

[Back to document](#)



Brilliantly Executed: Costume Craft and American Theatre

White, Timothy R. *Performing Arts Resources* (2010): 34-48.

Abstract (summary)

The author tracks the history of costume construction across three distinct eras in the U.S.: the late 19th century; the Broadway era beginning in the 20th century; and regional theater and performing arts centers beginning in the mid-20th century.

Full Text

In the costume trade, design is only half the battle. No matter how clever, elegant, or opulent an artist's design may be, no costume can take shape without proper execution. Anyone working in the field learns this lesson quickly, from the smallest of community theatres to the largest of stage spectacles.¹ Even the most untrained Project Runway enthusiast could likely explain the importance of good fabrication. Yet, despite the critical importance of execution in successful costuming, theatre historians have spilled precious little ink on the subject.

Costuming in the late 19th Century

Prior to 1900, most stage costuming was not big business. These were decades when minstrels, dancers, vaudevillians and dramatic actors of all stripes were expected to supply their own garments, and much stage costuming was a makeshift affair.² Looking back on the era from the 1920s, a critic related how gowns were "usually the last minute and hurried selection of the individual actresses, who were given an arbitrary amount of money to spend by the manager a few days before opening and told to pick up what they needed between periods of feverish rehearsal. And the results usually looked it."³

19th-century costumes did shine more brightly when a star such as Sarah Bernhardt appeared, or when teams such as the Kiralfy brothers staged a "spectacular", but such moments of exquisite costuming or mass quantities of newly constructed garments were not the norm. Instead, most operas, plays, and musicals of the late-19th century thrived through stock collections or rentals from a handful of historic costume houses.

Nonetheless, major American cities were not lacking for costumers. New York City, a

burgeoning theatre capital in the 1870s and 1880s, had dozens of "costumers" among its Business Listings.⁴ Other than notable exceptions such as Dazian's, Inc. and the Eaves Costume Company, however, most of these were actually unincorporated individuals who worked "in-house" with a particular impresario or institution for years at a time, rather than operating their own business. Such arrangements enabled many costumers to rely upon consistent work, season after season. This was certainly the case for a Mr. A.J. Cole, credited repeatedly for costumes at New York's Academy of Music through the mid 1880s, and for Ms. Matilde Castel- Bert, a steady supplier of garments to the Metropolitan Opera at the turn of the century.⁵ Leading theaters in Chicago, San Francisco, and Boston also relied upon inhouse costumers, in a manner strikingly similar to the patterns of the regional theatre, seventy-five years later.

Given that stock theatre companies were still operating in late 19th century, the in-house model for costume craft makes sense. Stock theatre companies relied on the talents of a relatively fixed "stock" of actors, along with the leadership of a charismatic actor-manager. Founded in major cities across the nation during the 1850s and 1860s, stock companies tended to stay put within their home theatre, but were also known to tour in the summer. Actor-managers could meet most costuming needs by collecting pieces and storing them in a stock collection inside their home theater. If these pieces were not enough, actor-managers could simply require their company members to sew, purchase, rent, or otherwise procure their own costumes. Such practices did not promote period accuracy. In 1882, one disillusioned critic suggested, "it is difficult in America to find a theatre where glaring anachronisms do not occur."⁶ Under the exceptional leadership of Mr. Augustin Daly, New York City's leading stock company did win glowing reviews for its costumes in the 1880s,⁷ but it was more typical for stock managers to spend as little effort and money on costumes as possible. More important, the costumes of stock companies were rarely branded as being produced or sewn from any particular place.

This would change when the stock company was replaced by the "combination company" as the leading vehicle for American theatre during the 1880s and 1890s, and when combination companies began to brand their costumes as having been built for Broadway. The combination company differed from stock in that it was a temporary collection of scripts, costumes, wigs, scenery and performers that producers have combined into a cohesive, saleable product during rehearsals. Such companies were assembled for one particular play or musical, and then disassembled upon the show's closing. No longer did stock actors play so many well-traversed roles in so many well-worn costumes. By definition, the combination company was a new "production", usually debuted in New York City, and often launched on a railroad tour when Manhattan attendance flagged.

Significantly, producers kicked the habit of hoarding costumes and instead got in the business of crafting them anew. To meet the needs of his combination companies in the 1890s, for example, Producer Henry W. Savage constructed a block-long facility for theatrical production near 11th Avenue in Manhattan. His building enabled him to design coherent shows, and the many workrooms included "a costume department with fifty women busily at work."⁸ His colleague and competitor, producer Daniel Frohman, built a similar space for costuming in the seven-story tower that rose as

an extension of his New Lyceum Theatre in 1903. A New York Times feature describes a "costumers' hall, in which fifty seamstresses may ply their needles together, aided by as many cutters as necessary."⁹ Even if press representatives exaggerated the scale of these workspaces a bit, both facilities stand as milestones in costume craft.

In these spaces, producers Savage and Frohman focused on made-to-order costumes geared to the touring phenomenon in the theatre, which was Broadway's own attempt at mass production in the era of Henry Ford. Tours had blanketed America since the days of minstrel troupes, but the combination companies of the late 19th century opened up a bold new era of simultaneity. When stock companies had gone on tour, they could only be in one place at a time. Tours tended to launch at the start of the summer, and home theaters were closed until the troupe returned in the fall. The actor-managers who took pride in their costumes, such as Augustin Daly, promoted their tours as "direct from New York", "with all the original scenery and costumes", or with "the original New York cast, scenery, and appointments."¹⁰ Others coasted on the popularity of their star actors, making no mention of costumes or scenery when promoting their tours. Whether exquisitely or shoddily costumed, however, all stock tours were limited to one cohesive set of actors, and therefore one set of costumes.

