Behind the Mask

Accessibility in Theatre and Performance Venues

with

Specific Reference to Costuming

for

Actors with Learning Disabilities

and for

Autistic Performers and Audiences

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) Dissertation

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List of Illustrations

Key Terms

Accessibility

This dissertation refers to accessibility in terms of the second definition of the Cambridge Dictionary, which is “the quality of being able to be entered or used by everyone, including people who have a disability.”

Autism

According to the UK’s National Autistic Society, autism, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD is “a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world.” Some traits autistic people tend to share are a preference for routine and repetitive behaviour, a sensitivity to stimuli such as light and sound, focused passions and interests or difficulty recognising and regulating emotions. Anxiety can overwhelm an autistic person, causing meltdowns. An observer might mistake this for a temper tantrum. Stress can also cause shutdowns which are exhausting internal struggles. Communicating with others can be a challenge as autistic people are often very literal, needing extra time to process information. They may repeat phrases they have heard others say without fully understanding the meaning.

Autistic People

The National Autistic Society states that “many autistic people see their autism as a fundamental part of who they are, so it’s important to use positive language.” According to NHS England, The phrase “autistic people” is generally, although not universally preferred, as it conveys that autism is part of someone’s identity, rather than the phrase “people with autism”, which removes autism as an element of someone’s identity. The latter has not been used in this writing.

Costume

Costume can refer to attire from a historic era or an outfit worn for a festive event as well one seen in a theatrical setting. Within this writing, a costume refers only to a garment or accessory worn during a performance. Clothing

worn in everyday life can also be considered a costume, if one's everyday existence requires an element of masking.

Masking

The act of socially conforming to a neurotypical environment is called masking and is often very tiring for autistic people. Neurotypical people often use subtext within their conversations and communicate in ways that autistic people can find challenging. This dissertation uses masking in the context of autism as well as that of the physical act of wearing a mask as a costume piece.

Neurodiverse

Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the idea that people having a range of different types of brain, including those with and without autism, should be regarded as part of normal human life."

Neurodivergent

Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "having or related to a type of brain that is often considered as different from what is usual, for example that of someone who has autism."

Neurotypical

Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "not having, or not associated with, a brain condition, especially autism, that is often considered as different from what is usual." Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent.

Performance

A performance is typically thought to be a demonstration of skill by one or more people who are engaging an audience with skills such as speaking, singing, acting or dancing. Traditionally, a performance takes place in a venue with an elevated stage. However, a performance can take place in any location. Those intended to be seen outside of a traditional space are typically called site-specific. This dissertation discusses performances which take place

both in and out of traditional venues. For autistic people, the act of masking in everyday life can be compared to that of acting in a performance.

Relaxed Performance

These shows are usually special versions of a show, which have been adapted to accommodate a neurodivergent audience. These might include such modifications as not dimming lights in the auditorium and keeping the volume of music lower. Non-typical audience behaviour, such as entering and leaving the space as needed and making noise during the performance, is also acceptable.

Stimming

A shortened version of "self-stimulating", this describes repetitive behaviours such as rocking, hand flapping, finger flicking, jumping, twirling or playing with an object such as a fidget spinner or a rubber band. These behaviours can be soothing and enjoyable for autistic people as well as a way of reducing sensory overload by providing one piece of sensory information to focus on.

Theatre

Theatre practice refers to the act of creating a performance piece, while a theatre is the traditional venue where performances take place. This is typically thought of as being an auditorium or as the Cambridge Dictionary defines it, as a "structure with rows of seats, each row higher than the other". However, almost any space can become a performance venue and therefore, a site-specific theatre. Within this dissertation, the term "theatre" is largely used to refer to the traditional venue.

1.0 Introduction

Costumes are used within a theatrical context to create a more immersive experience for both performer and audience, allowing both to believe fully in the world of pretend characters created on stage or on screen. This dissertation examines theatrical costume from the perspective of the performer as well as that of the audience member and considers why, within autism research, costume has not been explored. Additionally, it argues that costumes may be both extremely important contributors or barriers to inclusion and theatre accessibility, particularly for those who have a disability or face a social stigma, including the elderly or neurodivergent, such as autistic people. It also seeks to be an initial probe into further discussion around complex questions, such as how working practices can be made more accessible and inclusive in a theatre's costume department.

Many autistic people continually engage in theatrics in their everyday lives, constantly modifying their behaviour to conform to a neurotypical environment as though they are on stage. This is an exhausting, costume-like defence which allows them to blend into the outside world. This act is even named after a component of a costume: masking. Despite the way costume has metaphorically stitched or woven itself into an autistic person's daily experiences, the importance of theatrical costumes to autistic performers and audience members has remained largely unconsidered. Through writing, this work aims to present the case that costume is important to accessible theatre and that it should be part of a broader discussion around accessibility.

This paper also explores various performances and considers their accessibility from multiple angles, including their costuming. This essay also looks at the practices of the Lung Ha Theatre Company which was founded with inclusivity in mind. It also includes an analysis of the author's university work, particularly a project considering differently-abled performers. This was conducted in 2021, collaborating with dancer Rhoslyn Howroyd, who is autistic. Ultimately this piece aims to probe how future productions and other

university events, such as the annual Edinburgh College of Art Performance Costume Show, could be made more accessible.

2.0 Literature Review

The Importance of Costumes to a Theatrical Context

Costumes are a vital component of a theatrical production, described as "critical to making performance, critical to spectatorship, critically overlooked within scholarship…" by Rachel Hann and Sidsel Bech in 2014. They can mask reality and instead immerse an audience in a fictional world. By acting as a visual anchor, costumes give context to the words and gestures performed by an actor and can be considered a form of semiotics (Abdumalik, 2019), an academic discipline which uses signs and symbols to transmit meaning. (Danesi M., 2007) Through costume, an audience can visualise the age, status and personality of the figures onstage. (Cunningham, 1989) Costume Designers have a significant responsibility in developing the visual language for a performance; if successful it will add interest for a watching audience in the moment of attending the theatre and will distinguish it from other performances to create a lasting impression. A world without costumes would certainly survive, but it would surely be a bland one.

In popular discourse, the Arts are often viewed as an unimportant part of human life compared to other areas such as medicine or technology. (Costa, 2019) Humans have engaged in performances and theatrical rituals for thousands of years, with its traditions, including mask-wearing on stage, dating to the ancient Greeks and beyond.

Figure 1: Two Greek terracotta roundels with theatrical masks, 1st century BCE

Certainly, a rendition of Hamlet will not save someone's life in the same way as a new medication or a surgery could. However, the isolation resulting from the recent Covid-19 pandemic, emphasised the importance of the Arts. Artists and performers faced the duality of being unemployed and not considered essential workers; at the same time their recorded work on screen became a lifeline to a large portion of the population who were isolated in their homes. Storytelling, dance and song are clearly universal human needs, as some version of these exists in every corner of the globe and have developed into a significant aspect of society.

The Importance of Studying the Intersection of Autism and Theatre

The United Nations has explicitly stated that people with disabilities have the right to "enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities in accessible formats; enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres". In 2014, Kevin Brown, a professor at the University of Missouri, argued that we are the only species on the planet to produce theatre; among its many other benefits, the art of performance could help audiences better understand the human condition.

This should be enough of a reason to study and create accessible theatre. However, research around inclusive design in the world of theatre places greater value on theatrical projects which have perceived benefits to participants. Simply enabling the enjoyment of theatre for its own sake is not generally considered sufficient. These improvements must also produce a secondary benefit, such as better understanding of and expressing the body's reaction to cancer treatment (Pini & Rosier, 2021), advocating for more sexual agency (Schnellert et al, 2021) or being a form of therapy for those with mental health challenges or invisible disabilities. (Fabian et al, 2021) Despite these additional benefits, accessibility in theatre has recently gained more attention but has not yet become standard mainstream practice. (Cock et al., 2019).

Existing Sources

There are sources which discuss the history and the structure of relaxed and inclusive theatre, (Fletcher-Watson, 2015), (Nijkamp & Cardol, 2020), the importance of inclusive and collaborative theatre practice in education, (Storsve et al. 2021) and attempts to create an equitable playwriting intensive, (Derbyshire, 2016), which highlight the innate inequality within the structure of theatre's creative practices. Within these texts, references to aspects of theatre such as sound, lighting and the physical structure of the venue appear. However, within accessible theatre-based research, costume is not considered. In 2018, Ben Fletcher-Watson, together with Shaun May, analysed the autism-friendly two-day Autism Arts Festival in Canterbury and surveyed participants on what accommodations would be helpful in a performance context.

