Charlotte Hodes: Also the fact that it's raised, it's tactile it's coming up, it's more than decoration its ornamentation it's absolutely very, very physical.

Claire Christie: So can you see that that's cut straight like that on the shoulders? It causes it to be a cowl and it's actually not straight across, its cut slightly curved up... again its slightly high waisted and has got diamond [shaped pattern pieces] in... so this is on the straight coming around from the back, on the hip it's on the straight. On the front panel of the skirt it's all bias as well, isn't that beautiful, how clever is that.

Kate Dorney: Most of the people that come here have been coming since they first found it and keep finding new things. I guess my use of it is about trying to encourage other people to use it.