When combination companies began to tour, however, the American theatre transformed. Those producers who had invested in production facilities, such as Savage and Frohman, could send out several combinations for simultaneous national tours. Purveyors of these shows hoped that by combining a duplicate batch of the costumes, scenery, scripts, scores, and librettos that had congealed in the debut theatre, they could make lighting strike twice. No matter that the lead actress who had made such a hit at Wallack's or Daly's could not actually be in two cities at once. No matter that the incipient combination companies of the 1880s and 1890s often skirted by on a mishmash of costumes of varying degrees of quality. This was commercial theatre, and producers could counterbalance deficiencies in talent, casting, or costume craft through advertising.¹¹

Theatrical advertising began to impact costume craft most significantly with the advent of "production stills" in the 1890s. Unlike prior forms of advertising, such as portraits of leading actors taken in photography studios, the production still actually showed an actor onstage and in costume. As technological advances liberated the camera from the confines of the studio, "stills" began to appear routinely in posters, advertisements, and magazines. These photographs created new expectations among audiences. New Jersey readers of Stage Chat magazine in 1913, for example, saw photographs of celebrated actress Maxine Elliott in full costume, onstage in the New York run of *Hearts Aflame*.¹² The play's producers had little choice but to present Elliott in those very same costumes when the show toured in New Jersey. Even if producers were willing to foist makeshift costumes on tour audiences, and save Elliott's beautiful gowns for an upcoming Manhattan play, they ran the risk that critics in New York would recognize them from old production stills and know that producers were cutting corners instead of new costumes. As production stills began to dominate advertising in the 1890s, costumes had shorter life cycles, and the demand for new costumes in the theatre district grew apace.

Simultaneous changes in playwriting and theatrical design accelerated this growth in costume craft. "Realism" crept onto American stages during the 1880s and 1890s through the works of playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. These plays featured comparatively "real" characters instead of the cookie-cutter ingénues and villains of 19th-century melodrama. If one chose to mount a production of Ibsen's *Doll's House*, as seven producers did between 1888 and 1908, recycled and makeshift costumes simply would not do. Ibsen wrote his realist plays with a high level of specificity, giving stage directions that it was to be set in a "a small Norwegian town, 1879".¹³ As plays in this style gradually displaced melodrama on the American stage, highly specific, made-to-order costumes followed in their wake. Not all producers, playwrights, or designers embraced realism, but those who did left the recycled costumes and makeshift outfits of the 19th century far behind them.

The increasing scale and frequency of stage spectacles also created work for late 19th-century costumers. Such shows contended with modern cameras and their pesky ability to identify last season's costumes. It was one thing for dressmakers in New York or Chicago to make several new gowns for a leading lady, but it was something else entirely when the producers at a massive theatre such as the Hippodrome ordered new costumes for a cast of nearly one hundred dancers. Spectacles often called for fanciful, out of the ordinary pieces that simply had to be constructed anew, either because they transcended the looks available in rental collections, or because they had to be matched exactly, in batches of several dozen at a time. The massive amounts of design involved in large-scale costuming also helped to disaggregate costume and scenic design. It was typical during most of the 19th century to have a single designer take responsibility for all components appearing on the stage, be they silk or wood and canvas. It was only in the very last decades of the century that separate credits for "costumes designed" or "scenery painted" began to appear in theatrical programs.¹⁴ Stage spectacles, requiring massive amounts of work, helped to advance this turn-of-the-century trend.

Collectively, these changes in design, photography, advertising, and playwriting gradually moved the American theatre into a new era, defined not by stock or combination companies, but by a peculiar new breed of stage presentation: the Broadway show.

Costuming in the Broadway Era

In October of 1903, one of these Broadway shows, a touring company of the play "Favor of the Queen", came to an abrupt end in Baltimore. Its beautiful costumes burned along with all scenery, and the entire multi-city tour was cancelled.¹⁵ This event perfectly illustrates the peculiarity of the Broadway era in American theatre history. In the 19th century, no conflagration of mere stage components could have derailed the tour of a great star. Reviews suggest that audiences who flocked to see someone like Sarah Bernhardt cared little for costumes. Likewise, many decades later, the traveling shows of the post-WWII era had plenty of options for costume reconstruction in universities or regional theaters should they suffer a fire. But in 1903, a fire in a crowded costume or scenery storage space could indeed mean the end of a national tour. The dressmakers or scenic painters of Baltimore in 1903 certainly had the skills and materials to create replacement pieces, but their work

would not do because they were not "Broadway". As the 19th century drew to a close, Broadway had developed into far more than an industry or a place; it was a national brand.

The reach of this Broadway brand, which gave Manhattan costumers a near monopoly in the national market, was enhanced by the precision and specificity of stage costuming. Unlike scenery or backdrops, which can generally fit into theaters so long as producers have some sense of stage dimensions, costumes require an exacting measurement and fitting process during show rehearsals.¹⁶ It therefore makes sense that in the Broadway period, growth in the costume trade was greatest in the very city where almost all auditions and rehearsals occurred.

