

**COSTUME AND MAKE - UP  
IN THEATRE PRACTICE:  
An Appraisal**

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**Adakole J. Oklobia**

Department of Theatre Arts,  
University of Abuja, Nigeria.

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**Lilian E. Bakare**

Department of Theatre Arts,  
University of Abuja, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Theatre performances are often understood to consist of two major components - the literary and the visual components, or more specifically, the writing of and the presentation of a play in the Theatre. The playwright creates his story and characters in words, while the theatre artists must re-create the play in the theatre in visual terms. It behoves on the theatre artists to make the ideas, characters, story and dialogue, visible and audible by converting the playwright's creation into theatrical performances.

The playwright's words are only symbols for his ideas and it is very possible to interpret such symbols in a number of different ways. The theatre being all encompassing consists of experts in the different units or components, such as, dance, acting, stage and set design, costume design, lighting design and acting and each expert will have a different interpretation about the stage presentation of the playwrights ideas, words, dialogue and directions. If the interpretation of one of any of the experts in the theatre environment is presented on stage, the audience would take it as the true recreation of the playwrights' script. But if the entire expert's interpretations are incoercively presented, there would be a cacophony of ideas on stage. As such a unifying decimal is what is always sort for in the theatre environment, and that is the director. It is the director who unifies the interpretation of the

acting, stage and set design, costume and make-up, lighting, in such a way that the effects on the audience would be one. It is through his eyes that the audience see and interpret the production of a play.

As Cheney (1928) puts it:

The art of the theatre has to emphasise the presentation of a play by actors on a stage, through a flow of action, with that fusion of all the contributive stage arts, which makes the drama live for its audience at the highest possible emotional intensity.

Therefore, costume and make-up, as part of all the contributive stage arts, and as a re-creation of the play text, must always work in tune with all the other contributive stage arts, such as; stage and set design, lighting, acting etc, and must always serve the play's dramatic action, developing and enriching it, and never attempting to dominate it or distract the flow and movement. Costume and make-up, as part of the theatre environment, are the visual expression of the plays dynamic environment.

It is obvious that the use of the theatre environment is to place or illuminate the dramatic action. In this instance, to set the place and time of a play realistically, costume and make-up try to re-create the places and times of the action. Although, this may not present so much detail as if actual properties of costume and make-up are used. Costumes and make-up are often used to suggest the locality and period that a dramatic action is set. Make-up on its part means the appropriate application of colour- the same as is used in scene painting and costuming; on an actor's skin with the intention of exasperating the facial features in order to make them appear specific and emphatic.

Costume and make-up are one of the four elements that comprise the visual scene or environment of a theatre. The others

are scenery or stage space, properties or stage furniture and incidental objects and lighting or illumination. (Russell 1970). Costumes and make-up, on their own, are regarded as the moving scenery of the theatre environment and when used by actors, who are at the centre of the dramatic action, they become the strongest element of the theatre environment. Costumes and make-up are usually the most pronounced accents of colour, line and texture.

In the theatre environment, a very important physical requirement is that costume and make-up, stage and sets, lights must be designed to be used efficiently and effectively by the actors. Finally, the theatre environment must be part of the organic whole, that is, the entire production. The various designers must not try to outdo each other in order to gain the audience attention. Designers must not always be carried away by the picturesque nature or decorative aspect of their fields; they must not lose sight of the living human element that is the actor, the dancer or in general, the performer. Russell, D. (1970).

### **Costume and Make-Up in the Theatre through the Ages**

As part of the theatre environment, costume and make-up function as means of expression for the designer, actor and director and as a statement about an individual and his relationship with the society.

A costume and make-up designer can suggest all manners of moods, ideas and feelings by playing on the audience's level of reasoning. This is seen in the changes in costume and make-up over the years. These changes range from those that are symbolic to those that are close to regular everyday civil dresses; from costumes that suggest cultural and religious ideals to those that express personality and social class.

During the era of Greek theatre, heroes, heroines and gods represented the idealised, while comic characters, humanised birds and animals represented the unregenerate aspects of human nature.

The exaggerated costumes, masks and symbolic ornaments were more than extensions or enlargements of the everyday regular cloths. And these were handed down over the years. The Roman era borrowed largely from the Greeks though there was as much emphasis on realistic or melodramatic touches in masks, wings and garments as there was in Roman plays and art.

The Medieval period saw stage costume as a marvellous mix of the real and the symbolic, at one point emphasising something obvious about the psychological and sociological position of a character, and the next moment, commenting on the character's religious significance. This dualism in the visual aspect of medieval theatre is more obvious in the costumes of the mystery, miracle and morality plays.

During the renaissance era, costume came closer in resemblance, to the everyday or regular clothes, covered with a lot of accessories and ornamentation that acted symbolically to lift characters or scenes in a play above an ordinary psychological or sociological situation. The Elizabethan era saw the audience accepting, due to costume, an actor as a king or royalty if he wore a few symbolic or exotic accessories on his rich contemporary cloths. And in the same vein they would accept a character as a commoner if he wears the regular everyday clothes of a commoner as costume.