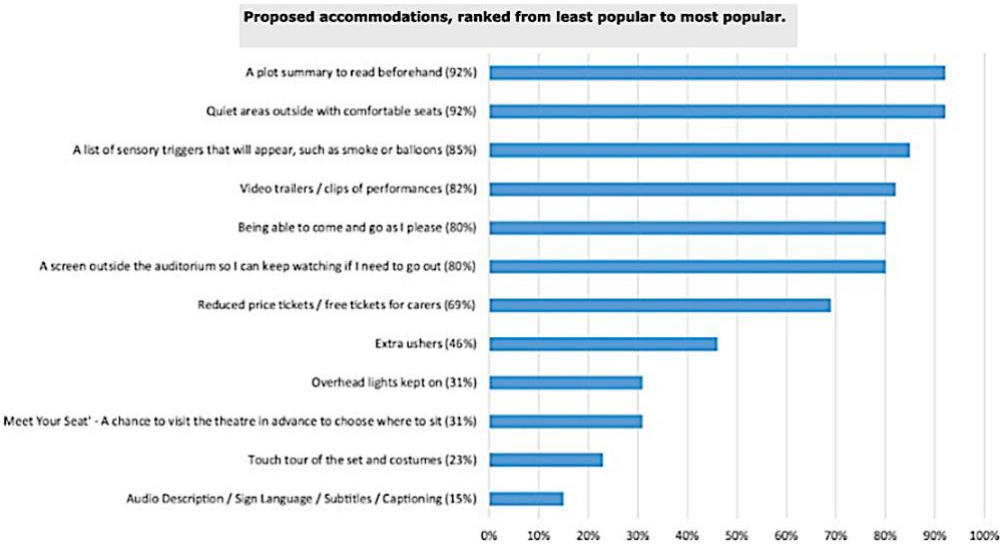

Figure 2: Findings of Fletcher-Watson and May's 2018 survey of autistic audience members

Only 23% of respondents felt that a touch tour of the set and costumes would be beneficial. The small percentage interested in a touch tour leads to the question of whether costuming itself is important to autistic performers and audiences. Does this imply that the state of accessibility is so problematic that even though costumes are important, there are issues of higher priority that need to be addressed? Perhaps current theatre practice is not fully showcasing the importance of costumes to audiences.

Misogyny in Academic Research Making Costume Under-studied

As early as 2010, theatre historian Aoife Monks argued that the recent association of costume and fashion with femininity may make costume seem unworthy of being studied. It is likely that this has contributed to a relative lack of academic research on the topic of costume design.

An illustration of a misogynistic lack of interest in the study of costumes in the context of accessibility may be found in research from both the U.S.C. Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and the Annenberg Foundation. As of 2022, 83% of costume designers were women. Several studies have been undertaken recently to examine the prevalence of women's voices in academia, particularly within science-related fields. One reported that women were significantly less likely to be credited with authorship, despite reporting that they contributed more to the project than their male collaborators. (Ross et al., 2022) Another reported that although the number of women publishing work in the sociology field of "Association for Behaviour Analysis" has increased since 1997, fewer are listed as the primary researchers. (Krebsbach, 2022) A medical literature review from the same year analysed a limited selection of medical papers in search of biased studies and found that "misogynistic perceptions continue to permeate the narrative". (Merone et al, 2022)

Theatre Workshops for Autistic Students

Some theatre programmes, such as SENSE Theatre, have developed workshops to assist autistic students, pairing autistic children with actors to learn communication techniques. (Corbett, 2016). In 2019, Daniel Wendler explored improvised comedy and theatre as a tool to support autistic individuals with social cognition. He found that participants felt more included and were significantly less nervous about social interaction following the workshops. Although these efforts proved to be successful, it does raise ethical questions. Could similar projects be merely teaching autistic children the exhausting process of masking? Are autistic people in theatre workshops being taught how to play the role of a neurotypical person rather than being allowed to present as themselves?

Comparing Costume for Autistic Children with Active Ageing Theory

In 2002, a "Bug-man" beetle costume was developed by Sherry Haar with the aim of making therapy more inviting for autistic children. The costume included elastic straps, a helmet and weighted cape which was constructed using 18 different fabrics. The aim of the costume was to expose children to a range of materials in a playful and self-directed way.

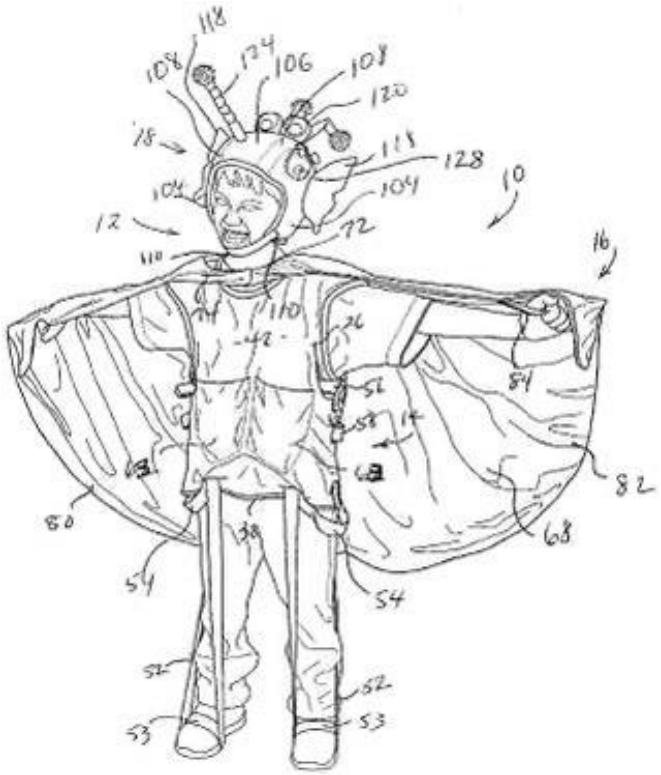

Figure 3: Technical drawing from the patent of Harr's "Bug-man" costume

As part of a 2011-2014 project, Melissa Trimingham worked with autistic children between the ages of seven and eleven in an immersive theatre setting. The title of this project describes performance as "Interventions for Autistic Spectrum Conditions". Trimingham found that masks, puppets and padded costumes were very helpful for these children and might have a similar effect to stimming, requiring the performers to exaggerate their movements. In particular, it appeared that the wearing of masks removed irrelevant details from the periphery of the wearer for a more focused experience.

Although these projects are largely positive, similar criticism of these might resemble that of the Active Ageing Theory which concludes that older members of society should stay engaged with the world around them by participating in many social activities, including theatrical productions. (Davis, 1987) Although this can be of benefit to participants, the concept of Active Ageing Theory has also been criticised by researchers Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs as dictating a "correct way" of engaging with the world and assumes that all older people should want conform. (Ylänne, 2012 p.13) This puts societal pressure on people who choose not to participate in social activities, just as an autistic person might be encouraged to mask. Society also leans heavily on the Medical Model of ageing, (Powell, 2006) which assumes an older person to be frail and on a path to increased incapacitation. Symptoms of ageing are viewed as problems requiring medical solutions rather than something to be embraced. Similar attitudes towards autism are prevalent. It is notable that the only academic sources which combine costume and autism have either a medical component, as seen in the Bug-Man project or an educational one, as in the case of Trimingham's work. Both projects focus exclusively on autism in children.

A notable comparison to be aware of is the concept of the mask of ageing, (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1991), which references that many older people develop a disconnect between their physical appearances and the way they feel inside, creating an identity crisis. Within this concept, many older individuals feel that age itself is a mask, which they cannot remove. Some attempt to conform to society's expectations with cosmetic products and harsh medical anti-ageing treatments, such as Botox, which in itself creates an entirely different mask. This second concept of a mask more closely parallels its effect for autistic people, where masking is the desire to conform to the norms of society and its behavioural expectations. It is also important to highlight parallels between autistic people and older sections of the population as there is a stereotype of autism being something which is only seen in children. An analysis of academic papers about autism found that of all published studies on the subject of autism, merely 0.4% was research about older adults, specifically those fifty years old and above. (Mason et al. 2022)

Autistic Theatre Practitioners

Regarding autistic theatre practitioners, very little academic theory exists. In 2016, the National Autistic Society reported that 11% of its respondents were interested in a career in the arts. In a 2021 survey, researchers interviewed autistic theatre professionals and employers, the first research study of its kind. (Buckley, Pellicano & Remington, 2021). It found that autistic practitioners needed more support and that theatres were enthusiastic but uninformed; time and money were cited as obstacles to further development. Some also commented that neurotypical members of staff seemed unsure of how to interact with their autistic colleagues. Other professionals were too worried about stigma to tell their employers that they are autistic, making it challenging to know what percentage of current practitioners are on the spectrum. Most were looking for understanding rather than big changes. It is important that if any changes are to be made to the theatre industry, companies do not have an attitude of imposition, seeking to mould autistic people into "ideal" participants, but that neurodiversity is embraced through collaboration.

