Engl. 336 Final Project – Text

**Introduction (1 min)**

When I was thinking of ideas for this project, I asked myself: in what ways do fashion and storytelling intertwine? That’s when I thought of the theatre. Costumes are an integral part of theatre’s visual storytelling magic, assisting audiences in suspending their disbelief while also conveying integral contextual and symbolic information. I spent time working in our theatre department’s costume shop in high school, and I know firsthand the care that goes into costume design for individuals and collective ensembles alike, from color palettes, designs and silhouettes, practicality, historical accuracy, and audience perspective.

**Selection of Production: *Chicago* (1 min)**

I chose the musical *Chicago* for my analysis. The musical first premiered in 1975, and was revived in 1996 to much acclaim, and went on to become the second-longest-running show on Broadway. *Chicago* is about two women on trial for murder in 1920s Chicago, turned into media sensations by their savvy, flashy lawyer, Mr. Billy Flynn. The story is based on a pair of actual trials that took place in 1924. *Chicago* takes on a satire of the criminal justice system and the ‘celebrity criminal’ through the framing of a vaudeville-style nightclub show. Much like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and its portrayal of Lorelei Lee’s various encounters with criminal justice in the novel and film alike, *Chicago* takes on questions of construction of narrative, and who gets trusted and believed and why when it comes to criminal justice systems. It also captures and reframes protagonists with questionable morals and actions.

**Analysis of Design and Costumes (3 min)**

The costume designer for the 1996 revival of *Chicago* was William Ivey Long, who continues design and upkeep for costumes in productions of *Chicago* worldwide even today. Pictured are three images from Long’s online archive of his own work. The first features his original costume design for actress Charlotte d’Amboise as protagonist Roxie Hart. The second is an image of a actress Melanie Griffith wearing the completed design. The third shows variations on the costume of Roxie Hart worn by different actresses over the years. Long has stated in interviews that the costumes for all of the characters in the show are based on individual performers, and tweaks to the outfit of one can cause a cascade of adjustments to the rest of the ensemble. Designing for the stage is not only about the individual, but about the entire presentation of cast and story. Long’s designs for this show revolve around three major principles: 1) references to the 20s – this dress of Roxie’s is modeled after flapper dresses; 2) references to Bob Fosse, the original choreographer, and the original Broadway production of the 1970s, and 3) the energy and feeling of today’s production – as stated, Long revisits and tweaks his designs frequently. Fashion is ever-fluid and ever-changing, even as it remains a constant, as Leopardi proposes in his “Dialogue Between Fashion and Death”

In Long’s original sketches, this dress is short, falling at mid-to-upper thigh length, with a plunging v-shaped neckline and an equally low-cut back, fastened at the top with a single button. The torso of the dress is solid black with a lacy hemline and black fishnet and lace comprising the top and sleeves. The choice of black enhances the sensuality of the ensemble, while the lace emphasizes Roxie’s flirtatiousness, Long described in interview. When developed from a sketch to a physical garment, this design changes slightly: the lace recedes to occupy just the sleeves and the neckline is raised. The sleeves cover the palms of the hands, parodying fingerless gloves. The garment is also paired with gauzy black nylons and black heels. With a short haircut and bloodred lipstick, it is easy to see the flapper influence on this outfit overall. The effect is scandalous, as are many of the actions of the New Woman and of Roxie Hart herself. This scandal is what audiences of the 1970s shied away from in *Chicago*, and what audiences of the 1990s through today flocked towards. The third image shows the individual variations made to the garment to match its varying actresses: differing sleeves and necklines in particular, but all still sporting combinations of solid black fabric and black lace, and all still with characteristically short skirt lengths. This dress conveys a sense of individuality and sexual liberation that fits with Roxie Hart’s 1920s New Woman persona.

Fashion in the theatre is a live and active medium. Costumes must be able to be worn again and again, night after night, must be able to adapt to a variety of performers, yet they also must stand as constants to the story being told. The dress of Roxie Hart in the musical *Chicago* manages both, through the multiplicity of its interpreted design that still maintains visual unity.

Works Cited

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