Re-Encounters

Drawings, quotes, fragments, costumes, collages, garments and photographs gathered from a group of designers, artists and researchers who participated in the Encounters in the Archive research project and film. The work included has been created as a result of the direct interaction with archived objects, housed in the V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.

Donatella Barbieri
Research Fellow in Design for Performance, jointly V&A and London College of Fashion

Encounters in The Archive

The film ‘Encounters in the Archive’ is part of a research investigation, which wrestles with the elusive subject of costume for performance. Since costume remains so poorly debated when it appears on stage and it is seemingly absorbed into the body of the performer, can it speak about itself when separate, as it lies dormant in acid-free boxes in the archive? Or as when fixed in an old photograph of a star of the Victorian stage? Or as it evokes the absent body of the performer when prepared for exhibition on a mannequin?

To seek answers to these questions from the V&A Theatre and Performance Collections, archived at Blythe House in West London, I invited a group of designers, artists and authors whose own research connects with my desire to articulate the complexity of this poorly debated area of design for performance. The participants were able to encounter and respond to specific museum objects that had once been costume on stage or that represented costume. With the help of archivists, objects were selected that addressed the specific interests of the participants, in order to draw out a dialogue between the object and its interlocutor.

The disparate nature of the works that resulted represents the range of disciplines of the participants. Ideas from this interaction with this archive have now made their way, transformed, onto the pattern cutting table, the stage, the catwalk, into publications and galleries. Selected aspects of these individual responses are assembled in this book.

Paul Bevan’s research as a photographer is around capturing a sense of suspended states and transitions. The resulting photographs play with the notion of the archive, the space itself being the subject of a visual dialogue. As such they set the scene for the rest of the encounters.

Costume designer Nicky Gillibrand encountered costumes by Mikhail Larionov and Giorgio De Chirico ahead of her work designing extraordinary costumes for the production of Government Inspector at the Young Vic, captured here in Keith Pattison’s expressive photographs. Curator and fashion historian Amy de la Haye articulates the differences between theatre and fashion through analysis of the material and visual impact of a costume by Coco Chanel. In the on-going research for de la Haye’s forthcoming book on the House of Worth, Victorian actress Lillie Langtry’s ‘cartes-de-visite’ are a valuable new source.

The ‘re-encounter’ with fine artist Charlotte Hodes reveals not only the large collage on her studio wall that had been influenced by the 18th century Meleto Castle costumes, but also the studio itself as an archive of fragments and forms, and the infinite number of creative possibilities this affords her. Costumier Claire Christie’s research on the bias cut as the embodiment of a femininity unmediated by the constraints of pre-determined and restrictive physical shapes finds expression in the detailed study of a 1928 costume for Cecily Byrne. Marios Antoniou’s suits, captured on the catwalk in Alex Maguire’s photograph, revives the ghosts of Edwardian clowns and reflects in the images of the fragments left from the spectacle of the show the common ground between the performer and the fashion designer. Finally Filmmaker Netia Jones comments on how her camera intensifies and highlights the quality of the encounters with the objects and with the space of the archive itself.

(*facing page*) Mask for Soldier in Chout, designed by Mikhail Larionov, 1921. S.755-1980. Photographed in the Conservation Department of the V&A.

Paul Bevan

Photographs by Paul Bevan

"We are dressed but at the same time naked under our clothes, with dress and photographs alike as keepers of secrets and fonts of suggestion.

Thus, costume and photography present a kind of 'simultaneous dilemma' that can be framed within the realm of the metaphysical; an idea that is situated between the actual and the notional.

Similarly, in thinking around theatrical performance, and photographic images as capsules of performed time/space, an illusive appearance is dressed over the body or thing/referent itself. The theatre, or suspension of disbelief, sits in the 'in-between', neither one thing nor the 'other'. This can be seen in terms of a liminal space, where liminality defines a 'threshold' between two different existential planes (such as conscious and unconscious); photography can present an order that is permanently liminal, and the theatre temporarily liminal (lasting only for the duration of the piece).

