

T H E S I S

on

The Costuming of an Historical Play

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by

Madeline Brumbaugh

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APPROVED:

[REDACTED]

Professor of Household Arts

In Charge of Major

[REDACTED]

Dean of School of Home Economics

[REDACTED]

Chairman of Committee on Graduate Study

Lib.

## THE COSTUMING OF AN HISTORICAL PLAY

This report consists of a presentation of (1) The Theory of a Course in Household Arts; (2) The Problem of Costuming an Historical Play; (3) The Principles Governing such a Problem; (4) The Historical Background of an Historical Play; (5) An Account of its Demonstration; (6) A Series of Exhibits employed in the demonstration, for the Master's Degree in the subject of Clothing, Textiles and Related Arts in the Oregon State College in the year 1928.

The essence of this paper consists not in the exposition of a scientific investigation but in the practical demonstration of an art. It is, therefore, not a philosophical dissertation, and cannot be judged as such. Its purpose is merely to outline the procedure and principles governing the costuming of an historical drama.

### The Theory of a Course in Household Arts

The point of approach in meeting the requirements of a course in Household Arts leading to a Master's Degree is that of the practical training in certain arts rather than the learning of theoretical information. Naturally an art cannot be acquired successfully without some conjunction with the science which underlies it. Nevertheless, the work is based primarily upon the acquisition of skill rather than data. This fact determines the nature of the Thesis which the department has approved as a correlative for such a course. It, too, was to be a demonstration rather than a research paper. Let it be plain, therefore, that this paper is not in content a thesis but the report on such thesis which has consisted of a practical project in the costuming of an Historical Drama. The success of such project was measured by the skill achieved in that performance and not upon the literary or philosophical quality of the materials of this paper.

### The Problem of Costuming an Historical Play

The Costume of any period in history has always depended on the characteristic movement of the period-- on the spiritual quality of the period-- on what is called the temper of the time.

Costuming is not dressmaking. It is a matter of understanding the dramatic inner idea, of knowing how the actors carry out this intention in their movements; and of arrang-

ing drapery to make these movements seem more expressive and more heroic.

There is a difference between costumes for the stage and the normal clothes of everyday life. Stage costumes should be all glamour, all thrill. Nothing should be worn on the stage that is not full of character-- full of life.

To create a perfect stage ensemble, the designer must be certain that all materials, objects, and characters are sympathetic to each other. Character and Costume must be friends.

There are certain essential qualities of paper, velvet and cheesecloth, and damask and leather; and the good designer will study materials until he has the feel of them in his fingers. He will acquire and develop a sense of their qualities. He will create an understanding of the relation of each material to the body it clothes. In makeshift of material lies a limitless field for the ingenuity of the designer. Things on the stage must be more like themselves than reality stripped of all but telling essentials, and stuffs so used will have a value more theatrical than the original.

#### The Principles Governing the Problems

Costumes and Stage settings are merely the embodiment and expression of an idea usually elaborated into a plot. They must therefore be true to such an idea. But at the same time the idea must have a setting in fact and cir-

cumstance. Often the times and places in which the idea came to life have so much of historical interest for other reasons that a conflict of interest occurs between the idea dramatized and the **back**ground of material events.

At once the question is important, namely: how to prevent the factual setting from stealing attention from the main idea and theme? One answer is to violate the field of fact and make it to order to fit the theme, while another is to remain true to the field of history but at the same time by skillful selection and emphasis reduce the background to a supplementary position.

Historical accuracy was not stressed until recent years. Henry Irving was a great advocate of perfect detail in historical reproductions. But the danger is to fall into a mere delineation of fact, to render the theme subservient to irrelevant details of material. It must be remembered that Art is not **history**. It may be an interpretation of life through a historical medium which often happens and in which the problem of treatment grows most acute.

The problem of the costumer is similar to that of the painter; he too is expressing his thought in a pictorial concrete. Yet, the artist must lift the idea out of its setting, must somehow make it both within, and yet above all else, mentally without. How is that attainable? Rosa Bonheur did not paint one particular horse, nor one particular sheep. She knew the characteristics of all horses and all sheep, and by wise selection she recorded an impression



powder and patches, of spreading hoops and towering coiffures, of powdered wigs and flaring snug-waisted coats. It was the age of the picturesque in modes and manners, the age of heart-breaking belles and intrepid beaux, of dashing highwaymen and reckless gamblers, of duels and coffee houses, sedan chairs and post-chaises.

The point of attraction in the costume of the 18th Century was brilliance and variety of colors combined in a single costume. Often as many as eight colors were combined in Milady's dress.

