

**COSTUME DESIGN FOR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS:
FROM CONCEPT TO REALIZATION: A CASE STUDY
OF THE PRODUCTION OF OBOTUNDE IJIMERE'S
WOYENGI**

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Abstract

Costume designs for theatre productions require the designer's knowledge of the functionalities of costumes, first as dress and, most importantly, as visual aids to character interpretation and role-playing. The designer's cognition of the characters in the play and how the costumes should help the actors in their role interpretations inform the costume design concept. Therefore, this study aims to interrogate the processes involved in creating costumes for a theatrical production to show the creativity and interpretations involved in costume design. Using Teresa Amabile's Creativity Theory, the study demonstrates the intricacies of constructing the costumes for a theatrical production using the performance of Obotunde Ijimere's *Woyengi* as a case study. The study concludes that the effective realisation of costumes for theatrical productions, especially in educational theatres, requires the designer's expertise and knowledge in costume/fashion design.

Introduction

The costume is the closest of the design elements to the actor's body. It is the conglomeration of what the actor wears in the interpretation of his role. The costume of the actor communicates to the audience so much information about the ideology of the play; from the social strata of the character, through his beliefs, religion,

sex, and mood, as well as the environment of the play, the character's psychology and his relationships with other characters. Hence, costume refers to the dress style peculiar to an individual, nation or period in history. According to Emmanuel Oga:

Costumes are important in the Theatre not only for the comfort they provide the actor as he performs his interpretative art...costumes convey information to the audience through their texture(whether coarse or delicate) their colour (whether dull or bright) and through their shape (whether crème de la crème, gaudy, or outlandish). (52)

Costume thus, gives an insight into the world of the play and the nature of the characters. The audience is thence, further enlightened about certain vital information regarding the production. No matter the nature of the costume, it should serve as wearable clothing to the actor. It should ultimately give the actor comfort because the actor dwells, sits, walks, tumbles, runs, models and sleeps with his costume in the world of the play. In other words, the actor's comfort is imperative when designing costumes; they (costumes) should be designed to aid the actor in his role interpretation. Costume designers, on the other hand, should be skilled individuals knowledgeable in the art and willing to bring to life their preconceived ideas of the costumes. The designer, therefore, becomes a visionary, someone who foresees the costumes from his/her mind's eye before anyone else. For effective costuming, the designer is expected to be grounded in the script where the characters emanate because the script is the creative source material from which the costume concept emerges.

This paper will analyze the processes involved in the making of the production costumes for the performance of *Woyengi* as directed by Alex Asigbo and staged at the Arts Theatre, Nnamdi Azikiwe

University, Awka on 8th December 2021 by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies. The study will use the qualitative data-gathering method to analyse the case study. Here, the primary data gathering method is the participant observation method and the non-participant observation method. In the participant observation method, the designer took part in constructing the costumes of *Woyengi* production to obtain first-hand information about the processes involved in the design process. Other sources data source; the library, the internet, conference proceedings and academic journals.

Theoretical Framework

The Creativity Theory by Teresa Amabile will be used to analyse the study. Creativity Theory is concerned with the parameter of how creativity is measured and determined. The theory explains creative development and its different stages in realizing a work of art. For creativity to thrive, certain factors determine its success. This, according to Amabile is the “Componential Theory of Creativity”. Amabile asserts that there are four components necessary for creativity response. These include:

- Domain-Relevant –Skills
- Creativity Relevant- processes
- Intrinsic Task Motivation
- The social environment

The Domain –Relevant-skills

The Domain-relevant –Skills highlight the importance of one’s proficiency in costume designing. It emphasizes one’s expertise in his/her skill area of specialization. Having professional knowledge in creativity areas is key as it motivates its success. This aspect of the theory can be seen in the construction of the costumes

of *Woyengi* in which the designers constructed the costumes from start to finish. The designers can be said to have possessed the Domain- Relevant-Skill, the primary skill needed for costume design: the practical knowledge of costume design.

