Theatrical Costumes

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The success of many a play may be attributed to the costumes worn by the characters in it. Its popularity is assured if its audience is held spell-bound by a dazzling creation worn by the heroine, or a resplendent array of costumes worn by the chorus. You may have wondered where the ideas originated for these fanciful, artistic creations. Perhaps you did not know that the principles governing the design of theatrical costumes are the same as those governing the design of conventional dress.

Theatrical costumes are of two classes: costumes worn in costume plays, that is, plays in which some period of the past is portrayed; and costumes used in plays depicting modern times.

Costume plays, with few exceptions, are of an historical nature. It would naturally follow that the costumes worn in the play would be identical with those worn during the period portrayed. This idea of costuming is gaining greater favor with theatrical producers each succeeding year. When designing for costume plays, you should therefore study the type of costume worn during the period under consideration, and fashion your costumes accordingly.

Frequently, musical comedies require costumes of a past period; but we need not adhere so strictly to the type of dress worn at the particular time, in this
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variety of play, as we do in the historical production. We are permitted greater scope of imagination; and although the costumes may retain a few period characteristics, yet they may be changed to suit a spirit of gaiety and merriment.

An illustration will serve to clarify this point: observe the dancing dress shown in figure 80. This was suggested by the French costume of the eleventh century shown in figure 81. Although you find the same lines and details, the design is obviously a completely new one. It is fashioned of gold cloth, and to make the design more effective we use an embroidered pattern of gold beads and bugles.

Charming theatrical costumes suitable for the characters in modern plays may be suggested by ideas taken from period costumes, designs in magazines, costumes seen on the street or in the ballroom, or from any other source which may be used to advantage in creating designs for conventional dress.

The stage costumer not only seeks to bring out the character of the person portrayed, but he aims to intensify it. This is why theatrical costumes are so much more extreme than the costumes accepted by convention. Observe the two costumes illustrated in figures 82 and 83.

Let us consider two types of characters. One is of the highly temperamental sort, quick to display her emotions. The other is quiet, serene, unaffected by emotion. Obviously, these two women could never be dressed alike. Their characters are different; their costumes must be different.

For the heroine of tragic plays, we would design a costume full of clashes and contrasts in line and color.
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Figure 82 is fashioned of white net over a champagne colored charmuese underskirt. Artistically arranged patterns of beads, bugles, and rhinestones cover the entire garment.

For the modest, retiring type we want something to harmonize with her undisturbed nature. Therefore we use colors that will blend harmoniously. This is made of light-blue silk net over a dark-blue chiffon underskirt; delicately tinted roses encircle the form. Figure 83.

Besides considering the individual characters themselves, the stage costumer has another object in mind. He must so arrange it that the prominent colors of each costume harmonize with each other; otherwise the entire effect is destroyed.

The costume shown in figure 84 is an original Pierrette costume suitable for stage or ballroom use. It is to be made entirely of white satin, trimmed with large black buttons. We appropriated the ruff at the throat of this design from that worn during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

A toe-dancer would be very appropriately dressed in the costume shown in figure 85. The bodice is made of shimmering silver cloth. The skirt is fashioned of graded petals in chiffon, the tones ranging from a deep hue to a very pale tint.

In order to design costumes which will produce a pleasing, harmonious effect, the theatrical costume designer has certain considerations to bear in mind.

First, there is the setting or background. Costumes which by themselves might be very effective would practically lose their value if they clashed with the setting. The colors selected, then, should either blend
with the background, or stand out in direct contrast, according to the effect desired.

Another point to consider is the lighting to be used. Colors become entirely changed under artificial lights, and a color scheme that was not planned under the same type of light as that to be used when the costume is worn, might not—indeed most likely would not—be in accord with its surroundings.

Eccentricity is a favorite characteristic with which playwrights are prone to endow their characters; and through the costuming, this can be brought out more strongly than through any other means. For instance, if one of the characters in the play were supposed to be a tall, thin, eccentric heiress, her individuality would be much better impressed upon the audience if she wore the costume illustrated in figure 86. The stripes running up and down, the high collar, the long, unbroken lines, the sweeping panels, the buttons running all the way down the angular arms, make her tall figure appear almost grotesque, and emphasize her outstanding features.

Then there is the other type—the stout, kittenish old maid, trying to imitate in dress and manner a sylph-like girl in her teens. The style of her dress, the flimsy material, the dainty touches of flowers and ribbons, as well as her coquettish coiffure, and diminutive fan, tend to bring out more strongly the ridiculous illusion under which she is laboring, and the *unbecomingness* of her whole attitude. Figure 87.