The characteristic features of the silhouette was the hoop and slim pointed bodice. The reign of George III saw, in the English mode, the short hoops, pannier puffs and delicately striped and flowered silks, and the dainty cotton prints and muslins of the Louis XVI mode of France.

The hoop skirt of the 18th Century was not like the crinoline, an undergarment of canvas or crinoline. It was an outside petticoat spread by hoops of whale-bone. This hoop-skirt was essentially the decorative feature of the gown and was of rich material, often much elaborated with embroidery, with applications or quilting in ornate patterns.

It was in this atmosphere that "The Rivals" was written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan and successfully produced at Convent Garden, London, in January 1775.

It is a Comedy of Manners with the plot centering around Captain Absolute, son of Sir Anthony Absolute, who assumes the character of Beverly in order that he may win the affec-

tion of Lydia Languish, the romantically inclined and wilful niece of Mrs. Malaprop.

Sir Anthony, not knowing that the Captain and Lydia have met, proposes to Mrs. Malaprop that his son seek the hand of Lydia. Captain Absolute is not received favorably by Lydia because of her love for one Beverly.

Bob Acres, old friend of Captain Absolute, also seeks the hand of the fair Lydia, and upon learning that he has a rival in the person named Beverly, challenges him to a duel, asking the Captain to second for him. The Captain, however, refuses. At King's Mead-Fields the mistaken identities are discovered and the blessing of Sir Anthony and Mrs. Malaprop are bestowed upon Lydia and the Captain.

#### An Account of the Demonstration

Working in conjunction with the Public Speaking Department, the Community Drama classes under the direction of Miss Elizabeth Barnes, costumed and presented "The Rivals" at the Majestic Theatre on March 2nd and 3rd, 1928.

After having designed the costumes and color schemes and cut the patterns, the problem of expenditure arose. The cost must of necessity be as low as possible. Makeshift material was purchased, remnants of lace and buttons. Buckles were made of tin; oilcloth was used for leather boot tops; and so the wardrobe was kept within eighty-five dollars.

The girls of the Community Drama class assisted in the construction of the garments. A workshop costume room was



fitted up and supervision of the work during the day established. The hours each girl contributed had to be checked and recorded.

#### Exhibits Illustrative of the Project

These exhibits are a series of photographs showing the various stage decorations and the personnel of the actors taking part in the demonstration. They constitute the following representations:

- Exhibit A. Act V. Scene III. Entire Ensemble. King's Mead Field.
- B. Act III. Scene IV. Acres Lodgings.
- C. Act IV. Scene II.
- D. Sir Anthony Absolute.
- E. Captain Absolute.
- F. Faulkland.
- G. Fag.
- H. David.
- I. Mrs. Malaprop.
- J. Lydia Languish.
- K. Julia.
- L. Lucy.
- M. Bob Acres.

Exhibit A. King's Mead Fields

Act V. Scene III.

Characters - Entire ensemble

Color Plan - Cyclorama

Bob Acres

-Grey

-Deep red velvet coat,  
tan breeches and vest,  
black hat and boots.

Faulkland

-Bright blue coat and  
breeches, white vest  
with black buttons,  
black hat. Cut steel  
buttons.

David

-Black coat and breeches,  
orange, white and green  
vest, purple tie, green  
hose, black hat.

Captain Absolute

-Red military coat, white  
flannel breeches, black  
boots.

Sir Anthony Absolute

-Black velvet suit, blue  
and gold changeable  
taffeta vest, black  
sateen cape, white wig.

Sir Lucius O'Trigger

-Green suit, yellow vest,  
brown cuffs and hose.

Mrs. Malaprop

-Violet dress with white  
petticoat, purple cape.

Lydia Languish

-Turquoise blue dress,  
salmon pink petticoat,  
blue green cape lined  
with tan.

Julia

-Yellow dress, flowered  
petticoat and cocoa  
brown cape.



## Exhibit B.      Acre's Lodgings

Act III. Scene IV.

Characters - Bob Acres

Sir Lucius O'Trigger

Color Plan - Walls -Maroon red

Furniture - Old walnut

Sir Lucius -Green suit, brown cuffs, and  
yellow vest. Gold buttons.

Acres            -Yellow coat, lavender breeches,  
                      and white vest designed in  
                      lavender.