Ethical Questions and Depictions of Autistic People in Media

This leads to ethical questions regarding the ability of a neurotypical person to embark upon a project about autism. As the neurotypical author of this dissertation, questions have arisen during the research process about who the best person is to investigate accessible theatre and specifically the subject of autism. Do people outside the autism community have the right to offer an opinion on these issues, even in the context of evaluating their own work? This writing aims to be an investigation into the subject rather than a mandate and a representation of people's opinions as they wish to be expressed. In an interview with Howroyd, she said that one of the biggest misconceptions around autism is "that we don't have or feel emotions. These are surprisingly common beliefs and are completely inaccurate. We can be just as capable of doing anything as any other person. Everyone has unique skills and things they can achieve and succeed at."

One further issue which highlights this ethical quandary is the way that autistic people have thus far been depicted in media. Mickey Rowe, the first openly autistic actor, who starred in “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” highlighted that 95% of disabled characters are portrayed by able-bodied actors. Seeing autistic characters presented in a negative light by neurotypical actors felt wrong to both Rowe and Howroyd. Howroyd highlighted the movie “Music” as an example, saying, “The director wanted to tell a story about an autistic person and decided she couldn’t work with any autistic actors. I felt that the neurotypical actor (Maddie Ziegler) gave a performance based around negative stereotypes, including muscle twitches and exaggerated facial expressions.” A neurotypical person playing an autistic character can be compared to putting someone else’s identity on as a mask and leads to derivative and stereotypical performances.

Figure 4: Maddie Ziegler as the character Music Gamble from the film “Music”

“Extraordinary Attorney Woo” is a current Korean drama about an autistic lawyer, which leans heavily on the stereotype that autistic people are exceptionally intelligent savants. This is a recurring theme in media, appearing in shows such as Dr. Shaun Murphy in “The Good Doctor” and Sheldon’s character in “The Big Bang Theory”. This trope has been criticised by many, including Douwe Draaisma, as early as 2009. She argues that although it may appear flattering, it puts pressure on autistic people to match the abilities of the fictional characters. The plots often imply that the only value of the autistic character is their intellect and may lead neurotypicals to believe that autistic people are supercomputers with no feelings.

Figure 5: Park Eun-bin as Woo Young-Woo in “Extraordinary Attorney Woo”

A 2018 study by Anders Nordahl-Hansen highlighted that theatrical autistic characters tend to take on all attributes of autism as described in the DSM-5, or The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. Most autistic people in the real world will have only a selection of the characteristics. Perhaps writers are drawing largely from academia rather than lived experience. Howroyd commented that she feels this stereotype is the easiest for neurotypical actors to replicate, which might be another reason for its prevalence among depictions of autistic characters.

Many examples of autistic characters are found in comedy settings. Are these representations exclusively positive? Could they lead to a trend of othering autistic people by laughing at them instead of with them? Many autistic performers, such as Hannah Gadsby, Fern Brady and Bethany Black have found success in stand-up comedy which allows someone to express their ideas onstage without having their views altered by the many collaborators involved in a play or movie. This also allows any jokes made about autism to come from a place of honesty and self-deprecation, rather than being mocked by someone else. It also demolishes the stereotype that autistic people cannot understand humour. Instead, it provides a unique way of communicating with the world: monologuing on a stage around people without any of the standard societal conventions which can be stressful for autistic brains.

Surprisingly, the accurate representation of autism on screen is fairly new. In September 2022, Netflix released a remake of the Australian series "Heartbreak High", which features autistic actress Chloe Hayden as one of the main characters, Quinni, an autistic lesbian teenager. In interviews she described the character as "the first time we're having this kind of representation" and explained that she had a major role in the writing process, regularly meeting with the directors to relate her lived experiences and to suggest ways that the script could be more accurate and enriched. This collaborative approach was refreshing to hear described and an example of how creative projects can be developed ethically. It was also a success for the talented actress and clearly made a big impact on viewers; she received an Audience Choice Award for Best Actress at the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards. The show itself also benefitted as it was renewed for a second season. Howroyd stated that she didn't relate to the character completely since their personalities are very different but applauded the show's sensitive treatment, saying that she appreciated having a character "have her own personality AND be autistic."

In conversation with Ben Fletcher-Watson, Administrative Manager for The University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, he indicated that it takes a significant effort to make an autistic character appear on stage as they truly would in real life; generally, even if informed by lived experience, an autistic character is a heightened version of themselves. This can be seen in some of the costumes of the characters described above. Quinni from "Heartbreak High" has a particularly quirky and colourful wardrobe, with large earrings, patchwork clothes, colourful eyeshadow and jewelled stickers on her face. She presents as a lovable extreme even within the contexts of a vibrantly-costumed show.

Figure 6: Chloe Hayden as Quinni in "Heartbreak High"

Fern Brady praised the comedy challenge show "Taskmaster" on which she appeared, for its structure and open-mindedness which allowed her to feel comfortable using the platform to present her fully autistic self, the first time she was on television without masking. It is notable that as part of this journey of self-acceptance she wore a green lycra and metal costume, reminiscent of the attire of a superhero, intended to represent "an alien" in "a secret wink to any ND [neurodiverse] folk watching".

Figure 7: Fern Brady in a promotional image for “Taskmaster”

While colourful and attention grabbing, it is still extremely exaggerated and likely not the garment she would actually be most comfortable in. Perhaps some of these choices are simply due to the nature of film and theatre which often tells hyperbolic tales with extreme characters. It can also depict a gritty reality but this is only one genre within the many types of performance art. Some stories presented on stage, not just those about autistic people, might be too farfetched for real life. At what point does the art of performance itself become problematic?

3.0 Case Studies

3.1 Lung Ha

Introduction to Lung Ha

Lung Ha is an award-winning theatre company which was established in 1984. It is based in Edinburgh under the direction of Richard Vallis and Pete Clerke and consists of a team of sixty actors with various learning disabilities. Their repertoire covers a vast range, from classical theatre by Molière, to works specifically created for the company. Their current production, in rehearsals at the time of writing, is a play with songs, called "Castle Lennox". It features an autistic protagonist called Annis and has themes of isolation, parallel realities and desire for freedom.

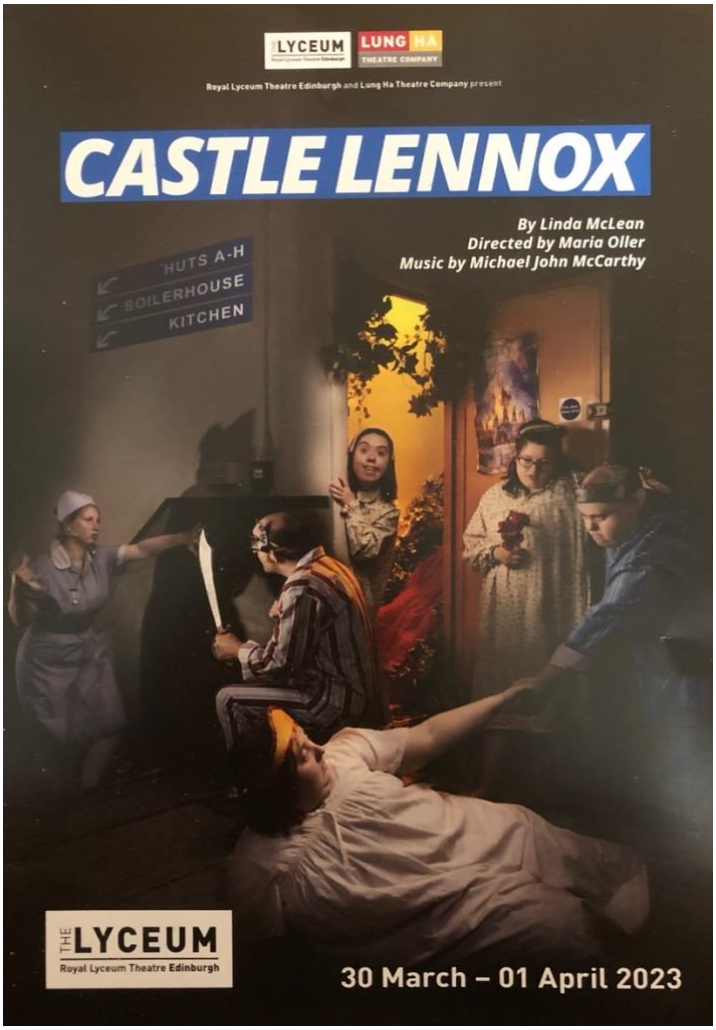

Figure 8: Flyer for Lung Ha's production of "Castle Lennox"

Alison Brown is the Costume Designer for Lung Ha's current production, which is a unique collaboration with the Lyceum Theatre's costume construction department. She has worked with the company for many years in multiple roles; Costume Designer, Costume Supervisor and Wardrobe Supervisor. Her earliest credit at Lung Ha dates to 2000, for the play "Are Unheard Memories Sweet?" She also won the CATS award for Design in 2006 and works for multiple Scottish companies in dance, theatre and pantomime.