Such space exists at Blythe House. It exists in the content and context of much of the stored material (costumes and photographic images from the theatre). But as a repository of an archive of objects (and secrets) it becomes a kind of liminal space by virtue of the latency of the work that is lying dormant (like photography). But it is also an exhibition in the present, and I wanted to respond to this idea as a site-specific performing body using photography."

Text adapted from the paper Photographic suspension and disbelief: fashioned bodies in oscillation by Paul Bevan

Nicky Gillibrand

On being invited to visit the archive, Nicky Gillibrand chose to view costumes that were being prepared for the exhibition of Diaghilev and Le Ballets Russes, and particularly those for Chout (1921), by Mikhail Larionov, and Le Bal (1929), by Giorgio De Chirico. In the De Chirico's Le Bal costumes she noted the fragmented and beautifully painted suits for the guests, which made use of the seams and construction panels to create the duplicities and deceptions embodied by the masked ball scene in the ballet; as three-dimensional, tailored paintings of the Surrealist artist, they reveal the creative potential of costume when perceived as 'art that moves'. In the Lariniov costumes for Chout, which resist any notions of being restrained in their play with scale, proportion and contrast, and yet achieve a balanced whole, Gillibrand saw the poverty of the material used and the rawness of the construction, itself adding to their expressiveness. She also noted the way the panels were composed and layered and the lines drawn on by pencil, evidence of the hand of the artist at work.

In developing the costumes for the Young Vic's production of Government Inspector, which opened in June 2011, Nicky Gillibrand used old suits and uniforms she unearthed in their theatre store. Reconstructing and layering them with new, extended forms, she commented implicitly on the artificiality of the characters that wear them and their egos. This layering of textiles and meaning is a metaphor for the labour that makes costume work, as a synthesis of ideas, dress and of performance. It is in this way that costume becomes an overt gesture, to be completed by the moving body. As such it carries its own rhythm, narrative quality and artistic expression. This is evident in Nicky Gillibrand's costume drawings, which, in the process of being brought to life on stage, continue the artistic process started on the page. She has spoken in the past about how she "draws and draws" until her drawings "felt like the characters". The act of drawing, the extensive research, the collecting of textiles and old clothes, the protracted conversations with performers and creative collaborators, succeed, through a continued artistic process, to conjure up, first on paper and then on the stage, the character, in the moment of performance.

Peopled by pretentious and dysfunctional characters wearing Gillibrand's anachronistic, self-deluding and 'inbred' costumes, Government Inspector describes a world governed by the autocratic, egotistical despot, 'Mayor', whose downtrodden servants reveal his shabby soul. This is a place with self-determined and bureaucratic rules and the costumes are drawn eclectically from a broad range of sources to communicate an absurdity, which is nonetheless somewhat familiar. The costumes eschew any misplaced notion of historical or geographic correctness in favour of creating character, meaning, comedy and, where needed, empathy.

(*right*) Costume for a Male Guest in Le Bal, designed by Giorgio De Chirico 1929. S.860-1980.