Due to pragmatic concerns of costume fit, and the branding concerns of the Broadway show, producers after 1900 had little choice but to gather every foot of ribbon and every yard of fabric within the city of New York. Though highly unnatural, it became generally accepted that components such as costumes should be fabricated on the island of Manhattan. Among the costumes that went on national tour from the turn of the century to the late 1950s, a towering majority came from rental houses, period collections, or made-to-order costume houses in Gotham. As America's commercial theatre expanded and transformed during these decades, New York City costumers followed suit.

The new players on the scene in the Broadway era were third-party contractors who built costumes from scratch in Manhattan. Costuming became big business after 1900, when dozens of firms, buildings, and specialists materialized. From only forty-three listings in the city directory in 1896, Manhattan costumers jumped to seventy-four names in six years.¹⁷ This seventy percent increase correlated with an increase in the number of theatres in the city, but it also reflected a booming business in national tours, which peaked in the first decade of the 20th century.¹⁸ Even more impressive than the sheer number of costumers¹⁹ were the powerhouse firms that secured lucrative contracts as costumers for the top shows on Broadway. By studying the history of leading firms such as Eaves Costume as they negotiated the terrain of their trade, we can learn much about the craft, business, and labor of costumes during the Broadway era.

Eaves was the great grandfather of Broadway costume houses, with roots going back to the Union Square theatrical district in 1863. After costuming an abundance of shows through the second half of the 19th century, including the spectaculars of the Kiralfy brothers, the firm headed uptown at some point in the early 20th, eventually purchasing a building on West 46th Street in 1914. Five years later, proprietor Charles Geoly was doing well enough in his trade to buy four additional buildings on the same block.²⁰ Much of this success had to do with the branding of Broadway and cultural power of the city of New York, but Geoly relied just as much, if not more, on his cozy business arrangements with the Theatrical Syndicate and the brothers Shubert.

Before costume designers and workers had unions, producing groups such as the Syndicate and the Shuberts called most of the shots in the industry. The eight producers who formed the Syndicate in 1896 were the first to fully capitalize on the cultural monopoly known as the "Broadway show". This oligarchic booking

organization was able to ensnare hundreds of dispersed American playhouses into their ruthless system for one simple reason: American theatergoers couldn't resist the chance to see a Broadway show. For playhouse owners to get a Syndicate show, however, they had to agree to a whole season's worth of Syndicate products. Eaves Costume partnered frequently with Syndicate producers, and the firm was credited time and again in the playbills of touring shows from 1896 to the 1910s.

While the Syndicate was launching tours from New York, and trainloads of Eaves costumes fanned out over countless national rail lines in the 1890s, a group of upstart competitors from Albany began to build theaters, undercut prices, and steal the Syndicate's stars by paying them more. Their names were Sam, Lee, and J.J. Shubert. They began by skipping the expensive costumes and scenery of the new Broadway era altogether, and featuring stars at a cut rate. In perhaps their most famous coup, the Shuberts presented the great Sarah Bernhardt in nothing more than an outdoor tent in 1905.²¹ After years of producing shows with relatively minimal components, the Shubert brothers eventually toppled the Syndicate to become a quasi-monopoly in their own right by the 1910s. With the Syndicate on its way out and the Shuberts on their way in, Eaves Costume was able to profit handsomely by providing costumes with a Broadway pedigree to both David and Goliath.

After an early Broadway period of producer control and high proprietor profits, the late 1910s ushered in a wave of costume unionization. Designers secured union status in 1918, with the founding of the United Scenic Artists (U.S.A.), but those who actually sewed and fitted costumes had to wait a bit longer, provided they did not work in one of the International Ladies Garment Worker Union's unionized dressmaking or tailor shops. In 1924, with the founding of a special Costume Workers Local in the I.L.G.W.U., all designers, cutters, stitchers, and seamstresses of a house such as Eaves were eligible for union membership.²² Even when costumes were all sewn up, and ready for a Broadway dress rehearsal or a tour launch, they remained under the watchful eyes of Broadway's unions. The stagehands union had created the rather gendered position of "costume mistress", with the duties of protecting, fixing, and laundering Broadway's garments, both in New York City and on the road.

Whether unionized or not, the team at Eaves Costume continued to produce made-to-order costumes aggressively throughout the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. There were also enough costumes returning to West 46 th Street in decent shape for Eaves to amass an impressive rental collection. The early 1940s advertisements of the firm boasted of " 50,000 costumes in stock", supposedly "the largest stock on hand in the East."²³ With seven stories available at their 151 West 46th Street building, Eaves had ample space to display costumes for rent. Brochures from the 1940s suggest a major midtown operation with a "research department", "wigs to rent and made to order", "arms and armor", and "designs and sketches . . . made by Eaves artists".²⁴

Even when the rental business was good, Eaves had an incentive to also work in made-to-order pieces, if for no other reason than this riskier work could also be highly lucrative. Eaves got more than it bargained for in 1941, however, when the firm signed a made-to-order contract with an inexperienced producer for the musical

"All in Fun". The musical turned out to be anything but fun, and the show teetered on the brink of insolvency during its Boston tryout. When Charles Geoly sent his son Andrew up to Boston to collect on the unpaid costume bill in January of 1941, reporters caught wind of the crisis and chronicled Andrew as he arrived at a stage door in Boston with a sheriff and an attorney, "waving a defaulted note on part of the \$23,000 costume bill."²⁵ Despite the heavy-handed tactics, Eaves never recovered its money.