Becky Minto is an award-winning freelance Set and Costume Designer, who has worked in Scotland at a multitude of theatre companies for over 25 years. As one of her many design projects, she has worked as a Set and Costume Designer for the Lung Ha Theatre company.

Both Brown and Minto are tutors in The University of Edinburgh's Performance Costume Degree Course and agreed to be interviewed. Minto described the working environment at Lung Ha as "one of the most fun jobs I have ever had". Brown confirmed this, saying that there was nothing she would change about the experience of working with them. Minto highlighted some differences between the process at a standard theatre and Lung Ha's inclusive operation. Their rehearsal process is longer as many participants have full time day jobs which have to be worked around. Minto also indicated that many performers attend rehearsals and performances accompanied by support workers who are frequently volunteering their time to the production. Brown also added that props and other items with which the actors need to interact are introduced very early in the rehearsal process; in other productions these would only be introduced near the end in tech week.

As part of the research process, the author was given the opportunity by Maria Oller, Lung Ha's artistic director, to watch one of the company's rehearsals. She explained that this was the third week of rehearsing and that in subsequent weeks a couple of neurotypical actors would join the cast. The company was using these rehearsals to fully prepare their own actors, including its five new company members.

The Rehearsal

The rehearsal room was a large space with a wooden floor. Curtains were hung from the ceiling to indicate where they would be in the Lyceum Theatre. Oversized beds and props for other scenes were stored at the back of the room. To assist the actors, a large, bold text version of the songs was printed and displayed on stage right, with photographs of Karen Tennent's set model. Several of Brown's costume plates were displayed on the stage left wall of the rehearsal room, showing that the final costumes would be historically inspired with some costumes featuring the tight silhouettes of the 1960s, others with fuller skirts. She described the overall feel of the production as having "a slight fairy-tale theme".

Figure 9: Copies of Brown's plates displayed on the wall in the rehearsal room

As an example of the importance of clothing and costume in everyday life, Emma McCaffrey, the actor playing the central character of Annis, had chosen to wear a T-shirt which proclaimed, "I'm not weird, I'm limited edition." Other actors were dressed in hoodies, leggings and the occasional pair of jeans. As the actors warmed up with an exercise in maintaining rhythm, it appeared that someone held a jingle bell.

Brown was fitting various members of the company in their performance shoes, having pulled them aside from the main group. The entire company was assembled for a rehearsal, the main focus of which was a scene in a laundry where the actors folded towels, and raised and lowered sheets to simulate the motion of waves. In order that it would create the best movement, the weight of the material used was being evaluated.

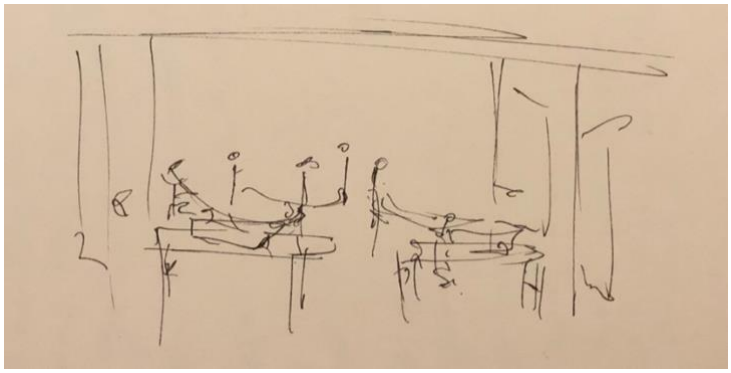

Figure 10: Quick sketch drawn during by the author during the rehearsal showing the staging of the laundry scene

The next scene was in a Victorian café; some of the actors were concealed behind a curtain which opened to reveal the entire cast of 23 people singing. The actors who sang were accompanied by an audio recording of a vocal track. It was unclear whether this was a learning aid or if it was intended to be used in the show.

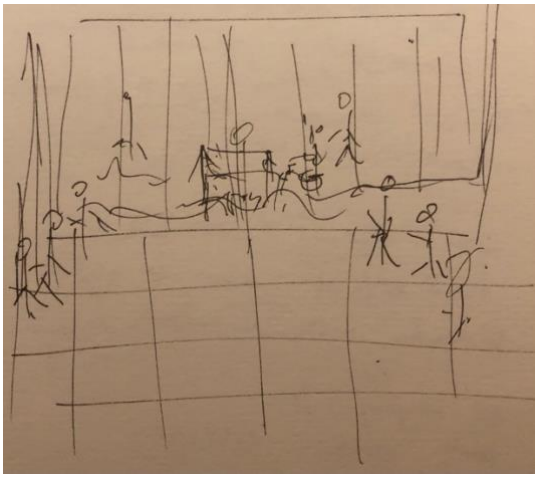

Figure 11: Quick sketch drawn during by the author during the rehearsal showing the staging of the Victorian café scene

The rehearsal concluded with preparations for a party; all the female performers lined up and sang as they mimed fixing their hair and applying makeup, also a form of masking, covering up imperfect aspects of oneself to appear polished at a more formal event. It appeared that the actors had been given general direction that had allowed each of them to explore the concept of getting ready in a creative way; this resulted in gestures more natural to the performers than others imposed by a director might have been.

The tone of the rehearsal was professional and positive; Oller consistently offered positive feedback as well as voicing that the current staging was experimental, emphasising that perfection was not required at this stage. There was a general sense of camaraderie. Oller explained that this was incredibly important, particularly if characters are required to be cruel to one another on stage. This is one situation when the concept of masking could be considered a positive; it was important for the cast to know that while the arguments and conflicts between on stage characters might seem real, they are in fact complete fiction and do not reflect or affect the true relationships between the actors once they have left the stage.

Comparing Lung Ha's Practices to those of Dementia Theatre

For ten years the author volunteered at The Victorian Garden Adult Day Centre in New Jersey. It was located in a Victorian house, with cheerful and upbeat decorations, changed to mark holidays and seasons. Birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated with felt crowns and cake. Food was delicious and often treats, such as cookies were baked in the little kitchen with assistance from clients according to their abilities. Crafts and entertainment were offered daily. Visiting performers, mostly singers and instrumentalists, engaged the audience with tunes from the "good old days". Many who were otherwise non-verbal would sing along and often the more mobile spontaneously danced. Skills such as crafting, piano and ballet were appreciated. In addition to the benefits for the clients, the staff were grateful for these performances which added variety into a stressful work week and a chance to catch a breath while someone else was capturing the attention of the client attendees. One of the most popular activities involved themed dressing

up to accompany associated activities. This might be to attend a “wedding” or a “garden party”, when a collection of fancy hats, straw boaters and shawls would be available for those who chose to take part. For others, who preferred to observe, there was always cake and ice cream and the sounds of enjoyment around them. Sadly, there are very few facilities which offer this level of individualised support and almost all are beyond the means of many seniors who would benefit from them.

Figure 12 &13: The author volunteering at The Victorian Garden Adult Day Centre in 2014 (left) and 2016 (right)

Parallels can be drawn between the practice of theatre for those with dementia and that of Lung Ha, with both requiring the involvement of support workers. Fletcher-Watson described this type of performance as a genre which considers the engagement and stimulation of people with dementia. It must also provide entertainment to their companions who are required to attend the theatre with the patient and may be less interested or knowledgeable about the field. As a result, the completed theatre work can not exclusively cater to those with dementia. Additionally, a caregiver must go above and beyond to offer support by visiting or participating in theatre. This likely means that more people are interested in dementia theatre or being part of a group like Lung Ha than are actually able to take part. This illustrates a conflict found within

Active Ageing Theory, where societal pressure is put on people to participate in activities but fails to consider that, often due to need for additional support, there may not be equitable access to these events.

