

“A Seam is not a Seam”

The Role and Meaning of the Work of Seamstresses, Tailors, Dressers and Shoemakers in Slovenian Institutional Theatre

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The theatrical costume differs from everyday clothing. Accordingly, the way it is made and maintained is part of a special process of theatrical creativity. The aim of this article is to list the backstage activities related to the process of creation, use and storage of costumes, namely, the work that is not only overlooked, but also disregarded in the wider public and, unfortunately, also in the theatrical environment. A seam is not just a seam. Likewise, the seamstress in theatre does not only sew and the dresser does not only take care of the costumes. On the contrary, these professions demand an integrated approach to the costume-making process. This includes both creativity and skill as well as a touch for working with people.

The article is based on interviews conducted with ten seamstresses, tailors, dressers and shoemakers employed in five Slovenian theatres. I was interested in the stories and opinions of people involved in the making and the life of a costume; from its inception to its use and “retirement”. This article thus touches upon nearly all areas in which these theatre employees are involved: from the working space to the interpretation of the sketches, the making of the costumes, communication with the costume designers, and the learning process, to salary grades, maintenance of the costume storage, and archiving. My aim was to explore how the working process and the role of the costume changed during the course of my interviewees’ lives, how the present approaches to costume design differ from past ones, what is their attitude toward the costumes and performances, what is their perception of the work they do, and whether and how they preserve the sketches, materials and costumes from past performances. I was interested in all aspects of the life of a theatrical costume in relation to the work done by the theatre employees; not only in the operative part of their tasks, but primarily in how they perceive their work.

The large part of the article records the changes in their work. Organised into

levels, they include the changes on the micro level (fabrics and materials, sewing practices and/or shopping), on the level of theatre organisation (the artists'/costume designers' ways of working, work organisation, number of performances), on the level of the performance-production process, and on the macro level (the changes of the economic-political system). Special attention is given to costume storage, an indispensable segment of any theatrical house as well as costume-design practice. Costume storage entails the storing of costumes from staged performances, but this is not its sole function. Storage also provides stock for internal and external rentals and serves educational, archival and economic functions.

The detection and analysis of the hierarchies in institutional theatre present the central interpretative axis of the article: in short, how does the current socio-economical model of neoliberal capitalism shape the processes, relations and working modes within institutional theatre. An inherent feature of institutional theatre is hierarchy, both on the level of structure as well as performances, which develops in this type of theatre and which is, as its product, inevitably caught in the mentioned hierarchies. The discussed professions are poorly paid and unappreciated. This is reflected in the relations between the employees, in their relation to the work, in the society's relation towards these professions, as well as in wage ratios. Even more so, it is reflected in the relation toward the costumes, which are, after the productions have run their courses, left to storage and the good will of the management and the employees. The mentioned professions are underinvested – they lack adequate introductory as well as further training and are not provided continuous professional development. The number of productions and accompanying events is continually increasing; as a result, the employees have to find ways to be more efficient, while the creation processes are shorter and shorter – since the performances are not prepared in advance as they could be, the employees are expected to quickly adjust to the changes within the processes. In terms of the organisation of work, the theatres are introducing outsourcing, there are instances of compressed production schedules, the number of performances and events is increasing, while the role and the importance of those working in the workshops is decreasing. This kind of flexible, mobile, performative, simultaneous and unstable work is characteristic of the post-Fordist mode of production. Theatre employees in institutional theatres are subjected to this indirectly; through the practices introduced into their working environment by the artists with whom they collaborate and by the management that defines the workflow.

Translated by Katja Kosi