In addition to the rental and made-to-order trades, Broadway's costume firms had the option of television costuming by the late 1940s. Film studios had bypassed New York City's costumers very quickly, amassing their own armies of seamstresses and their own costume collections in southern California by the 1910s and 1920s. Television, however, was a different story. Television broadcasting from 1948 to the mid 1950s was concentrated heavily within New York City, and was therefore a boon to local costume craft. In 1951, Eaves "reliably reported" that a full fifty percent of its income came from the new media.²⁶ Though television broadcasting largely abandoned New York City for the West coast in the late 1950s, Eaves continued to thrive on West 46th Street throughout the post-WWII era, nabbing Broadway credits for musicals such as *Redhead* and *Cabaret*, and opening a warehouse in Long Island City with storage space for over 100,000 costumes. Though dogged by a kickback scandal in 1964, Eaves remained a major player in Broadway costuming well into the 20th century.²⁷

Eaves' top competition for most of the Broadway era was the Brooks Costume firm, founded back in 1908 as a supplier of military uniforms. Brooks proprietor Ely Stroock got a leg up when the Hippodrome ordered a small army's worth of uniforms for a spectacle show, and an even bigger break when none other than Florenz Ziegfeld proposed a business partnership sometime around 1914. With Ziegfeld reportedly spending as much as \$1000 per "show girl", Stroock could add a made-to-order costume shop to his already bustling uniform company. Both wings of the Brooks operation occupied multi-story facilities on the east side of 6th Avenue, just south of 46th Street. By 1933, a younger Stroock by the name of James took over costuming so that his father could return to uniforms full time. Described by the *New York Times* as dapper man with wavy hair, James had the good fortune of becoming the costumer of choice for leading producers such as Rodgers and Hammerstein, the Theatre Guild, and Robert Whitehead. James Stroock's advertisements from the 1940s suggest a proprietor confident about his place in the industry, boasting of "the largest collection of the world's finest costumes . . . the kind Broadway stars wear."²⁸ During its heyday at mid-century, Brooks chalked up more Broadway credits than perhaps any other costumer, from *Glass Menagerie* to *Gypsy*.²⁹

Despite this track record, many Brooks costumes from the mid-century period looked drab and dilapidated. This was not because the firm suffered unpredictable spells of shoddy workmanship. Certain scribes of the era, especially William Inge and Tennessee Williams, called for precisely this type of costuming in their naturalist plays. As it became acceptable for Broadway leads to tread the boards in threadbare suits and fading dresses, producers turned to thrift shops and ready-made clothing, and the unionized work flows at shops like Brooks and Eaves hit a snag. Eaves,

relying more heavily on rental costumes and specialty items, faced less of a threat. But at Brooks, where fifteen to twenty full-time employees counted on made-to-order costumes for their livelihood, and where a major contract could generate work for temporary hires, ready-made and thrift store clothing posed a serious challenge.³⁰ As more and more producers protested the creation of a "custom-made worn out suit" in a Broadway costume house, when a similar worn-out suit may very well hang in the back of their own closet, the grip of Broadway's costumers on the national theatre began to slip.³¹ Years before the rise of Off-Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, and the regional stage, champions of thrift store and ready-made costumes began looking for ways to bypass the strict controls of unionized costume shops.

Brooks weathered the ready-made clothing challenges of the mid-century period with both its bottom line and its 6th Avenue workspaces intact. Much like Eaves Costume, Brooks worked extensively in television as it thrived in Manhattan, earning as much as forty percent of its income from this alternative to live theatre. In 1952, when Brooks relocated to West 61st Street, the announced reason was "to be near the television studios in the Columbus Circle district."³² Clearly, costume contracts for television broadcasting became more than just an afterthought to Broadway during this transformative mid-century period.

All told, the work in stage, television, and amateur theatricals sustained a total of thirty-one major Manhattan businesses by the late 1940s, about half of them fully unionized by the United Scenic Artists.³³ This robust collection of firms was a far cry from the unincorporated individuals of the nineteenth century. Whether in New York City or on national tour, Broadway costuming was strictly a contractor's game. Joining Brooks and Eaves in made-to-order costuming at mid-century were noted firm proprietors Helene Pons, Veronica Blythe, and Madame Barbara Karinska. Ms. Blythe had come close to breaking the contractor mold when she became an in-house costumer for the Shuberts in the 1940s, but the arrangement did not last beyond 1952. Another firm, Charles Chrisdie, earned its keep in Times Square through rentals alone. Founded down on the Bowery in 1873, the firm moved its stately array of period costumes up to West 47th Street in 1940. Filling a five-floor building with its rental pieces, and later moving to a copious two-floor work space, Chrisdie thrived as a rental supplier of "thousands" of period pieces from 1942 until 1963, when the widow of Charles Chrisdie Jr. sold off the collection to various buyers and the firm ceased to exist.³⁴