Employment Opportunities for Autistic Performers

Lee Bowen is the creator of inflatable Walk-Around Costumes. Made of vinyl, with an internal fan around the wearer's thigh, they appear to be somewhat of a combination of mascot and inflatable lawn decoration. Since 2005, the costumes have been worn by autistic performers, many of whom have found that the inflatable oversized attire affords them a physical barrier to the outside world. This enables them to have the confidence to socialise in ways they had been unable to previously and offered the performers an employment opportunity at a time when 90% of autistic people in America did not have a job. (Chen et al., 2014)

Figure 14: (left) Autistic performer Nate Sangimino putting on his inflatable costume

Figure 15: (right) An example of Lee Bowen's costumes fully inflated

The State of Accessibility Within Theatre

In general, academic literature on the global state of accessibility within theatre is focused on flaws within the system and aspects that need to be changed. When considering the subject, both Brown and Minto were much more positive. Minto believes that there might not be much change needed

within the costume department, as workers within this field “are already very sensitive to people’s needs, since we can be working with difficult actors and personalities on any given show.” However, Brown added that having “more care and love in the room is ideal in any situation”. Each highlighted examples of other productions being inclusive towards actors with disabilities and Brown felt that the situation was “improving”. These opinions suggest that a significant positive change has already taken place within theatre during her career in the industry and that a cultural shift of understanding is likely currently underway.

Minto thought that “since Covid, people have been realising that a lot of accessibility issues aren’t just physical and sometimes invisible disabilities can be harder to cope with. Many people now have anxieties about going back to work.” When asked what aspects of Lung Ha's theatre practice Minto would like to see adopted by other venues to make them more accessible, she highlighted considerations around physical space, such as the challenges and requirements of wheelchair access and the need for quiet spaces and private dressing rooms.

This correlated with an accessibility study (Anderson-Moore, 2021), which evaluated the entrances to various physical spaces around Edinburgh, inquiring of a broad demographic of people whether they considered that these spaces were accessible. This was paired with a range of questions asking people to offer their opinions on additional aspects of accessibility and theatre. Issues which arose were largely centred around mobility or that rows and seats in theatres are too close together. This questionnaire was confined to examining theatre and accessibility in the physical context. The results demonstrated that changes made to accommodate a subsection of the audience would benefit everyone.

Figure 16: Photograph of the Bedlam Theatre entrance,
taken by the author for the 2021 survey
Despite its signage, 42.9% of respondents felt the entrance was inaccessible and another 40% said that it was not very accessible

Minto's experience was that costume design is a much "bigger job" than set design. Given this, it is surprising that more research has not been done on this issue. When working with Lung Ha, she does not produce illustrations of her costume designs, as the company does not have the resources to create costumes from scratch. Brown felt that Lung Ha's costume budget was comparable to that of other companies but highlighted that "Castle Lennox" is unusual as it is a collaboration between Lung Ha's performers and the Lyceum Theatre, which is providing the props and costumes. In a typical production, she would be responsible for buying garments which could then be altered to fit the cast. Fletcher-Watson, who is familiar with the company, also noted this and said that some performers actually wear their own garments onstage, which adds much more of a collaborative nature to the project, as well as offering the performers instant intimate connection to the characters and an ease of movement within the space. Brown clarified that shoes are really the only costume piece for which Lung Ha actors might wear their own clothes. This is largely due to comfort and stability. However, she pointed out that the shoes could be decorated with clip-on elements to add character. She also felt that an actor wearing their own clothes onstage as a costume would make the production amateur rather than professional.

Design Process

Minto commented that when working with Lung Ha, the design process is the same as for any other project; at the start, creative thinking is required and the focus should be on "what supports the storytelling and narrative." Designs should incorporate any necessary accommodations for the performers but should also allow the piece to read as a cohesive whole to the audience. This is in direct contrast with many accessible products, such as standard mobility devices i.e. crutches, walkers and canes. Aspects of architecture, including automatic doors and ramps are also frequently designed purely for function and can appear bleak and medicalised.

The Fitting Process

Minto highlighted specific costume requirements for Lung Ha which include that actors might swap roles during the process and could be completely different sizes. Brown said it is important to have garments that are broad across the shoulders, to allow for ease of movement and to accommodate curvier performers. The most frequent alteration necessary is to raise the hem of trousers as many of the cast members are petite. She commented that modern productions are easier to costume as they can include elements such as an elasticated waist. Brown also mentioned that some cast members are allergic to wool. Fabric weight and its ability to be washed must be considered as there might be bodily fluids on the costume. Having options throughout is very important in order to minimise stress and anxiety. Examples might include having two pairs of trousers just in case of hygiene issues.

Fittings and measuring sessions were also described as processes which take plenty of time and require extensive communication about what the costume will look like before it is tried on. A performer might be a wheelchair user or be anxious about being touched. Some solutions to work around this might include asking the performer for the clothing size they would buy in shops, to hold a tape measure themselves or if they would be willing for their caregiver to measure them. Minto said, "In most cases it's about gaining their trust - you wouldn't do fittings and measurements on the first day of rehearsals, you'd meet them in advance and get to know them." Communication emerged as a

key word in her description of the entire process with the ultimate aim being to "make life easy for the performer".

Contrastingly, Brown described some aspects of costuming Lung Ha members as a somewhat playful "battle" and so "knowing how to play people" is important. One example she gave is of a performer who would initially refuse to wear a dress and throughout the fitting process needed to be convinced that she looked "gorgeous". Another really loved wearing his watch which was not appropriate for historical settings. Solutions such as providing a period one to wear and allowing him to have his preferred watch in his pocket were successful.

3.2 "The Six Marys"

Design Project Overview

As a third year Performance Costume undergraduate in the School of Design at The University of Edinburgh's College of Art, the author was tasked with designing an Edinburgh-based, site-specific dance piece for six performers. The assignment was to imagine a hypothetical performance and create a fully resolved costume which an actor could transform into a second one during the performance on stage.

This project, "The Six Marys", would be set on the Esplanade in front of Edinburgh Castle. The hypothetical production would explore grief, loss and memories, as the story of Mary, Queen of Scots and her mother, Mary of Guise, is told through ballet, Highland and Scottish country dance. The dance would recreate the life of two powerful historical Scottish queens while shedding light on the importance of supporting figures who are often forgotten, in this case Mary, Queen of Scots's four ladies-in-waiting, coincidentally all also named Mary.

Figure 17: The Esplanade of Edinburgh Castle and proposed venue for “The Six Marys”

A further requirement was that the costume would make use of predominantly recycled materials; this would involve sourcing fabrics from charity shops or reuse hubs. Additionally, both the production and costume design needed to consider accessibility by being inclusive towards at least one disabled participant.

Professional Productions versus an Academic Setting

There is a cultural distinction between designing and making costumes for a professional company and in an academic setting. This derives from the fact that costume and wardrobe departments often involve multiple people and the overall aim is extremely collaborative. This might lead to more original ideas and potentially advance creative practices. An academic project on the other hand, is usually very focused on a single student and their individual development. Largely operating within a separate structure from the industry, this environment makes it a complicated place from which to examine or confront the structure of costume practice. An additional challenge is that academic design projects of this type inherently contain an element of the theoretical.

Project Research

The ‘Six Marys”, was a collaboration with Rhoslyn Howroyd, who is autistic and has an extensive background in Scottish Country Dance. Since entering university, she has also embarked on Highland and Step Dance. She was willing to share her experiences and modelled the costume.

To gain greater understanding of autism, at the time of developing the project, the author attended a lecture organised as a partnership between Autism Rocks (Fife) and the Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland. The discussion was on structuring dance events; in this case the emphasis was specifically on ceilidhs for autistic attendees. It concluded with an autism-friendly ceilidh. The event inspired the inclusion of audience participation within “The Six Marys”, with a ceilidh dance performed half-way through.

Figure 18: Advertising for the autism friendly ceilidh

Symbolism Within the Designs

The costume designed for Howroyd to wear is for the character of Mary, Queen of Scots. The design process was collaborative throughout and included multiple interviews. It was she who modelled the final costume. It includes a monochrome bodice and kilt-like skirt, which transforms in real time on stage into a red dress with gold detailing, revealed at the end of the performance as a spectacular finale. The choice of red is symbolic, representing the queen's execution and her funeral. To represent autism acceptance, red and gold have each been proposed as an alternate colour to the traditional blue. The latter has been tarnished for many by the work of Autism Speaks, an advocacy group started in 2005 which launched successful awareness campaigns. These largely presented autism as a villainous threat which "will plot to rob you of your children and your dreams". Use of red and gold therefore adds a degree of symbolism to the dress, which could be interpreted to reference hidden autism, with the red, concealed and masked for a large part of the show, to be revealed at the emotional culmination of the story, illustrating the hope that autism acceptance is within us all.