The Creativity –Relevant- Processes

The creativity –Relevant-Processes is one’s ability to develop new ideas different from existing ones. It challenges one’s thinking abilities. It inspires an individual to innovate new concepts of doing things. To Amabile, “People are most creative when they feel motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself...”(3). This is evident in the construction of costumes for the *Woyengi* production as the designers set out to design and construct the production costumes by challenging their creativity notwithstanding the technicality involved in the costumes. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh further explains this in her “Costume and Make-up Design....” thus:

The skills of a costume designer are seen in her creations. For a designer to prove her worth, she may need to do less borrowing and more creating. The ability to exhibit this skill as a result of any form of limitation greatly undermines the expertise and credibility of the designer. (43)

In costume design, one’s intelligence is being tried as the designer conceptualises the ideas in making the costumes and goes further to make them a reality.

Intrinsic Task Motivation

Intrinsic task motivation states that people are most creative when they feel primarily motivated by the work’s interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge and not by extrinsic motivators. For example; the designers of *Woyengi* costumes were

motivated to embark on the task of constructing the costumes as a result of the passion they have for costume designing. Regardless of the challenges in making and creating complex costumes, they still went ahead with the creation.

The Social Environment

The social environment is having a good environment that stimulates creativity. Here, Amabile indicates that creativity can thrive when the designers are being encouraged to develop new ideas, and having a good team who is collaborative, supportive and not criticizing new ideas can spur one's creativity. However, political problems within the organisation, a conservative low-risk attitude among top management and excessive time pressure can block one's creativity. The success of the production of *Woyengi* costumes was a result of the support the designers got from the production team.

***Woyengi*: The synopsis**

Woyengi is a historical play that is set in the Ijaw kingdom. The eponymous character – *Woyengi* is a powerful goddess of creation who creates her creatures in accordance with their wants and fate. The supreme goddess gives her creatures the freedom to choose with wisdom the kind of beings they would be on earth, their sexes as well as their deaths, but none will eat their words as their choices are irreversible. *Lakpe* chooses to become a fruitful woman to bear children as much as she wants. Other creatures opted to be warriors, farmers and *Ogbanje* (a spirit child that dies in her prime).

Ogboinba chooses to command the earth at her will and never in her life will she bear children. She becomes powerful and is revered in the land and suddenly becomes dissatisfied with her gift, as she becomes envious of her pregnant friend – *Lakpe* whose house is filled with the laughter and cries of children. She dares the goddess

and embarks on a journey to the world of the spirit to challenge the goddess, *Woyengi* and reverse her destiny. She is intercepted by spirit beings who foresaw the futility of her adventure. *Isembi*; the king of the forest; the *Cock*; the ruler of the last kingdom of things that die and, *Olokun*; the god of the sea. She conquers them and goes to challenge the supreme goddess– *Woyengi*. *Woyengi* becomes furious and chases her from heaven back to earth. *Ogboinba* takes refuge in the body of *Lakpe* where the goddess pronounced her to remain in the eyes of the pregnant woman till eternity.

A Character-by-Character Analysis of Costume Demands in Ijimere's *Woyengi*

Effective costuming in theatre productions requires meticulous analysis of the characters in the script and a full understanding of the concept of the play concerning the setting, the period of the play and the style of the production.

In the construction of *Woyengi's* costumes, the following was considered by the designer: the texture of the fabric, the colour, the character trait, the mood of the play and the style of the play.

Woyengi is the eponymous character whom the play is titled after. She is a goddess of fertility. *Woyengi* symbolizes purity, productivity and fame hence throughout the play, she exudes these traits.

Woyengi's characterization demands that she is adorned in costume(s) that project her supernatural nature. Again, she must wear apparel that will accentuate her divine nature and not impair her movements as the celestial being.

Ogboinba: She is the antagonist in the play. Her insatiable greed and selfishness are seen in her character. Having chosen to be barren and possess mysterious power to command the earth, she

suddenly had a rethink and went back to *Woyengi* to change her destiny so that she willfully chose herself. She is seen throughout the play battling with spirits like *Isembi*, the *Cock* and *Olokun* that tend to prevent her return journey to the spirit world to challenge *Woyengi*.