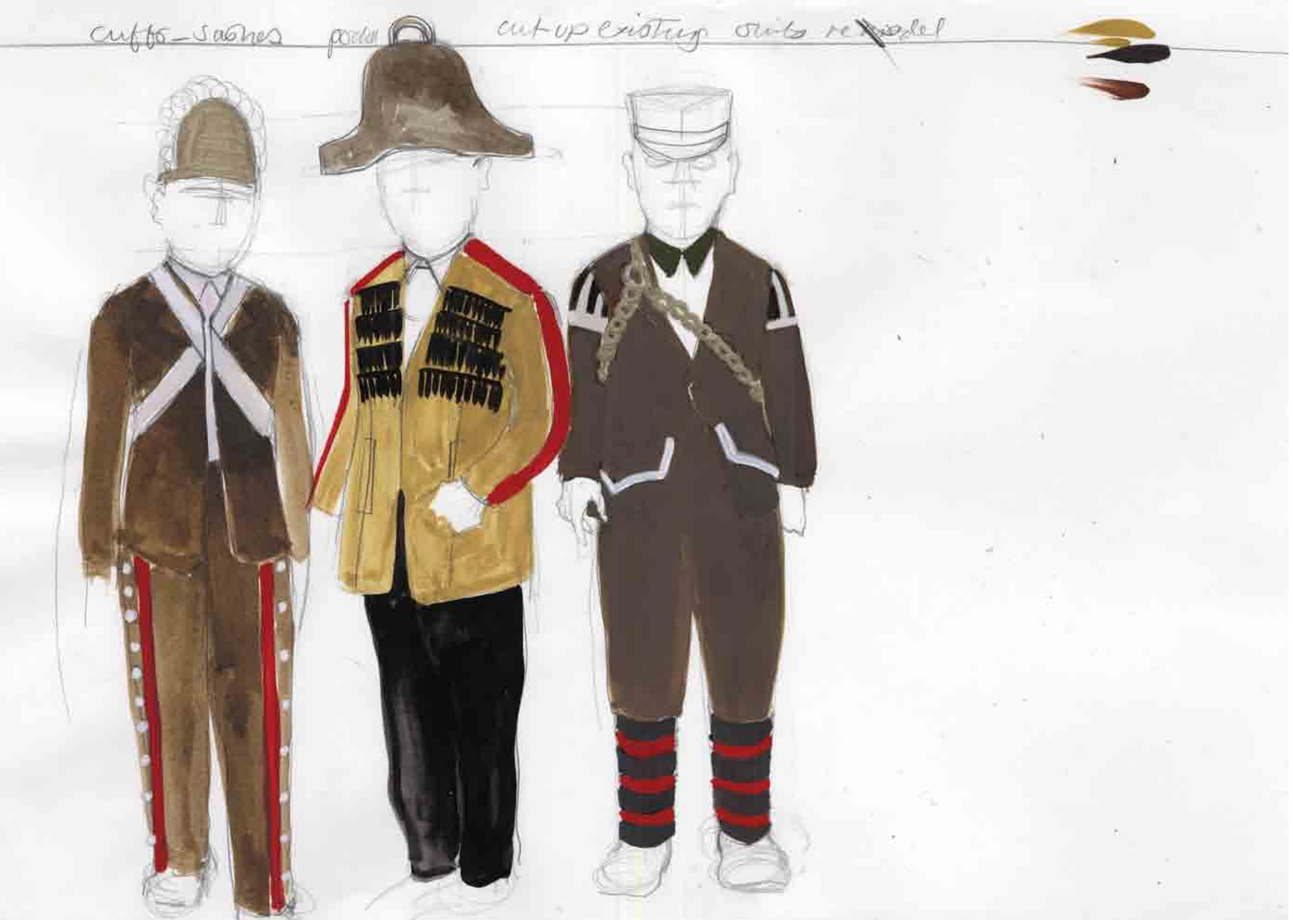
(*facing page*) Bodice for the Buffoon's Wife in Chout, designed by Mikhail Larionov, 1921. S.762-1980. Photographed in the archive.

(*facing page*) Costume drawing for Civil Servants by Nicky Gillibrand

Photograph by Keith Pattison

Detail of Soldier's costume from Chout, designed by Mikhail Larionov, 1921. S.755-1980, photographed in the archive.

Photograph by Keith Pattison



Detail of costume for the Young
Man in Le Bal, designed by Giorgio
De Chirico, 1929. S.855-1980.
Photographed in the archive.

(*facing page*) Uniform Colour Idea, drawing by Nicky Gillibrand

(*right*) Photograph by Keith Pattison

(*facing page*) Costume drawing for Mayor's Servants by Nicky Gillibrand

(facing page) Costume drawing for Town Officials by Nicky Gillibrand

Photograph by Keith Pattison

(*facing page*) Costume drawing for Poor of Russia by Nicky Gillibrand

Photograph by Keith Pattison

Amy de la Haye

Amy de la Haye reflects on her first-ever viewing of the costume for La Perlouse in Le Train Bleu, designed by Chanel in 1924, viewed on 13 May 2010.