The eighteenth century saw costume still richly decorated, with symbolism of class, nationality and historic period added to regular clothes. The transition between the eighteenth and nineteenth century saw a new scientific view of history develop, and for the first time in the history of the theatre, historical accuracy appeared in theatre costumes. This limited the designer, director and actor. This new development at this period saw costume becoming aesthetic and picturesque as well as unified, simplified and controlled.

The African situation, however, is different. Richly endowed with elaborate costume and make-up, African theatre expresses values, norms, cultural heritage, emotions and experiences through

ritual music, dances etc. Costumes in African theatre include traditional attires, masks, body adornments such as; cowries, shells, and beads, animal skin amongst a host of others. These, constitute an artistic medium that convey messages in cultural contexts. African theatre costumes correspond to the traditions and costumes of the African people. However, not all African theatre employs elaborate costume because of the nature and forms of their origin.

In the Nigerian theatre, it is common to find glamorous, elaborate and distinct costumes and make-up. Indeed, the rich cultural heritage of the Nigerian people is always on display through theatrical costumes and make-up Oshionebo and Adodurin (48). Apart from the use of costumes for theatrical purposes, it has always been part of Nigerian indigenous culture to showcase bright, flashy and elaborate costumes during the numerous festivals which abound in the nation. In traditional performances more emphasis are placed on costumes than on sets, stage etc.

The three major political and geographical divisions of the country, the north, east and west, all have different rich traditional costumes which are peculiar to them. The same goes for all the minor ethnic groups in the country. From the northern part of the country, the traditional costumes commonly used amongst the men are flat garments. This costume falls into the category of what is known as the "Riga" or the "Riganaiki". This is a rectangular piece of cloth that runs from the front length to the back length, without any form of joining at the shoulders. It is folded into two equal pieces, with the desired length and an opening for the neck is made. In the middle of the piece. The "Riganaiki" or work cloth, is similar to the "Riga", but for the introduction of sleeves and the embroidering of the neck shifts and edge of the sleeves and the hem. The trouser forms a kind of loose, baggy shape due to the additional piece of fabric in between the legs. A small, well embroidered cap "hula" or "mecca cap" completes the outfit.

The Yoruba people of the Western part of the country use

costumes which are lavishly embroidered and have large sleeves reaching almost to the hemline. These sleeves are added to the already measured shoulder length. The most commonly worn Yoruba costume is the “iro and buba” for the women, and the “agbada, sokoto and buba for the men, with a cap to match. Yoruba traditional costumes, robes and ceremonial paraphernalia of state or royalty are very flashy, bright and elaborate. According to a report by Negri (44), the Oba’s costume consisted mainly of an elaborate crown or tiara, a counter balance pectoral, kilt and beaded leggings and other beaded ornaments.

The Igbo’s of the Eastern part of the country usually dress according to their social status. The common traditional costume among Igbo men is wrapper, tied around the waist on top of which a shirt made in “buba” style is worn. Igbo women are usually costumed in blouse and two piece wrappers tied one over the other. This style is commonly referred to as “up and down”. These costumes are usually accompanied with rich beaded hand bangles and necklaces, colourfully starched hearties and red caps, as the occasion or status demands. Title holders also have their specific costumes especially during occasions and ceremonies. These, vary from the very large cloth of fine hand woven fabric to the voluminous skirt wound in layers of white cloth material made from the Akwete fabric.

Over the years, traditional costumes became relegated to the traditional settings. Changes occurred and what can be referred to as the “dress essence” or “costume-essence” of Nigeria and therefore, the influx of Western style civilisation, along with the style of costuming became more fashionable. These became artistically incorporated into the Nigerian theatre.

### **Functions of Costume & Make-Up**

Costume and make-up in a production are expected to express the personality of the character, revealing his status, socially and

otherwise. It should aid the audiences’ understanding of the character’s relationship to other characters and to the entire production. Costume and make-up of a character must be in harmony with others on the stage or in strong contrast to them. This is because, one inharmonious costume, no matter how beautiful it may be in itself or how becoming to the actor, can ruin an atmospheric effect. The wise costume designer will work out the costuming for the entire production, well in advance of the dress rehearsal in order to avoid the necessity of last minute changes. Ommanney and Schanker (46).

As costume and make-up are integral parts of production design, the designer must pay careful attention to them for costume and make-up are the exterior reflection of the actor’s impersonation, which assumes that the person portrayed is someone other than the actor himself. As part of their many functions, costume and make-up help in bringing out new themes and ideas that have been sought by the director in consultation with the costume designer.