Costuming in New York City was so vigorous during the Broadway era that some firms prospered not as rental or made-to-order houses, but as suppliers of specialty fabrics. Gladstone, Maharam, and Dazian's Inc. did so through the latter half of the Broadway era, capitalizing on the importance of attractive, workable fabrics for good costuming. Proprietors Louis Gladstone, Louis Maharam, and Wolf Dazian each maintained a shop with multiple employees near Times Square through the 1930s or 1940s, in buildings tucked in between Broadway's theaters. The presence of these local firms was especially helpful when a producer needed to replace or repair a costume with a highly specific fabric. As Broadway shows began to have much longer runs in the 1940s, renewable sources of fabric were absolutely crucial. Though long-running shows did generate some work for those who completed

repairs or replaced fabrics, they would grow to be a major problem for costume houses as the Broadway era drew to a close in the 1950s. The mother of all long-running shows was the 1943 musical *Oklahoma!*, which ran for five years at the St. James Theater and sparked a trend of multi-year blockbusters in the American theatre. Before *Oklahoma!*, it was highly unusual for any Broadway hit or national tour to run longer than a year.³⁵ When shows stayed open longer, fewer new shows opened every year, and Broadway's costumers saw their work opportunities dwindle. Though *Oklahoma!* did generate an extra batch of work for Brooks Costume when it launched a national tour, the big story on the Rialto was that no new costumes were needed at the St. James for quite some time. As similar hits such as *Guys and Dolls* (1951) and *My Fair Lady* (1956) became semi-permanent fixtures on Broadway, their longevity undercut the primacy and profitability of leading costume houses.

The conclusion of the Broadway era was not sudden, and is not easily pinpointed. There was a steady decline in the number of Manhattan costumers after 1960⁽³⁶⁾, but the abundant sixties remained profitable for those costumers lucky enough to stay in the game. When faced with fewer contracts per year, several leading firms merged. Brooks Costume acquired a leading Philadelphia costumer to become Brooks-Van Horn in 1962, but the real sea change came in 1981, when Eaves bought its long-standing rival to become the Eaves-Brooks Costume Company. Historians might be inclined to wax nostalgic about supposed golden ages before these mergers, when dozens of master craftspeople such as Wolf Dazian walked midtown, selecting, sewing and supplying fabrics for the stage, but the truth of the matter was that New York City's loss became America's gain. Costume designers, seamstresses, cutters, drapers, and the like did not disappear in the 1960s and 1970s. They moved. As costume craft floundered in and around Times Square, it flourished everywhere else. In cities such as Dallas, Seattle, and D.C., and in dozens of university theatre departments, professional costuming jobs cropped up, with only a minimal connection to Broadway. In this way, the regional theatre altered not just the map of professional theatre in America, but also the national geography of costume craft.

Regional Theatre and Performing Arts Centers

The dispersal of American costume craft to an interconnected national network of regional theatres and performing arts centers constituted a remarkable upheaval of decades-old patterns of production. From the days of turn-of-the-century dressmaking to the most avant-garde costuming in the 1950's, the trade had been stubbornly entrenched within New York City. Producers, designers or performers in places far from America's theatrical capital had an even harder time finding costumes locally when ready-made clothes supplanted made-to-order shops in most American downtowns during the first half of the 20th century. Then came the regional theatre revolution. Over a period of about twenty years, the impressive monopoly of New York City's costumers simply faded away.

The opening salvo of the "revolution", as its champions called it, came in 1947, when "dynamo" Margo Jones announced that she wanted "to live in an age when there is great theatre everywhere", and planted the seeds for professional costuming in the city of Dallas.³⁷ Her Theatre '47 got off the ground with a grant

from the Rockefeller Foundation, but unfortunately fell by the wayside when Jones passed in 1955. The enthusiasm for professional theatre in Dallas survived, however, and less than five years later, local donors had facilitated the construction of a Dallas Theatre Center, designed by celebrated architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Although Wright's original design did not allow much space for costume craft, the D.T.C. did boast three full-time costume craftspeople by 1965.³⁸ Later, in the early 1980s, the expanded and renovated D.T.C. would employ many more. As a lone institution, the D.T.C. of the 1960s was hardly positioned to challenge Broadway's costume houses. Collectively, however, the full-time positions in regional theatres across the nation began to add up and have an impact.

In nearby Houston, another visionary, Nina Vance, began to present plays in a rented dance studio in 1947, before later moving to a converted factory building.³⁹ Vance had neither the space nor the budget in these locations for professional costumes, but like so many of her colleagues around the country, she would move her crew into a multi-million dollar facility during the 1960s. In Washington, D.C., Zelda Fichlander nurtured her regional theatre along similar lines, enduring costume construction within an abandoned movie house through the 1950s before locking down a generously outfitted Arena Stage building in 1961.⁴⁰ Joining Dallas, Houston and D.C. in this pattern over the course of the 1960s and 1970s were the cities of Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, San Diego, Denver, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Atlanta, Buffalo, and Chicago. According to a Twentieth Century Fund study from 1970, a full "173 arts centers and theaters were completed in the United States between 1962 and 1969, with another 179 on the drawing boards or in construction."⁴¹ Even more significant than the geographic spread of these facilities across the country was the expenditure lavished upon them by private, corporate, and governmental entities. In the single year of 1964, economists estimate that the total national expenditure on performing arts buildings was between \$50 and \$75 million dollars.⁴² It was these performing arts centers, even more than the regional theatre troupes, which made a new American geography of costume craft.