"It looks much more artisanal than I'd imagined – I'd imagined it was going to be modernistic and quite smooth, machine-knitted jersey, but it actually looks hand knitted – like something a grandmother could have made. I would never have expected this vibrant, rose pink colour; nor for it to look as handcrafted as this and certainly not to be this colour. It is a real treat to see it – not what I was expecting at all – especially from looking at the photographs of the period, which are all in black and white. That is the beauty of looking at the real thing, just opens your eyes.

The dancer, Lydia Sokolova, remembers putting this costume on for the first time and it feeling quite radical. They then wrapped her head up in suede, which set up a whole new vogue for skullcaps, and they gave her a pearl earring. The influence in Paris of the theatre on art and fashion at the time was extraordinary.

I've done a lot of work on Chanel and I've looked at her fashion collections and from everything that I'd read, I believed that these costumes would be almost indistinguishable from the sport designs that she created in the 1920s but in fact they are completely distinctive. She adapted her fashion aesthetics in a more overt way than I had anticipated. It must have been itchy as well.

Also, it is intriguing that this was a really high profile production and yet they still mended the costumes whereas you would have expected the lead dancer would be supplied with new ones. I cannot believe how artisanal and hand-mended it is. The mending really adds to the human connection of the garment.

To me that is the magic of old clothes. All old clothes have an imprint of the body but the exciting thing about knitwear is how it adapts to the shape of the body more than other fabrics. It really is entwined with lives lived and performances performed."

Costume for La Perlouse, Le Train Bleu, designed by Coco Chanel, 1924. S.837-1980.

Lydia Sokolova and Leon Woizikovsky, 1924, by Bassano

(*above*) Lillie Langtry, photographed by Alfred Ellis & Walery, S.143:515-2007.

Sepia photographs of Mrs. Langtry, ca. late 19th - early 20th Century, collected by Guy Tristram Little (d.1953).

(*from left to right*) Museum numbers, S.143:515-2007; S.143:340-2007; S.143:342-2007; S.143:350-2007; S.143:331-2007; S.143:349-2007.

In the research for her forthcoming book on the couture of the House of Worth, Paris, Amy de la Haye encounters 'cartes-de-visite' of the famously beautiful Victorian actress Lillie Langtry (1853-1929).

"Charles Worth designed outfits specifically for Lillie Langtrey, for both her on-stage roles stage and her off-stage persona. The V&A's Archive of Art and Design houses the House of Worth Archive, while the Theatre and Performance Archive places its emphasis on the actor. In the former, there are several albums which contain the records of Worth's couture garments, photographed while worn by house models or on mannequins. The latter houses 'cartes-de-visite' of this very well-known and fashionable beauty.

In the photographic albums held in the Art and Design Archive the emphasis is on the clothes being presented on static mannequins. Where a 'house model' was photographed, she would be positioned in the same way - very precisely in order to show the designs in poses that were preset and sequential, regardless of the garment the model was wearing. These photos of Lillie Langtry are completely different; we see her using a range of expressive poses and performing potential roles within a single garment."

Amy de la Haye concludes that "Lillie Langtrey was famous for always wearing the latest fashion on stage and was more successful when she wore couture on stage than when she had to wear historical dress". In this symbiotic relationship with the theatre, couture gave her glamour and presence; she, in turn, offered the couture house not only the opportunity to publicise their work but also to see it embodied, performed and contextualised.