Figure 19: (left) Costume plate for the design post-transformation

Figure 20: (right) Costume plate for the design pre-transformation

Autism and Fabric Sensitivity

A survey (Kyriacou et al., 2021) examined the extreme sensitivity many autistic people have to touch by studying how ten autistic people responded to various textiles, satin, denim, hessian, cotton, polyester, wool and spandex. Thus far, this appears to be the only survey to study autistic people's reactions to fabrics. Surprisingly, Grace Baranek and other researchers found that, as of 2006, touch sensitivity was the least studied sense in the context of autism. The findings of the 2021 study showed that softer fabrics, particularly silk, were viewed as pleasant to touch while hessian and spandex were particularly disliked for being abrasive. Some participants explained that their tolerance of various fabrics could change throughout a day. Others described irritation, stress and visceral reactions from encountering unpleasant textiles or bulky seams and labels in clothes. They also mentioned that material found on furnishings could be a challenge. From a theatre perspective this would affect set design and props as well as the seating and carpeting in the auditorium.

A key component of costume construction is the textile from which it is created. Textiles are one of the most important components of the costume design process. Two challenges were present with this particular project. The brief required materials to be largely recycled, which meant it became extremely difficult to know the fibre content of the garment. Also, every fabric needed to be approved by Howroyd, to ensure that she could handle wearing that particular textile.

Figure 21: (left) Fabric sample for the final costume: charity shop beads attached to fabric from a black velvet jacket

Figure 22: (right) Fabric sample for the final costume: white sheet couched with gold thread and gathered to replicate a sleeve head

She highlighted that fabric sensitivity can change over an autistic person's life. As an example, when she was younger, she could not wear wool, as it was too itchy, unless it was very soft, such as merino or cashmere. However, she now prefers to wear wool and natural fibres but still intuitively avoids extremely itchy fabrics including boiled wool. She also previously had issues with performing in a outdoor summer production in muggy weather while wearing raincoats and rain boots which were "uncomfortably hot and crinkly". For her, the consistency of a material touching her skin was important. A heavy cape or cozy jumper would be comfortable, as would a tight fitted shirt but a lightweight floaty garment that continually brushed against her skin would be an irritant, as would something made of a bulky fabric that "drags and shifts around".

Textiles and Historical Accuracy

Another aspect of the design process to consider was the historical accuracy of the fabrics. Due to the recycled nature of the project and the fact that these were dance costumes in which extreme movement might be required, most fabrics were merely an homage to the past. On one section of the red bodice, a stretch corduroy was used to allow for more movement, while also creating a fitted structure.

Figure 23: Fabric sample of red stretch corduroy from a pair of trousers, used for the bodice on the final costume

The Fabric Selection Process

To avoid discomfort, the initial fabric search was limited to charity shops where garments still had labels attached, including a list of their fibre content. Some experimenting revealed that Howroyd was comfortable with other soft fabrics, even those including polyester and other non-natural fibres. The fabric search was then expanded to reuse hubs where fabrics were not labelled and sometimes in questionable condition. Some textiles there were aesthetically pleasing but might not be durable for a long season of performances. Although one official interview was conducted at the start of the process, the continual development of the costume involved consistently asking subsequent questions of Howroyd to ensure her needs and opinions were met and that the project was heading in a productive direction.

Costume Being Deliberately Dangerous

In discussing this with Fletcher-Watson, he raised the idea of a costume becoming deliberately dangerous, challenging the view that a costume must always be comfortable for the actor to wear. He recounted an anecdote of Laurence Olivier, the legendary performer who once described acting as "a masochistic form of exhibitionism", (Time, 1978) requesting to wear shoes on stage which were two sizes too small, to physically experience his character's mental discomfort. The purpose of a costume is to help the performer mould into a three-dimensional and believable character. Some actors might request to be made uncomfortable on stage to embrace the mindset of their character more fully. When considering an autistic performer, perhaps it is better to ask how they would like to feel on stage, rather than immediately assuming comfort is the ideal scenario. This would have to be a very personal decision and the product of close collaboration between performer and costume department. Some ideas for creating a deliberate sense of discomfort would be to use a fabric that causes a moderate negative feeling or create a transformational costume which would have one way of being worn behind the scenes and be perhaps more restricting on stage. If this is in fact desirable, is it ethical to deliberately exploit someone's sensitivities for the purpose of art? Is it cruel to deliberately make someone feel pain or distress, even if they have consented to this in the name of performance? One participant in a 2021

survey of autistic people regarding textiles (Kyriacou et al., 2021), described encountering distressing fabric as “lots of little needles pricking into you”. Given this, it seems an imperative question for designers to consider.

After putting some of these questions to Howroyd, she felt that from her perspective, discomfort caused by a costume would be too distracting to concentrate on delivering an acting performance, which indicates that uncomfortable costumes are not for everyone, perhaps only those committed to a truly “method” performance. She proposed textile manipulation as an alternative, perhaps using “clashing fabrics and patterns, lots of different textures, or garments sewn to look very contorted” to create the illusion of distress. She also mentioned ideas of ways that an actor’s on stage behaviour could involve their costume to indicate emotion, such as scratching at their garments. Even if comfort is the goal for a performer, costumes can still be part of an actor’s toolkit that is used to create a character.

The Fitting Process

Another logistical component of a costume’s construction is the fitting process, which involves both the costume wearer and maker meeting to assess the garment at multiple stages in its construction. These can be extremely intimate or awkward as they can involve close contact between two people, who in a professional setting might not know one another well, or at all. Costume students are trained not to offer comments on a performer’s body, but to focus on the fit and styling of the costume. This is to create an atmosphere of professionalism and also because comments about someone’s body can affect them negatively, even if the overall intent is positive. There is also a slight physical risk, as sharp objects, specifically pins and scissors can be dangerously close to someone’s skin. It can also require the model to remain still for an extended period, while elements of the costume such as the hem are measured. At one point Howroyd had been immobile for too long, and became dizzy, needing both a seat and some sustenance. A lesson in taking regular breaks was learned.

As two university students, coordinating schedules was a challenge and fittings often became impromptu, such as after a dance class. The transformative nature of the costume was complex and added a significant number of necessary fittings. Howroyd commented that a more regular fitting schedule would have helped a neurodiverse person more throughout this process, which emphasises the need for organisation when working in a costume department. This paralleled responses to the 2021 industry survey by Buckley, Pellicano and Remington, who learned that many respondents struggled with the last-minute changes so often found in live theatre.

The Final Costume

Howroyd described the final costume as very comfortable, with tights as the only negative; these were necessary for warmth on an Edinburgh winter's evening but not an ideal option for Howroyd. Despite concerns about the bulk and weight of the bodice, which contained a hidden lightweight skirt, she stated that "it had a substantial weight but wasn't uncomfortably bulky". The weight of fabric needed to be considered both from a perspective of comfort and function, particularly the transformative element. The lightweight red skirt might have been a mild irritant, had it not had the structure of the original costume's kilt and bodice underneath, acting as a barrier between it and Howroyd's legs. One aspect of the construction which was perhaps under-considered was the position of the bodice after the transformation, which was slightly more restrictive and pencil skirt-like than intended.

After the costume was constructed, Howroyd modelled it outside Edinburgh Castle for atmospheric photos, after dark, on an evening which happened to coincide with a seasonal light show. There were therefore more crowds at the Esplanade than expected so there were concerns that the lights might be overwhelming. However, most of the activity was centred extremely close to the entrance, so some creative positioning was used to find a corner which was both photogenic and away from most of the crowds. One aspect which aided Howroyd in fully embracing the character was removing her spectacles, blurring her vision of the surrounding area, making it less overwhelming and giving her more confidence to move performatively in public. If someone is

literally unable to see their surroundings and observe how neurotypical people are behaving, then they might be less reliant on masking to blend in. However this also shows that an individual is consciously choosing to ignore society, rather than society becoming more accepting. It should also be emphasised that this experience was a positive one for both model and designer and having an optimistic mindset about the event was crucial to its success.