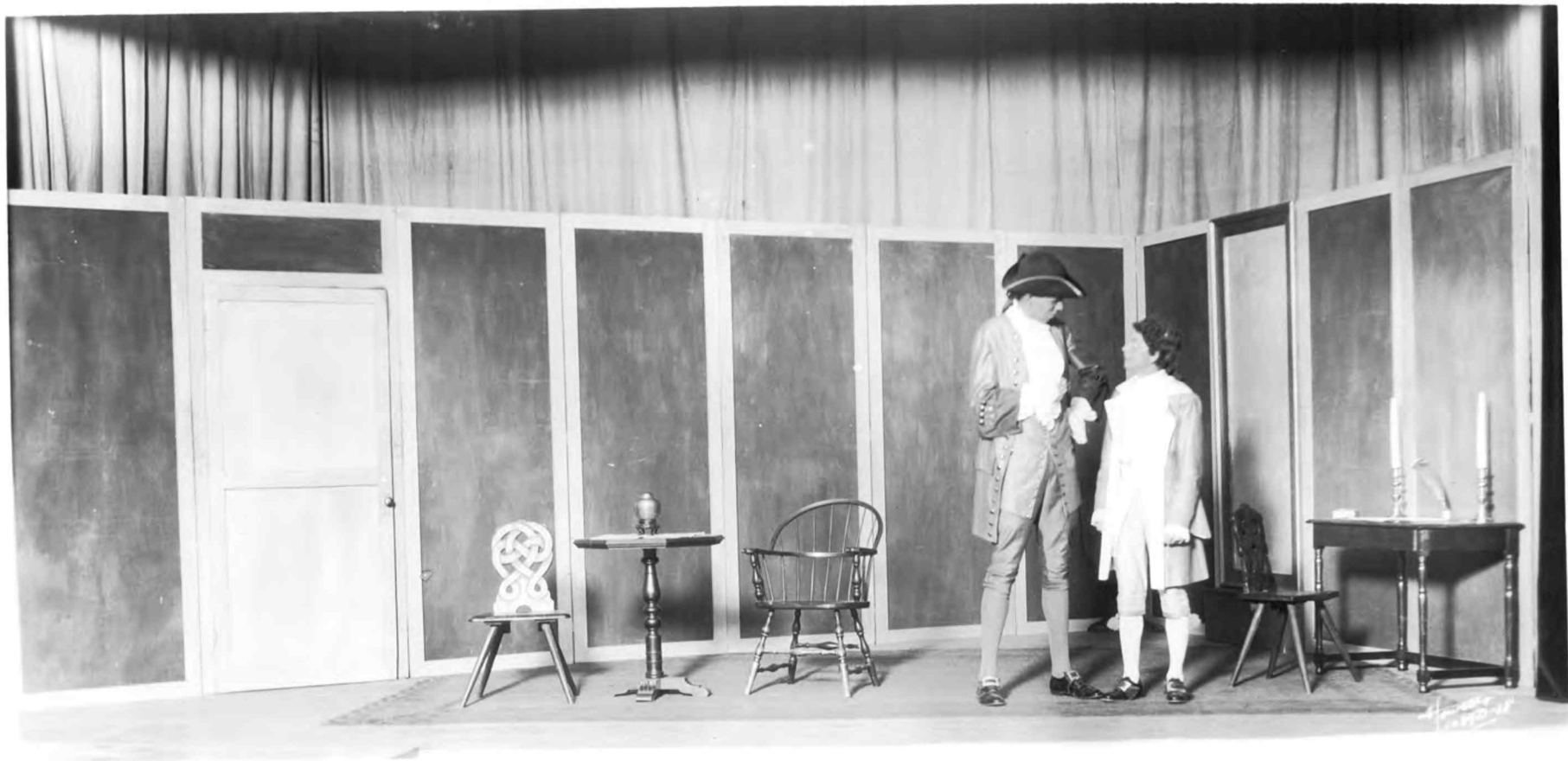


Exhibit C.    Mrs. Malaprop's Lodgings

Act IV.   Scene II.

Characters - Captain Absolute

Sir Anthony Absolute

Mrs. Malaprop

Color Plan - Walls

-Grayish pink

Captain Absolute -Red coat, white trousers.

Sir Anthony        -Black velvet suit, white  
                              satin vest.

Mrs. Malaprop      -Rust color dress, cream  
                              lace.

Lydia                -Green organdy appliqued  
                              with golden brown velvet,  
                              velvet bodice and lace  
                              sleeves.





Exhibit D. Sir Anthony Absolute.

Black velvet suit, blue and gold taffeta vest with gold braid and fringe. White lace sleeve and neck frills.



Exhibit E. Captain Absolute.

Bright red military coat, trimmed with black. White vest and trousers. Black hat and boots.