Among all of these cities, the most storied success was in Minneapolis, where professional costumers arrived just as soon as the city's regional theatre did. Upon its founding in 1963, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre secured the talents of designer Tanya Moiseiwisch, costumer Ray Diffen, and draper Annette Garceau, who shared a state-of-the-art workroom.⁴³ Diffen had executed the costumes for Broadway shows *Camelot* ('60), *Jennie* ('63) and *Mr. President* ('63), and had a close working relationship with esteemed director and regional theatre founder Tyrone Guthrie. Although Diffen did not leave Broadway behind completely after 1963, executing costumes back in New York for *Tartuffe* ('65), *1776* ('69), *I Do! I Do!* ('73), and *Pippin* ('75), it appears that he had to split his time between the two cities in order to compile a full year's worth of work. Designer Moiseiwisch and draper Garceau, however, seem to have moved to Minneapolis without looking back. The 1963 founding of the Guthrie as a fully realized operation, complete with costuming space, was unusual for regional theatres. Most struggled for years as "acorns", only gaining a professional production crew when they relocated to their glittering new performing arts center. According to one chronicler of the regional stage, the Guthrie broke the mold when it landed in Minneapolis as a fully-grown "oak", with a million-

dollar budget that was the envy of many a regional artistic director.⁴⁴

Seattle was a close second to Minneapolis in terms of regional costuming space. Like Minneapolis, the Emerald City was not an obvious place for professional theatre. Not an obvious place, that is, until the 1962 World's Fair. After the fair, two newly constructed performance halls in the Seattle Center sat empty. In the smaller of the two, Seattle Repertory's first artistic director, New Yorker Stuart Vaughan, set out in 1963 to create a "union house with high standards for scenery and costumes".⁴⁵ Looking back on the success of this regional troupe in 1979, the *The Wall Street Journal* wrote of a "A City that Staged a Fair and Got Culture", explaining that "[b]efore the fair Seattle was just another stop for the 'bus 'n' truck' road shows mopping up revenue in the provinces after a strong Broadway run."⁴⁶ Although he was not quite as well funded as Tyrone Guthrie, Vaughan was able to hit the ground running with a production staff of twelve, who made costumes and scenery in dispersed rental spaces throughout the city.

Over the course of its first fifteen years, the Seattle Rep. grew under Vaughan and the artistic directors who followed him. By the mid-1970s, "the Rep" had more than doubled its production payroll to thirty-three backstage employees, and employed three full-time seamstresses. By the early 1980s, the successful Rep had enlisted so many donors, and so much local government funding, that the troupe's craftspeople could relocate to "costume construction facilities that would be the envy of any local group".⁴⁷ In their new home at the Bagley Wright Theatre, the Rep not only swelled the ranks of its costumers, but also benefited from fully integrated construction and rehearsal spaces, where scenery, costumes, props, wigs and performers could gel under one roof during rehearsals. From a ragtag startup operation in a decommissioned World's Fair building, the Rep became a fully realized, institutional center for the production of American theatre, even exporting its products to paying audiences in smaller cities throughout the state of Washington and Oregon.

Whether in Dallas, Minneapolis, Seattle, or any of the other numerous cities that had a new costume facility spring up after 1960, no individual facility could rival the still solvent and formidable Broadway theatre.⁴⁸ Collectively, however, these buildings and their employees constituted a major shift away from the antiquated, ad hoc Broadway business model, towards an nationally distributed, institutional theatre, with costuming restored to its 19th-century "in-house" roots. Hundreds of costume craftspeople entered realms dominated by donors, institutions, and endowments rather than contracts, firms, and midtown Manhattan workrooms. The institutions of the American regional stage did not replace Broadway altogether, but they certainly did knock Broadway down a few pegs, to a far less dominant position within the theatrical landscape. Having existed for many years as both the symbolic pinnacle and the dominant production center for professional theatre, Broadway after 1960 was forced to share the spotlight, so to speak, with its many regional theatre and performing arts center cousins.

Conclusion

By tracking the history of costume construction across these three distinct eras, historians, costumers, and librarians alike can glean invaluable lessons about America's theatrical and urban past. Analysis of costuming along these lines reveals

that craftspeople have needed either strong institutional backing or a thriving urban economy to prosper. During the late 19th century, institutions predominated, in the form of stock companies and the integrated construction facilities of producers such as Henry W. Savage and Charles Frohman. In the Broadway era, the Manhattan economy was sufficiently robust and diversified for costume craftspeople to found businesses and enter into contracts with producers. Fabric suppliers and skilled employees resided in external markets, available on the streets of midtown Manhattan. Though disproportionately concentrated within New York City, this commercial model for costume craft functioned relatively well until the 1960s. As regional theatres restored a more natural dispersal to the geography of costume craft, and performing arts centers returned American costuming to institutions, Broadway's costume houses closed, merged, and dwindled in number. In the grand sweep of these trends over more than one hundred years, the Manhattan-based Broadway era stands out not as the natural state of costume craft, but as a bizarrely concentrated anomaly.

The big picture of American costume craft, unfolding over the course of a century, also sheds light on questions of New York City history. The forgotten history of costume businesses, for example, helps to explain the rise of New York as a national "culture capital" at the turn of the 20th century, when costumes were key ingredients in the strange alchemy of the "Broadway show" within American culture. Packaged up and exported as the standard-bearer of theatrical achievement and professionalism, these shows became a snowballing trend of the culture to some, but the greatest swindle in the history of American theatre to others. They soared into prominence because a critical mass of national theatergoers came to believe they were inherently superior to shows crafted elsewhere. They also succeeded because the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shuberts had cut deeply into the economic landscape of America with elaborate booking and contracting mechanisms, which funneled profits back to the city of New York. When combined with the cultural power and mystique of the Broadway brand, these mechanisms all but guaranteed that American costumes would come from Manhattan after the 1890s.