Costumes and make-up can point up the time of the day and thereby clarify the nature of the occasion taking place, such as an informal meeting, dinner party etc. Costume and make-up can be used to establish the social class and economic stature of the characters by distinguishing between rich and poor, those on the way up and those on the way down. It can also be used to establish occupation, especially when particular types of uniform or dress are used to indicate a character. Costume and make-up can establish the age of the characters since certain clothes are appropriate only to the old, others only to the young. Costumes can indicate when characters try to appear older or younger than they are. They help to clarify character, relationships by tying together members of a family, group etc, through identifying elements of ornament, line and colour. Sympathetic and antagonistic relationships can be shown through similarities and contrasts in costume elements.

Changes in costume can indicate alteration in the relationships among characters or in the psychological outlook of a character.

Russell, D. (10) sums up that costume can point out

The importance of the various characters through emphasis and subordination, for instance, the use of strong colours against weaker ones or the placement of a solid black costume in the midst of colour.

Make-up on its singular part has two significant functions; the first is to make an assisting statement of an actor's characterisation; and secondly, to counter the balance of stage lights. Bearing these two major functions in mind, it then behoves the director and the make-up designer to know how best they think an actor can best illustrate a character, and also related properly to the lighting problem.

The costume designer should take interest in the make-up, because of the good and bad effects that hair styles, both head and face, as well as facial colouration have on a costume in totality. And the lighting designer should also be interested in make-up because the colours and textures of make-up can compliment or seriously hamper his light design. It is on this note that we can say that make-up is a welder of costume and light.

Good make-up is hardly noticed by an audience, except in those productions where it is used as an obviously stylised device, because it is part of the actors face and is part of his reality. Consequently, make-up cannot be a laid-on stage tool but must be organic in that it expresses the actor's characterisation in the context of the lights on stage. The usual procedure is for the director, in consultation with the costume and lighting designer, to design for each character, a facial mask, that is, what the character looks likes. Actors can then, on their part, execute their own make-up and can be confident of their adjustment in a specific design Hodge

(25a).

Some of the Make-up functions to provide an audience with its visual idea of a character- the frame of reference from which the dramatic action can emerge. In this instance, make-up bridges the gap between a character's costume and the physical character in the body of an actor. Good make-up strives to exploit given circumstances as a matter of course-time, place, social status etc. In a nut shell, make-up compliments costume, hence, they go side by side in operation.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF COSTUME**

The sum total of lines in costume is the form, in other words the shape of the costume. It should be noted here, that this is the most basic aspect of design. The line may follow the contours of the body or create artificial lines related to the body, but different from body lines. This is the changing aspect of costume – the relationship of the contours of the body to the materials in order to alter the external lines that are seen. Costume design begins with form. As already stated, costume is moving scenery. And as a replica of real life, costume in the theatre has to have a strong sensors value. Its colour blends have to be real to life. The audience has to see it as exciting, sometimes erotic and theatrical. It should be noted that as we move in colour in our daily life, so also we move on the stage.

In the same vein, the same can be said of the texture of materials used for costume. This is because without the combination of texture and colour we cannot see contrasts or find emphasis in costume design. Texture gives boldness and clear statement by providing the necessary exaggeration that makes possible the projection of ideas from the stage. Just as colour can be seen and felt, so can texture in costume.

Another characteristic of costume is movement. As costume is a moving scenery, it shows that as artificial coverings for human

beings, they are dynamic and moveable. And because costumes move, they convey to the audience the many and varied images inherent in flexibility, that is, images that range from the stiff to the completely free and flowing. Once the actor inside a costume is fully aware of how the costume ought to move, the costume is thus brought alive.

Composition is the placing of the strong costumes on dominant characters and designing costumes for characters of the second, third and fourth importance in a production on the fringe of the design perspective. Composition in its simplest form means using the costumes with strong, bright or striking colours, mass, lines, textures etc on the strong or prominent characters. Since costumes are hardly seen on stage alone the art of costume design is to project all the possible compositions that might turn up in the play. The problem with composition as a characteristic of costume is its complexity. Since costume is more difficult to arrange because of its dynamic nature as scenery yet it must always do its effective work no matter its position on stage.

Since costume is worn by the moving actor, it is a move intensive and continuous transmitter of mood than either sitting or lighting. The feelings of the members of the audience are definitely aroused by costume, even though they are not conscious of how the effect is made. As earlier reiterated, costume is character, for the audience is led away from the actor and towards character through the particularising aspects of good costume design and it is character that moves an audience. If a costume is stronger than an actor, it can readily seem self-conscious and distracting, a condition that definitely reduces mood possibilities. Costume must be an aid and not an inhibitor. All characteristics of costume can, should or must evoke mood: colour, line, mass, texture and movement.

**APPENDIX A:** List of some of the important items needed in a make - up box.

- Tissue
- Absorbent cotton wool
- Cotton bud
- Applicator
- Brushes
- Hair clips
- Hair spray
- Blending/face/cake powder
- Cleansing cream/milk/oil
- Blushers
- Eye shadow/liner/brushes
- Plastic/wooden combs
- Eye lashes adhesive
- Disposable shaving sticks
- Tweezers
- Emery board
- Liquid make - up
- Concealer cream
- Lip colours/liners etc.

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