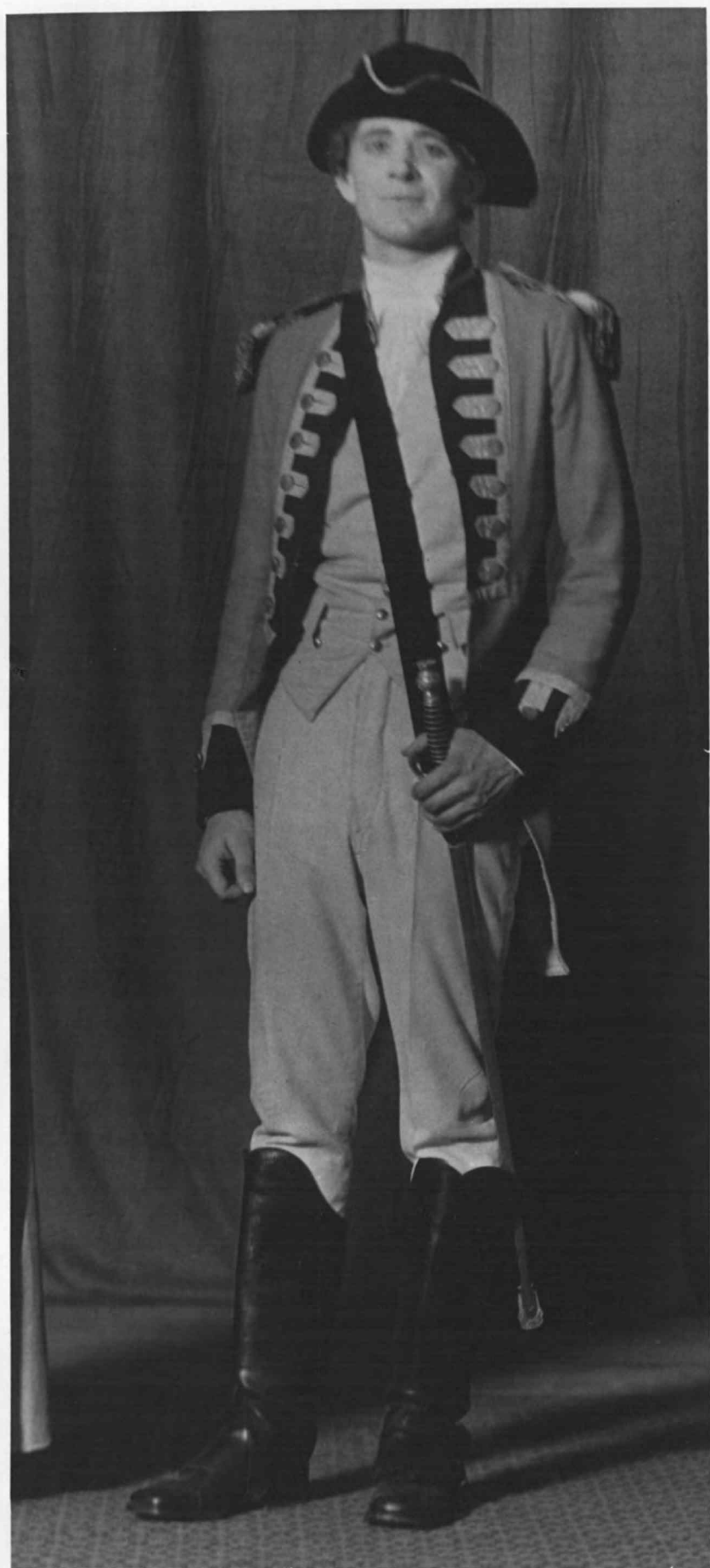


Exhibit F. Faulkland

Bright blue coat and breeches with cut button trimming. White satin vest with black button trimming. White tiered lace frill at neck and voile frill at sleeves. Black silk hose and buckled patent leather shoes. Black hat.





Exhibit G. Fag.

Black sateen coat, breeches and vest. White frills  
of coarse lace. Black cotton hose.



Exhibit H. David.

Black sateen coat with silver braid. Orange, green,  
white and purple vest. Purple tie. Green hose, Red wig.



Exhibit I. Mrs. Malaprop.

Violet sateen dress over white sateen skirt with ruffled flounce. White collar and cuffs and purple button trimming. Black velvet neck band. Lavender fan.





Exhibit J. Lydia Languish.

Turquoise blue sateen dress over salmon pink ruffled  
voile petticoat. Cream lace frills on sleeves and blue  
and gold button trimming.



Exhibit K. Julia.

Yellow sateen dress over yellowed flowered organdy.  
Black velvet trimming on bodice with cream net on sleeves  
and neckline.



Exhibit L. Lucy.

Blue flowered dress over blue quilted sateen petticoat. White net collar, cuffs and cap. White hose and black buckled slippers. Blue Sateen cape.





Exhibit M. Bob Acres.

Dark red velvet coat, tan breeches and vest, white stock and black hat and boots. Gold braid and large gold buttons.