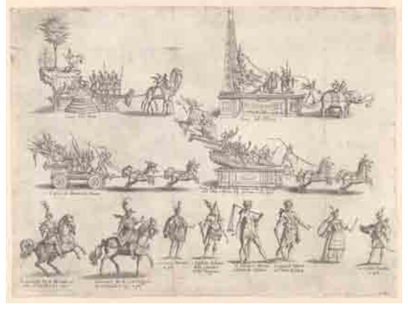
Charlotte Hodes

The Meleto Castle costumes, circa 1750, selected by fine artist Charlotte Hodes, lack a named 'author' or even any reference to a specific performance. In encountering these costumes Hodes, in whose work the female form is juxtaposed with complex and layered surfaces, immediately noticed the way her eye was invited to travel across and around the sides of the torso by the "surprisingly bold pattern". The "luscious and swirling" raised silver and gold embroidery "exists as its own object" in a structured composition of enlarged scrolls and flowers, "resplendent" whilst contrasting against the red velvet on which it is "encrusted". "The other wonderful contrast you have is the tight stitching, which you probably wouldn't see on stage; you can see the directional changes of the stitching. Then you get the contrast with the small, frond-like and flickering details around the edges".

The Meleto Castle costumes would have reflected candlelight. The changing lines of the threads in the embroidery pattern, the moving, fringed, peplum pieces and the shape of the velvet garment itself would have absorbed and reflected the light in different directions, emphasizing both movement and structure. Notwithstanding the weighty impression of this costume, which was made on a hessian base and embroidered with precious metals, the 'swirling' motion materialized in the raised pattern of the embroidery against the velvet echoes the pattern and movement of a baroque dance.

"This garment really evokes a rich atmosphere - the music and the ambience, all that is contained within it". The relationship with space, light and movement are all embedded into this costume, which seems to be holding the dance within itself. When brought out momentarily into the light, the Meleto Castle costume maintains the spatially and historically sited performative effectiveness that has shaped it.

"All you need to know about the world is contained in here" concludes Charlotte Hodes. On re-encountering Hodes in her studio to view the large collage that had been influenced by her encounter with the Meleto Castle costumes, one is reminded of the whole world being contained within the artist's studio. The studio itself is an archive of fragments, forms, bodies and ideas which affords an infinite number of creative possibilities. She found immediately the sketches she made in the archive and the references she had from the visit, which led, in part, to the creation of the large collage being completed on the wall. The use of surface and composition, like the Meleto Castle costume, seems to hold the movement within itself, its dark tones and the luscious and swirling forms that compose the figure on the page balancing the sense of instability of the figure, who seems about to dance her own way away from her pedestal.



(from left to right)

Jacques Callot's etchings, 1616.
S.1836-2009

Jacques Callot's etchings, 1615.
S.4208-2009

Jacques Callot's etchings, 1616.
S.1835-2009

Costume from Meleto Castle, Italy. Linen covered in crimson velvet with raised silver embroidery. Mid-18th century. S.92-1978

Large collage from the Series:
Figures on Pedestals
Collaged, printed and painted papers
Approximate size 280 x 175cm
Charlotte Hodes

Marios Antoniou

At the time of filming, Marios Antoniou was an MA Fashion student at London College of Fashion. His encounter in the archive was arranged by Course Director Darren Cabon to support the development of his menswear collection, for which he applied a design methodology informed by the study of images of Victorian and Edwardian clowns.

Amongst the costumes viewed was the patched, distressed clown costume worn by Maurice of Maurice & May, a comedy cycling clown act, and which was made out of deconstructed suits. It is, in Darren Cabon's words, "the patching together of garments that appear to be made, then cut apart, and then reassembled as something else". He draws comparisons with the designs of Comme des Garçons in whose "all wool, tailored collection in the early 90s, the garments were cut and frayed and then put together without any pressing. You got this very same effect with Maurice's costume". This similarity between the deliberate anti-fashion statements of Rei Kawakobo's deconstructed suits and the tramp-like clown's costume - an indispensable tool of his trade – confirms the way in which the making of garments functions as a metaphor for the fragility of human existence. Marios Antoniou's catwalk show, captured in Alex Maguire's photographs, revives the ghosts of Edwardian clowns and places the archived costume in between past, spent performances and future fashion collections.