Ogboinba's costume demands that she wears costumes that will portray her conflicting personality and her restless spirit which brought about her confrontations with other spirit. She must wear a costume that will accentuate her divine nature while retaining her human personality. Her costumes should be designed to soothe her personality and enable her in the acrobatic movements on stage.

Ogboinba's Spirit Power

This is the character that represents *Ogboinba's* powers. This character's costume demands that he wears the same costume as *Ogboinba* since he represents her powers.

Item: This is the king of the forest, the first spirit being to wrestle with *Ogboinba* against her journey to the spirit world.

Isembi's costume demands that it portrays his character as the king of the forest and the spirit being. His costume should also give him freedom for physical combat with *Ogboinba*.

Isembi's Spirit Power

This is the character that represents *Isembi's* power. The costume of this character demands she wears exactly the attire of *Isembi*.

Olokun: This is the king of the sea and the second spirit is to wrestle with *Ogboinba*. As a supernatural character, his costume should portray this. Understanding that the character will be

involved in a dance and a physical combat, his costume should however not impair his movements and dance on stage.

Olokun's Spirit Power

Just like other spirit powers, the character should be a replica of *Olokun* in her costume representation.

The *Cock*: The *Cock* is the ruler of the last kingdom of things that die. He is the last being to wrestle with *Ogboinba*. His costume should also portray the character of a *Cock*. The *Cock's* costumes should be designed and constructed to aid his line delivery as well as in the dance movements and the fight with *Ogboinba* while still exhibiting the characteristics of a cock.

The Cock's Spirit Power

This is the spirit being of the cock. This character costume demands that she is also seen as a cock.

Lakpe

This is *Ogboinba's* pregnant friend that chooses the fate of marriage and fruitfulness.

She represents the character of a true African woman. Her kindness is seen throughout the play as she tries to save *Ogboinba* who threatens to kill her children from *Woyengi's* wrath. *Lakpe's* costume should depict her character as a true African mother while accentuating her pregnant body.

Conceptualising Costume Designs for the Production of *Woyengi*

Woyengi is a stylized play that demands an appreciable level of creativity and artistry, especially in costume design. Hence, conceptualizing costume design for the play commences from the

script analysis stage down to the casting and rehearsals proper. Having understood what the costume demands for each of the characters are, the designer went ahead to detail the requirements for making costumes befitting for each of the characters. During rehearsal, for instance, the designer noted that *Woyengi* delivers her lines amidst song renditions and dance steps as the director had laced the performance with songs and dance. This was part of what informed the design of *Woyengi*'s costume because suitability and comfort are key factors considered in costume design. Hence, the costume designers ensured the costume for *Woyengi* allowed her to perform especially when climbing to the 'heavens' without much inhibition.

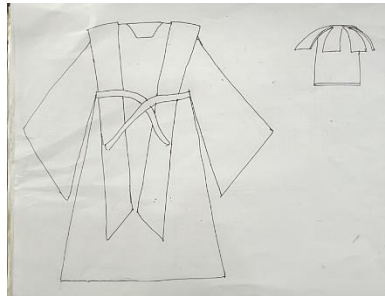


Fig 1: *Woyengi*'s costume and headgear



Plate 1: *Woyengi*

The goddess was costumed in a white thick bridal silky material. White signifies purity, and chastity and white is generally used to represent celestial beings. Gillette further explains colour interpretations. According to him “the meaning of colour is constantly changing. Colour meanings are influenced by many factors: cultural background, age, personality, adjoining colours and individual mood (91).”