Figure 24: (left) Howroyd wearing the costume outside Edinburgh Castle
Figure 25: (right) Howroyd wearing the costume outside Edinburgh Castle
A video link of the garment transforming can be found in the bibliography

Design Flaws

The design concept for "The Six Marys" was highly considered and structured, but upon further reflection had some notable logistical flaws which would likely cause issues in practice. Lighting was described as a challenge for autistic performers by both Fern Brady and Rhoslyn Howroyd. In an attempt to appease the sensory overload, performing in an outdoor venue might reduce the harshness of the lighting, particularly in the daytime. The show was intended to be one that could run as a matinée or an evening event so audiences could choose the time frame that best suited their sensitivities. However, this might conflict with the needs of the performers who would likely be most affected by the brighter lights required to illuminate an evening

spectacle. Additionally, being outdoors would involve sensory challenges such as inconsistent temperature and weather and an uneven flooring surface not designed for dancing. A better alternative might be to choose an indoor venue which could be set to a consistent temperature and to work carefully with the cast to set the stage lighting in a way that suited them.

Regarding the audience, multiple types of performances could be arranged with the auditorium lighting fully on, partly-dimmed or turned off as in a traditional theatre performance. The only negative of such an arrangement would be losing the site-specific nature of performing at the castle by returning to a more traditional theatrical venue. However, after having seen the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, the scale of the Esplanade now seems extremely disproportionate for a performance by only 6 dancers. An additional benefit of working in a smaller space would be that the audience could more clearly see the performers' facial expressions and perhaps makeup would not be required. This is a sensory issue for many, including Howroyd. This change would however, put this work at odds with some of the current ideas around relaxed performance. In discussion with Fletcher-Watson, he offered that some advocates are questioning whether a traditional theatre is the best location for a truly accessible performance, since it is a venue where traditional rules still exist, although they are somewhat diminished in importance. How vital is a physical theatre to accessibility? This indicates that if an alternate site is chosen, it must be done so carefully and that outside of a traditional theatre space, other unexpected problems may arise which would in turn require creative solutions.

One issue with the illustrated costume designs for the "Six Marys" is that they largely follow the formula of a corps de ballet. The main figures of Mary, Queen of Scots and her mother, Mary of Guise, wear distinctive colours such as white or red, which indicate their individuality. The other four Marys have an identical silhouette and largely the same design, with small modifications on the bodice and sleeves to reference heraldic designs. While this does create a cohesive design aesthetic, it also means each character loses their own

individuality. This is a problem many autistic people also face in masking to try and blend in with others.

Figure 26: (top left) Costume plate for Mary Livingston

Figure 27: (top right) Costume plate for Mary Seton

Figure 28: (bottom right) Costume plate for Mary Fleming

Figure 29: (bottom left) Costume plate for Mary Beaton

Performance Costume Show

Following completion of the "Six Marys" project, the annual 2022 Edinburgh College of Art Performance Costume Show was held and Howroyd was

offered the opportunity to wear the Mary, Queen of Scots costume in an entirely different context in Edinburgh's Queen's Hall. Due to scheduling conflicts she was unable to do so. Had she been able to participate, this would have presented a chance to decontextualise the costume from its surrounding production and consider its practicality as an isolated unit. Howroyd's participation might also have allowed her to evaluate the accessibility of the venue and organisation of the Degree Show. She was able to offer retroactive comments based on reports about the way the costume show had been structured and what she thought her comfort level with participating would likely have been by comparing her experiences with those of being involved in The University of Edinburgh's 38th Annual Dance Show, which took place at the Pleasance Theatre.

The Performance Costume venue had a very small backstage area, with some costume students assigned a large closet as a dressing room. This would have given no real option for an isolated quiet space if needed. Howroyd highlighted this as a definitive issue, especially while surrounded by other people who would almost certainly also be stressed. She reported that there had been similarly cramped spaces at the dance performance, with several groups held in the same room together. The sound of so many people in the same space became overwhelming, to the point where she was unable to hear someone speaking directly to her. She found the option of exiting the building into the outdoor courtyard an easy way to find some temporary quiet. She described some music selections at the dance show, particularly those with pop and rap music with harsh volume contrasts, as painful and giving her a "physical jolt" when listened to, so she was unable to watch many of the dances by other groups.

The costume show was on a raised platform, which was accessed only by stairs. Many people found these challenging to navigate in their extreme garments; Howroyd pointed out that this meant the stage was inaccessible to someone with a physical disability, who needed mobility aids or a wheelchair. She was also concerned about the bright lights used at the Queen's Hall venue. The stage was brightly lit from multiple angles, such that for a performer the

audience was largely obscured. However, she was more worried about the sound created by technicians, from a soundboard located near the stairs to enter the stage. Music at the Costume Show is either a collaborative choice by the year group or in the case of graduating students, a decision down to the individual.

Some cast members at the 2022 Costume Show had voiced their concerns about the length of rehearsal days, particularly when technical issues meant that the original schedule was not adhered to. Rhoslyn commented that she understood the complex nature of organising rehearsals but noted that if any had run too late she would have been concerned about getting home. She could "guarantee that would've been very stress inducing for many autistic people."

Howroyd enjoyed the dance performance itself, describing the audience as "great and lovely", but commented that it was very cramped and warm at the end of the show when all the dancers returned to the stage for a communal bow, followed by a speech. Exiting was also a challenge, as the lights were turned off before anyone had left the stage. In terms of costuming, those she wore for her dance performances were comfortable especially as she was able to wear her own kilt but she would have been less so with warmer lighting. Her costume for "The Six Marys" lost aspects of its practicality when being transposed to a new venue as it had been designed for an outdoor setting in Edinburgh's winter. It would have been significantly more challenging for Howroyd on a warm stage with bright lighting.

Making the "Six Marys" an Interactive Performance

One difference between the structure of the Autism Rocks (Fife) autism-friendly ceilidh and other similar events is that participants at the Fife event were instructed only to dance with the people with whom they came. These friends or relatives would all be familiar with the preferences and needs of their autistic companions. In a similar vein, at the 2018 Autism Arts Festival, badges were made available to be worn using a colour scheme which clearly showed each person's preference for communicating with others. A similar

system could be incorporated into the “Six Marys” piece, to indicate people’s openness to dancing with a stranger or independently.

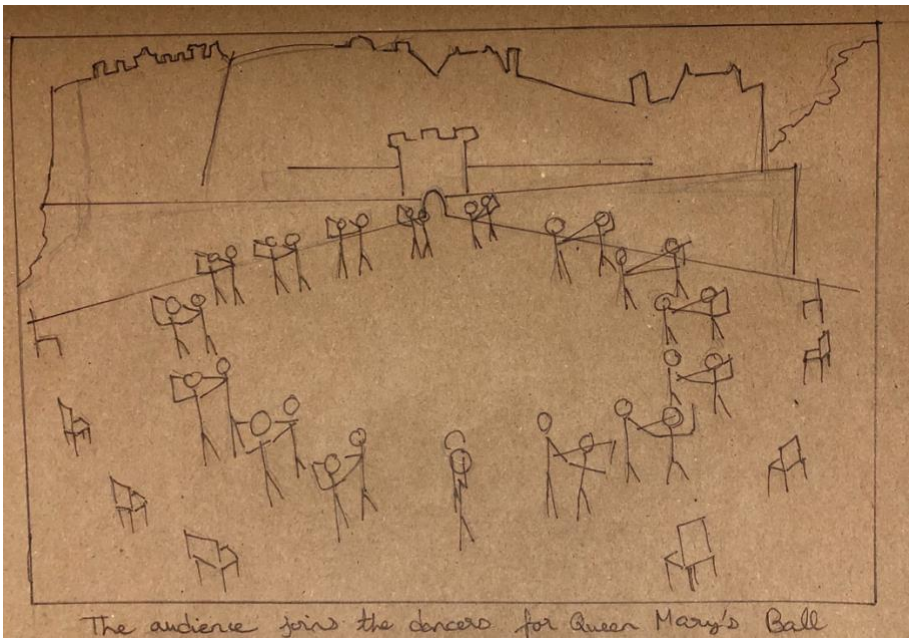

Figure 30: Sketch showing the idea for the interactive ceilidh

To adapt this to a performance setting, it might be helpful to develop a flexible version of a traditional dance style where everyone is able to choose to join in with or without a partner. To allow attendees to prepare for any participatory opportunities, an explanatory video demonstrating the ceilidh dance could be sent to everyone in advance; this would allow anyone who chose, to familiarise themselves with the dance at their own pace. The use of visual signposting around the room would also be helpful during the interactive dance section. Audience members would be offered objects to use throughout which would be matched to the props the dancers would use during the piece. The idea for this addition stemmed from a request by an Autism Rocks ceilidh attendee for a mug to hold and manipulate from her seat as she watched the dancers.