Darren Cabon comments on the different types of hand stitching and mending in the garments found in the archive as evidence of costume being made and remade by more than one pair of hands, and the human quality this entails. These garment testify to many performances through their wear and tear, through the work in their making, their breaking and their mending and re-mending. Marios Antoniou's own photographs are of the damage inflicted on his own beautifully tailored collection after a year of catwalk and editorial work. These images reflect in the fragments left from the spectacle of a show on the common ground between the performer's work and that of the fashion designer.

(*facing page from left to right*)

Charles Clark, as clown, 1914.
Photograph by Oscar Delonge.
S.144-2012

'Sandy' as a clown, circa 1875.
Photograph by Fradelle & Marshall.
S.146:436-2007

Harry Payne as a clown, late 19th century. S.148:914-2007

(*above and facing page*) Photographs by Marios Antoniou

(*left*) Photograph by Alex Maguire
www.alexmaguirephotography.com

Costume worn by Cecily Byrne in By Candle Light, 1928.
S.1194B-1982.
Photographed in the archive.

Claire Christie

Claire Christie's research interest is around the use of bias cut in costume. On her first visit to the archive, she was able to view original stage costumes, photographs and newspaper cuttings from the period between the 1920s and 1930s. This was a time when the use of bias cut, as elaborated in the complex construction techniques developed by couturier Madeleine Villonet in Paris, was reflected and disseminated by stylish female performers on the London stage.

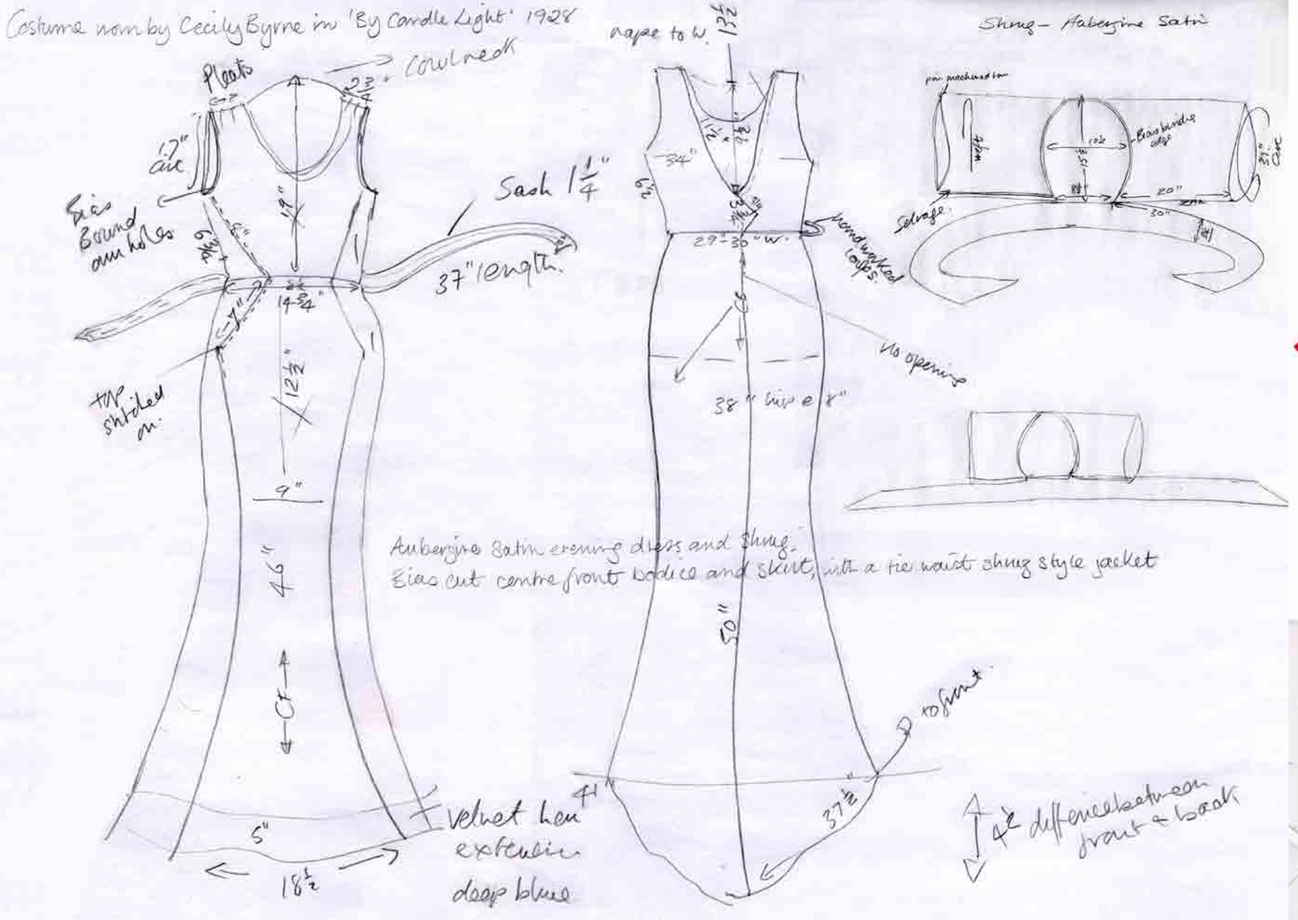
Christie's own approach as a costumier draws inspiration from Vionnet who, in Rebecca Arnold's words, began to define her thinking around patterncutting "by eliminating the heavy sanitised black cotton dresses which all house models wore under the couture designs"[1]. Vionnet "was gradually peeling away the layers of stifling 19th century morality that had deemed no woman respectable who was not closed off from the world in corset and petticoat, her body a mysterious object encased in whalebone"[2]. This chimes with Christie, who collects original Victorian and 1930s dress and who has developed an approach to making costumes around minimising bulk, weight and restriction whenever possible. Of the costumes she was able to view, the one she returned to most often was worn by Cecily Byrne as the Countess von Baltin in Siegfried Geyer's play By Candle Light performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London, in September 1928.