Being the goddess of creation, the shiny white thick bridal was appropriate for her character. Crystal stones were used to embellish the robe of *Woyengi* which created lovely and sparkling aesthetics as she sits on stage. Her costumes were made in two layers; the inner gown which was made sleeveless and embellished with ruffles at the ankle region thereby covering her legs. It was made to flow on her body to avoid impairing her movement on stage. The outer layer, a robe, covered the sleeveless nature of the inner costume, thereby creating a larger-than-life aesthetics. The silhouette of *Woyengi*'s costume enhanced her appearance on the stage as a celestial being. Her hands and feet were covered with gloves and stockings, all white. She was made a white tall hat accessorized with white cord lace and glittering crystal stones. She was made of white hair that complements her costume.

Ogboinba



Fig 2: Ogboinba's costume



Plate 2: *Ogboinba*

The design of Ogboinba's costume was considered by her character evolution. Ogboinba appeared in the first scene as a creature in the hands of Woyengi, then she was given magical powers to command the earth. Her character and costumes transited from an innocent creature in the hands of Woyengi into a tyrannical being who wants everything to go following her will and desire. However, the designer ensured her costumes characterized her, thereby interpreting the style of the play. Ogboinba is energetic, she does a lot of dance and acrobatic movements in the delivery of her lines; these informed the designer's choice of making a pant and body hug for the character.

The nature of Ogboinba's costume

A costume that is suitable for Ogboinba's character was made. Firstly, the costume designer, having studied her personality and her actions in the play chose baggy pants to aid her acrobatic movements on stage. She was also made a sleeveless bodice, embellished with cowries, snail shells, mirrors and rattles. The

colour of her costume was off-white with a red cotton hair band that was beaded with cowries. The choice of Ogboinba's colour was a result of her selfishness and greed. Her costume colour would have been immaculate white but for the fact that she rebelled, she was given the off-white.

Isembi



Fig3: *Isembi's* costume with leaf motif



Plate 3: Isembi

Being the king of the forest, his costume was designed to depict the environment of the play– the forest. The colour of his costume for instance is brown which symbolizes the earth. His brown fur-like costume was embellished with green leaves giving a clear impression of vegetation. His head was covered with a dark brown hair-skin cap also creating the illusion of soil.

Olokun

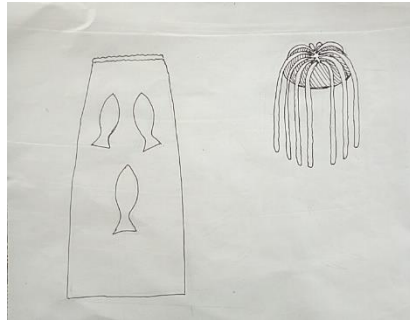


Fig 4: *Olokun*'s costume and headgear with fish motif



Plate 4: *Olokun* and the spirit power

The king of the sea was costumed in a white costume creating the illusion of the sea. The sea-blue and white effects are the colour of his costume. The designer used a blue fabric to construct fish on his costume. Sea creatures' shells were also embellished in his costume. The king of the sea costume was made with white jam-pad material. The texture of the fabric is coarse, suggesting the shell of a fish. The costume was embellished with a blue fish design depicting the personality of the king of the sea. The blue colour is suggestive of the sea environment. The costume has cowries as well as the shell of crabs. His neckpiece was constructed with white crafted beads that suggested the teeth of the sea creatures. His hair was braided white giving the impression of water being. A snake-like fabric was used to construct a snake for the sea god to complement his costume and his character.

The Cock



Plate 5: The Cock



Fig 5: Cock's costume

The costume designer created the cock from a white fur-like fabric resembling a real cock-fur. The head was constructed to look like a real cock, thereby ensuring that the cock speaking role wasn't hindered in the construction of the beak. Hence, the costume designer created the cock beak that allowed the character to deliver his lines.