When this Broadway system unraveled after 1950 or so, there were problems of crime and real estate instability in Times Square that make far more sense when one considers the number of costume and costume-related businesses that were closing up shop. As the cultural and the economic aspects of Broadway's power grew weak, so did the neighborhood where Broadway had been built. Such inquiry into the urban conditions of Times Square also sheds light on the financial difficulties of Broadway costumers after WWII, when decentralization trends did much to separate them from traditional sources of labor, fabric, and affordable workspaces. As the focal point of this decentralization trend, Times Square, once replete with fabric stores and costume shops, suffered urban problems and growing pains, before finally morphing into a hybrid of white-collar office towers and family-friendly entertainment.

As unfairly concentrated as it may have been, the Broadway era did produce a dazzling mix of intricate, creative, and beautiful costumes for American audiences. The women and men who worked in the design and execution of costumes during these years, from Caroline F. Seidle and Lucinda Ballard, to Wolf Dazian and Ray

Diffen, should not be discounted simply because they worked on Broadway. Indeed, throughout each era of theatrical costume craft, there are ample instances of creativity and brilliant craft to celebrate. Most information regarding these achievements comes in the form of costume design history. When compared to costume execution or fabrication, scholars and archivists have positively lavished attention on design, and for good reason. Without the creative spark of a designer's vision, there is simply nothing to fabricate. Archives nationwide therefore include many vital repositories for all types of costume sketches and design-related documents. The paper trail for fabrication, however, is quite short. Perhaps the craft of making costumes is less inspiring or exciting than the art of designing them, but it is just as important. Without viable means of fabrication, even the greatest of America's stage designers would have been hard-pressed to transcend two dimensions. Without fabric stores, rental collections, an array of affordable workspaces for design, sewing, storage and alterations, strong costumers' unions that offered training and mentorship, and generously outfitted performing arts centers with ample space for craft, American costume history would have been threadbare indeed.

Footnote

ENDNOTES

1 Producer Harold Prince learned about execution from designer Irene Sharaff during the Broadway tryout of *West Side Story*, when he tried unsuccessfully to substitute low-cost jeans for Sharaff's carefully dyed fabric pants, made to look like jeans but enabling the dancers to move. See Prince's *Contradictions* (1974), pg. 36.

2 Most players supplied their own costumes until the 1919 Equity strike forced producers to supply them.

3 NYPL Margaret Pemberton scrapbook: 5/11/25. Daily News "Enter New Character-'The Director of Costumes'"

4 Even as the theatre flourished near Union and Herald Squares, the Manhattan Business Listings had fewer than fifty costumers. NYPL, Microfilm, 1879 and 1886 "Business Directory".

5 Cole found in N-Y Historical Society, Theatrical Programs: Quinn-small, 1880s "Academy of Music"; Castel-Bert featured in *Curtain Call*, Ed. Alexis Greene (2009).

6 NYPL Billy Rose-"Scrapbook of clippings Augustin Daly-1881-1892", unknown newspaper: April 19, 1882

7 *ibid.* Oct 26, 1881-"Royal Youth', the new play brought out at Daly's last Saturday night, has certainly been put upon the stage in a royal manner as regards scenery, costumes, and all appointments."

8 NYT, "A Factory for Making Plays", no named author, 11/25/06, Pg. SM4

9 NYT, "New Lyceum a Model of Comfort", 9/27/03

10 N-Y Historical Society, Theatrical Programs: Quinn-small, 1880s: folder 1888-89: "Wallack's Theatre-The Lady and the Tiger" and Chicago Daily Tribune: "The Drama" 3/13/1898, p.39: "Mr. Augustin Daly will present "The Circus Girl" with the original New York cast, scenery, and appointments."

11 In 1888, Daly complained "the people have been surfeited with the uneven and oft-repeated performances of numerous combinations . . . the companies are so numerous that the standard has been greatly lowered . . . many of these combinations spend more money on their wall and window printing than they do on the salaries", NYPL, Daly Clippings: 1881-92, unknown paper, 6/10/88, "Theatrical Systems: Changes in the Star & Combination Companies"

12 NYPL, Perf. Arts: MWEZx n.c.15,562, Stage: Periodicals: US (uncatalogued) Stage Chat: "the above reproduction taken from an actual photograph showing Maxine Elliott and Mabel Taliaferre in the great scene in the Third Act of 'Hearts Aflame'. Reproduced here Next Week, Mon. Tues., Wed. May, 1914."

13 From stage directions, original manuscript by Henrik Ibsen, published in Norway 1879.

14 N-Y Historical Society, Theatrical Programs: Quinn-small, 1880s "Academy of Music", Feb 6th 1888 program for Imre Kirafly's "Mazulm: The Night Owl". Separate credits for scenic and costume design.

15 NYPL, Billy Rose, Robinson Locke bound notebook Ser. 2, "Haswell, Percy", clipping NY Telegraph, 10/25/1903

16 An oft-repeated Broadway yarn explains how producers make final decisions about their replacement actors based on whether or not they could fit into expensive costumes, already constructed.