This early embodiment of bias cut mixes straight cut panels with bias cut ones in a complex composition that looks deceptively simple. It involves the use of fabric in a sculptural way, emphasising movement and the expressiveness of the female form. Original bias cut garments can be too fragile to be brought out of their acid-free boxes. Claire Christie's analysis of this surviving bias cut costume, initially captured in the archive through her sketches, notes and photographs and careful measurements was then reproduced on a half-size mannequin, recreating the radical and innovative nature of this 1928 design, in the flat pattern she developed.

On her pattern-cutting table Christie's research on the bias cut as embodiment of femininity unmediated by the constraints of pre-determined and restrictive physical shapes, found expression in the detailed study of the 1928 costume for Cecily Byrne.

1 *Arnold, R. Vionnet and Classicism, in Judith Clark, ed., Vionnet, Exhibition Catalogue for Madeleine Vionnet Fifteen Dresses from the Collection of Martin Kamer (London: Judith Clark Costume Gallery, 2001).*

2 *Ibid.*


Costume worn by Cecily Byrne in 'By Candle Light' 1928
Pleats
Cowl neck
2 3/4"
1/2" circ
Bias Bound armholes
Sash 1 1/4"
37" length
6 3/4"
14 1/2"
12 1/2"
9"
Top stitched in
46"
Cr
5"
18 1/2"
Velvet bow extension deep blue
Shrug - Aubergine Satin
Nape to W. 12"
34"
6 1/2"
3 3/4"
29-30" W.
Bound worked loops
No opening
38" hips
50"
to flint
41"
37 1/2"
4" difference between front & back
Aubergine Satin evening dress and shrug.
Bias cut centre front bodice and skirt, with a tie waist shrug style jacket
Selvage
20"
30"
31" Circ

Netia Jones

"As an 'eye', the camera draws attention to something specific in the space, composes the space in the frame and takes a position in relation to it."
"In movement it communicates not only through what it focuses on, but in terms of speed, length and the juxtaposition which expose layers of meaning."