Analysis of the Realization of the Costume Demands of *Woyengi*

In the realization of the costumes for *Woyengi*, the designers had the freedom to explore new ideas just like Amabile's postulation on "Creativity –Relevant-Processes". Here, they had a supportive production crew who loved creativity and innovations, they never criticized the new ideas of the designers and this contributed to the designer's success in the making of the costumes. The designers had enough time to work on the costumes instead of experiencing excessive time pressure that would have

hampered their creativity as postulated in Amabile's Theory. The designers in the *Woyengi* production possessed the Domain-Relevant- Processes of costume designing as highlighted by Amabile. The Costume design crew of *Woyengi* had the practical knowledge of costumes that aided the realization of the costumes. For instance, the designers did the cutting and sewing of the costumes from start to finish. They underwent different stages to ensure the success of *Woyengi* costume production. These include careful and adequate script analysis to understand the story and the characters in the script, Incubation of the ideas of the costumes: here, the designers went ahead to conceive the various styles of the costumes to be constructed. After the styles were conceived the crew selected the different designs that would soothe the different characters in the play, this motivated them to carry out a market survey on the prices of the fabrics and the accessories to be used in the creation of the costume. A budget was drawn to obtain the cost implications of the various materials used in the design.

After the approval of the budget by the director and the producer of *Woyengi*, all the fabrics were purchased and the design team commenced the drafting, cutting, and sewing of the costumes and the acquisition of accessories worn by the actors, this lasted for a period of one month. Upon completion of the costumes, the actors were called to fit their costumes and then adjustments were made accordingly.

On the evening of the Dress and Technical Rehearsals; a costume parade was made and the the actors modelled their costumes they were made to walk and sit in them to ensure they did not impair their movements on the production date. The costume parade helped the costume design crew to make final adjustments to the costumes. For instance, it was observed during the costume parade that *Woyengi's* costume needed to be reduced in length to enable her to climb the throne built by the scenic designers.

The Team equally integrated the elements of design; shape, line, texture, colour, mass, measure and position in the making of the production costumes. These were evident in the final rendition of the costume as could be seen in the costumes for *Isembi*, *Olokun* and the *Cock* where some motifs were sewn into the fabrics. The crew also ensured that the shape of the costumes of the actors fit their body sizes and their sizes did not hamper other elements on stage.

The colours of the various costumes used were chosen following the different roles and backgrounds of the characters. For instance, the character *Woyengi* was given an immaculate white coloured costume because of the association of the colour white with purity and celestial presence. The designers also considered the 'line' element to enhance the aesthetics and silhouette of the costumes.

We notice lines because of their dimension and quality.

We attach meaning to their character. Lines attract attention as their complexity increases... Lines that contrast strongly with their surroundings or backgrounds draw more attention than those that don't. Curved lines are more distinctive than straight lines of the same length (Gillette; 70-71).

This is very evident in the *Cock's* costume; the *Cock's* costume was made very distinctive and illustrative with exaggerations in proper dimensions. The costume of the *Cock* has 'V-shaped lines that enhance the appearance of the cock costume.

The textures of all the fabrics used for the production were skilfully selected to interpret the different roles of the characters as well as their backgrounds. For instance, the texture of the goddess' costume highlighted her status as she was given a rich high, quality fabric, thick bridal satin, which was accessorised with crystal stones. 'Mass' and the 'position' as design elements were considered in the realisation of the costumes. The crew considered

the proportion of the body sizes of the characters and ensured that the costumes made for them were not overtly heavy so as not to discomfort them during the performance. The costumes were made to fit in the space provided for the actions in the play without inhibiting other elements on stage. For instance, the costume design team worked with the scenic designers to ensure the costumes did not collide with the scenic properties.

Conclusion

Costume is a very expressive element in the visual composition of stage productions. In the design for any theatrical production, the costume and its accessories are conceived and constructed to help the actors' interpretation of their roles and to enhance the audience's understanding of the production. The costume designs for the performance of *Woyengi* at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in 2021 have shown that aesthetic and artistic variations exist in the costume productions of the play. The design and realisation of costumes for the *Woyengi* production were successful due to an experienced and skilled costume design crew who understood the intricacies of designing costumes from concept to realisation while adhering to the play's overall production concept. It was observed that the costumes made by the designers in *Woyengi* were skilfully conceptualised to delineate the environment of the play, thus helping the characters in their role interpretations and helping the audience appreciate the play's message.

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