This idea also brought to mind an interactive performance of Shakespeare’s “As You Like It” from the Stratford Festival Theatre in Ontario Canada in 2016. Audience “crowd” participation was central to the production and gave it a jovial atmosphere. The tone of the entire show was very silly, with visual

puns, such as the impromptu appearance of a large whale, which was passed through part of the crowd, as the actors delivered the line “well, well, well”, making a throwaway line suddenly extremely memorable. Additionally, each audience member was given a souvenir bag of props to use during the show; the contents of each bag differed according to seat location on the various tiers of the theatre. The props were presented in small bags, on the outside of which were printed diagrams to indicate how the pieces were intended to be used. The lovesick character Orlando had composed poems which he had hung on trees throughout the Forest of Arden. Everyone seated in the stalls was given miniature trees to which the included paper poems could be attached with clothes-pegs. Meanwhile, audience members in the balconies above had been given lights, which represented stars. The overall effect was that of creating a forest filled with poetry. The audience became an ensemble, collaborators and participants within the world of the play, rather than merely passive observers.

The play concluded with a happy wedding scene. A select few audience members, including the author, had a ticket which included the opportunity to join the performers on stage, participating in a traditional dance. The remainder of the audience assumed the roles of seated wedding guests. Those who were to dance had been asked to wear white and to arrive in advance of the show for an hour-long rehearsal. The dance featured some fairly complex patterns for people with no experience but it would be an activity that could be simplified for other audiences. All the participants appeared to successfully master the choreography and enjoy their debut at the festival.

In a similar vein, the props suggested for “The Six Marys” were integral to the concept and offering them to audience members would have created a tangible connection to the plot. Some, such as a letter, could be unfolded and refolded to include a tactile component while long red ribbons would be a spectacular visual in the audience, particularly outdoors in the Scottish winds. The most costume-like of the provided items is perhaps the most satisfying, a crown, which would allow the audience to become monarchs of Scotland and of France along with the two Marys. Perhaps this could be expanded to include inviting attendees to arrive dressed in tartan clothes if they chose. As Fletcher-

Watson emphasised, it is important that these items are not mandated or dictated to the audience to be worn or used in a particular way or at a certain time but for them to be allowed to explore the objects creatively on their own comfort level.

Figure 31: Interactive props chosen for the audience to use in "The Six Marys"

As an example of how costumes can be an exciting contribution to an event, the National Museum of Scotland recently promoted its "Doctor Who" exhibit with two evenings called "A Night of Science and Wonder". Participants could attend lectures by experts from the show, interact with artefacts from space and see the incredible detail in costumes used in the series. They were also able to immerse themselves in the roles of beloved characters for a photograph by donning hats, scarves and jackets similar to those worn on screen. As a final touch, with the addition of paper masks, they became one of the iterations of "Dr. Who" or a more sinister villain from the series. Guests were able to choose which, if any, props appealed to them and items were varied in size so that all participants were able to choose something they were comfortable with. Some commented on the warmth of "Dr. Who"'s signature long scarf while others remarked that although they had been smiling in their photographs, this had been obscured by the paper masks. Both neurotypical and neurodiverse persons would have had the freedom to self-dictate their experience of these items and choose how much of themselves they wanted to hide behind a character. As a result, this was a wholly inclusive activity.

Interactive performance is not always so successful. A cautionary example can be seen in a survey created by the author in 2021, which examined theatre accessibility. This survey asked participants to reflect on the types of theatre they enjoyed and those they disliked attending. Of the forty participants, none indicated that they enjoyed interactive theatre, while four specified that they disliked it. One simply expressed that interactive performances brought them "out of their comfort zone", while another said that they enjoyed the concept of immersive theatre but often found the execution lacking. They particularly noted that many shows "practise very poor levels of audience consent" and that there is a "very real danger" of actors and dancers injuring audience members by having no understanding of working with disabled bodies.

Exploring Additional Senses

For a more rounded experience, a production might consider the entire spectrum of the five senses, so that sensory-challenged audience members would also benefit. Today, it is fairly routine to see performances being signed, but sound would be a significant addition to a theatre experience for someone who has visual challenges. A perfect example would be the jingling of bells, which is being incorporated into costume designs for "Measure for Measure", one of the author's two graduate pieces. These bells are integrated into the costume, rather than being shared with audience participants, although in another situation, this would be very fitting. Their use sheds light on how sound can impact someone's experience of a character on stage. In the case of this project, the character wearing them is a prostitute and their ringing is designed to reference the historic examples of such women being ordered to wear bells or identifying garments to mark them as "other". In 1384 Italy, Florentine prostitutes were required to wear gloves and high heeled shoes, along with bells on their heads, which visually and auditorily segregated them from the community. At the same time, lepers were also ostracised and required to carry bells. (Brackett, 1993) Their sound is therefore a theatrical device which constantly reminds the audience about the treatment of women in society. Even when off stage, the character could have a presence. If a noisemaking object were held by an audience member it might have a similar

effect of reminding those around them that they too are a permanent presence in the world being created on stage.

Figure 32: Costume Plate for Mistress Overdone in “Measure for Measure”

Fletcher-Watson also remarked that although many odours are often too overwhelming for autistic people, flavour and taste are more likely to be successful avenues for an interactive experience. In 2006, in a Little Orchestra Society production of “Amahl and the Night Visitors”, walk-on “child villagers” shared fruit with children and adults in the audience, to be consumed if desired during the performance. This was incredibly popular, particularly with the adults. Perhaps to fully explore interactive objects for an audience it is necessary to adopt an imaginative child-like mindset and embrace play. It would likely be beneficial to have an exploratory session to

test these objects during the project's development; the author has not encountered this in any rehearsal process thus far.

This conversation led to reflection on an outreach performance designed and delivered by the author in 2016 for the French Académie of Ballet in New York City. The concept was to present an abridged version of "The Nutcracker" ballet to an audience of children of diverse ages and backgrounds with little or no prior knowledge of the art form or of the story. The whole experience lasted one hour and was structured on a series of dances, each preceded by a short explanation. It covered some of the basic elements of a ballet class, costumes, props and the anatomy of a pointe shoe. Midway through the show, the audience was invited on stage to participate and learn some dance steps. Although there was an educational component, the main aim of the experience was to make ballet fun. With hindsight, one of the attendees may have been neurodivergent and including a prewritten explanation of the programme might have been helpful, as would having incorporated a visual symbol to represent each piece. Using the concept of taste here as an interactive object would have worked well as the entire story revolves around the Land of Sweets. Children would definitely remember the ballet if each dance were associated with receiving a sweet candy or fruit treat!

4.0 Conclusion

Ultimately, theatre at its best creates the opportunity for equity. With a small amount of thought and advance planning, this can generally be achieved. It was evident at the "Dr Who" exhibit, which offered an inclusive chance for anyone to choose how they wanted to interact with costumes. This is also seen in the universal inclusivity of Lee Bowen's inflatable costumes.

The University of Edinburgh's Performance Costume Show 2023 will be returning in a few months. As every year, any of the performers might be neurotypical, neurodiverse or have another overt or hidden disability and the ethics around accommodating all participants must once again be considered.

In the upcoming show, two of the performers will wear costumes designed by the author. Currently, all presented information indicates that both performers are neurotypical. However, a designer might not have the right to make this assumption; the performers could be masking. Unless other facts are volunteered, a designer should not expect their models or performers to reveal their challenges, whether neurotypical or neurodiverse. Should all participants be asked if they have specific requirements in order not to discriminate? Should a performer need to disclose a difference in order to be included? All should feel welcome, not excluded and where possible, their needs should be taken into account, just as Lung Ha's performers are considered in every stage of the creative process.

Where current practice and circumstances limit appropriate accommodation, the onus should be on the theatre to investigate alternate ways of including a diverse cast. These might involve off-site private costume fittings, accommodating someone's companion or support worker, scheduling or structural changes, more flexible or shorter rehearsal times, adding dedicated quiet spaces or relocating performances to a more inclusive venue with better accessibility. How much any one theatre can do will be governed by time and financial constraints.

In everyday life, those who are neurotypical do not ordinarily mask, while those who are neurodiverse are constantly masking. With awareness of individual needs, a theatrical stage can become a level playing field where all can perform together. In costume, everyone has an equal chance to be "masked" and "play a character".

The world cannot be changed overnight but motivation is crucial. As Minto and Brown realistically acknowledge, there have been improvements and every small step is progress. Perhaps greater awareness is what everyone should aim for now. Consideration of these conclusions should lead to further phenomenological studies of the practice of costume and hopefully result in a future expansion of opportunities for all within individual theatres.

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