17 Microfilm, NYPL, 1902 "Business Directory".

18 Bernheim, Alfred L. The Business of the Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750-1932

19 The NYPL Manhattan Business Listings consistently list more than forty costumers through the end of the 1960's.

20 The Buildings were 106, 108, 110, and 112. NYT, "Latest Dealings in Realty Field . . . Times Square Deal", 9/8/21.

21 NYT, "Bernhardt Under a Tent", 12/14/1905

22 See Mary C. Henderson's Theater in America, p. 220-230, for more details about the costume unions.

23 NYPL, "Costumes-Masquerade & Theatrical", Manhattan Classified Telephone Directory, 1940

24 NYPL, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, "Production: financing-clippings" Eaves booklet, p.6

25 NYT, "Bizarre History of a Failure", Jan 12, 1941, pg. X3

26 NYT, "Costuming for TV", 11/11/51

27 NYT, "2 Get Jail Terms in Theater Inquiry", 6/30/64

28 NYPL, "Costumes-Masquerade & Theatrical", Manhattan Classified Telephone Directory, 1940

29 Details from NYT: "Dressing Up Broadway", 11/5/61 and "James E. Stroock, Costumer, Dead", 6/23/65. Sample

credits include: Death of a Salesman, Mister Roberts, Street Scene, Oklahoma!,

Carousel, Finian's Rainbow, The

Heiress, Look Homeward Angel, Guys and Dolls, The Miracle Worker, I Do I Do, No
No Nannette

30 An attempt by the United Scenic Artists, Local 829 to unionize Brooks in 1952
yielded a list of nineteen employees. "Brooks Costume", Folder 30, Box 1, Robert
Wagner Labor Archives, NYU, New York, NY

31 NYT, "Costumers Local Threatens Stage", 8/31/50

32 NYT, "Brooks Costume Moving" 4/30/52

33 "1945-47, Union Theatrical Costume Manufacturers and Shops". Box 1, Folder
30. U.S.A. Archive: Robert F. Wagner Labor Collection, Tamiment Library, NYU.

34 NYT, "Westside Leases Made" 6/16/42 Pg. 37, Classified Ad 6/5/62 Pg. 81 and
NYT 6/14/65, Pg. 33

35 Legendarily long-running shows from the 1920's and 1930's, such as Tobacco
Road and Life With Father, actually closed up and relocated several times over the
course of their long "runs".

36 NYC Yellow Pages "Costumers": 1902: 75, 1929: 70, 1940: 52, 1950: 41, 1960:
50, 1970: 33, 1980: 14, 1990: 10

37 Zeigler, Joseph W. Regional Theatre: The Revolutionary Stage, p. 17

38 NYPL Billy Rose, Dallas Theatre Center, Clippings 1955-79: 11/25/65 program for
Kalita Humphreys Theatre

39 Gerald M. Berkowitz, New Broadways, Theatre Across America, p. 71

40 Gerald M. Berkowitz, New Broadways, Theatre Across America, p. 73

41 Bricks, Mortar, and the Performing Arts (New York: 20th Century Fund, 1970),
p.1

42 *ibid.*

43 Star Tribune. Minneapolis, Minn.: Oct 14, 1988. pg. 01.E (via Proquest)

44 See Zeigler, Joseph W. Regional Theatre, for a full account of the acorns and oaks
of the regional stage.

45 NYPL Billy Rose, Seattle Rep Clippings, Sept. 1965 Playbill Magazine "Birth of a
theatre" by Stuart Vaughan

46 NYPL Billy Rose, Seattle Rep Clippings, 3/9/79 Wall St Journal "A City that Staged
a Fair and Got Culture"

47 NYPL Billy Rose, Seattle Rep Clippings, 11/23/83-Women's Wear Daily, Arts
section

48 Joining the Rep on the West coast was the San Francisco Opera Costume Shop,
founded in 1982 with 24,000 sq. feet, a staff of 60+, and storage space for 10,000
costumes. Though not a theatrical facility per se, the shop rented costumes to opera
companies in San Diego, Seattle, Dallas, Houston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and
D.C., in a manner highly reflective of the geographic sea change in costume
craft-San Diego Union. 9/25/89, p.D4 (via Proquest).

AuthorAffiliation

Timothy R. White is an Assistant Professor of History at New Jersey City University. He teaches history courses on Urban America, the U.S. in the 20th Century, and American Popular Culture. His research focuses on the craft, business, and administrative aspects of the American theatre from the late 19th century to the end of the 20th century. Prior to his appointment in Jersey City, NJ, he taught at New School University and Yeshiva University. He received his Ph.D. in U.S. History from Columbia University in 2008.

Indexing (details)

Narrow Subjects: American theater, Theater history, Costumes, Design, Designers, Production personnel, Construction, Broadway theater, Regional theater

Broad Subjects: Theater-Stagecraft, Theater-USA, Performing Arts History

Identifiers / Keywords: Theater-Stagecraft, Theater-USA, Performing Arts History, American theater, Theater history, Costumes, Design, Designers, Production personnel, Construction, Broadway theater, Regional theater

Title: Brilliantly Executed: Costume Craft and American Theatre

Authors: White, Timothy R

Publication title: Performing Arts Resources

Source details: 27

Pages: 34-48

Publication year: 2010

Publication Date: 2010

Year: 2010

Publisher: Theatre Library Association

Place of Publication: New York, N. Y.

Country of publication: United States

Journal Subjects: Theater

ISSN: 0360-3814

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of Publication: English

Document Type: General Information

Document Features: References

Other Number: Theater-Stagecraft, Theater-USA, Performing

ArtQuest, American Theater

History, Costumes, Design, Designers,

Production personnel, Construction,

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/docview/821047517?accountid=12261>

Last Updated: 2011-01-19

Database: International Index to
Performing Arts Full Text

Copyright © 2011 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - Terms and Conditions