"Bringing a camera into a space creates intensity particularly as far as the participants are concerned, putting both the subjects and the objects of the encounters under a metaphorical microscope."
"The camera in the space interrogates the meaning of the space itself. The trolley shots suggest the endless nature of the space, a space that feels like infinity, thus drawing attention to the contradictions inherent to an archive of performance – an endless proposition."

"The project creates a sense of displacement; the fact that the objects are found in an unfamiliar surrounding heightens the senses. So the dress that should be in a gallery setting is now revealed under tissue paper. The ability to perceive and engage with imaginative responses is intensified by the way the object reveals itself in a different context."

"The camera highlights the object, making it more than an object amongst many to be passed by in the museum. The individual object – which is already rendered special by the museum, through its selection, collecting, conservation and archival practices – is made even more important in the exchange with the participant. The camera underlines the intensity of the object."

"The one-off nature of the filming process enables the intimacy of the encounter to be recorded."

"The fleeting moments of the encounter become archivable objects themselves, being captured by the camera. The camera renders the moment of encounter with the object visually engaging through capturing the compelling nature of the object and the response of the participant."

"The camera immerses the viewers in the space of the archive – as highlighted by Paul Bevan's initial words in response to the space."

Quotes from a postmortem meeting, held on 6 July 2011, with filmmaker Netia Jones, on how the camera functioned on encountering the archive and the object.

(*facing page and following page*)
Costume for a Sylph in Le Bal, designed by Georgio De Chirico, 1929. Photographed by the author.

Afterword

The complex object that is costume, constituted through craft and performance and re-contextualised in its archived and collected state, can, once taken out of the acid- free archive box, offer new ways to articulate its performance values. By placing the non-interpreted costume/object in conversation with an engaged, informed and perceptive interlocutor, this project has been able to draw out some key points about costume.

Amy de la Haye's response to Chanel's La Perlouse makes clear the relationship with everyday fashion, with the body and with the performer. The presence of the artist's hand at work on the costume as a co-author of the performance is evidenced in Nicky Gillibrand's close-up viewing of The Soldier in Chout. Her own work on Government Inspector affirms the centrality of costume to the creation and the reception of performance, demonstrated through her drawings and through the costumes on stage. The performance qualities detected by Charlotte Hodes in the embroidery of the Meleto Castle costumes, articulate the spatial presence, movement and atmosphere that it can embody. Paul Bevan frames costume "within the realm of the metaphysical ... between the actual and the notional", while Claire Christie considers the engineering of bias cut that re-proposes on the stage of the late 1920s a newly asserted femininity through dress. Lastly, Marios Antoniou demonstrates via the ubiquitous notion of the tramp/clown costume, the metaphoric values of the broken suit as a symbol of human fragility and fallibility, and how the obvious presence of the human hand, in making and mending, adds to the audience's empathic relationship to dress.

By including a multiplicity of expert voices and of performances, Encounters in the Archive attempts to begin to articulate the complexity of costume in design for performance. The resulting film immerses the viewers in the archive, connecting them with costume as an archived object. From its privileged and protected position in the archive costume can begin to look outwards to its own redefinition.

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This book is exhibited as part of 'Transformation And Revelation: Gormley To Gaga'. UK Design For Performance 2007-2011, 17 Mar 2012 to 30 Sep 2012, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in Tapestries Court, Room 94.

www.encountersinthearchive.com

Commentary by Donatella Barbieri
Design Assistant: Claire Suckall
Research Assistant: Emily Collett

All uncredited photographs are by Donatella Barbieri.

Our thanks go to all the participants whose work has made this book possible; to the V&A Research Department, and to Liz Miller; to V&A Theatre and to the Performance Archives, and especially to Claire Hudson; to the Research Department at London College of Fashion, and in particular to Anthony Kent; to Bill Butcher, John Forbes, Greer Crawley, Carol Wyss and Christine Bisatt for their individual and much appreciated support.

A special thank you to Rob Hadrill and Haein Song at Book Works, for inspiration, advice and support.