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Design Studio I

10 April 2019

Historical and Timeless

The Revolutionists by Lauren Gunderson is "a comedy, a quartet, a revolutionary dream fugue, [and] a true story" (Gunderson). It is a combination of historical references and modern vernacular. For my costume design, I chose to highlight this combination of time periods by mixing historically researched costume pieces with modern-day t-shirts that reflect the timeless issues of the play. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate and better understand the historical context of my design, both the research images-based fashion of the 1700s and the modern commentary on the t-shirts.

In my design, Olympe de Gouges, Marianne Angelle, and Charlotte Corday begin the play in corsets, long skirts, and t-shirts. They each also wear modern shoes to tie in with their modern tops. Olympe de Gouges wears oxford shoes, and her t-shirt reads, "Will Write For Change." Olympe is described in *Twelve Portraits of the French Revolution* as a leader "far from being at the beck of men" (Béraud 211). Although her life ended in being beheaded, Olympe helped to create the change she sought. Béraud writes that "it was in the blood of those martyrs [like Olympe] that the dawn of a new era started, that the rights of women, which are not yet recognized everywhere, but which will be, were founded" (Béraud 232-233). He quotes Olympe's view on this matter: "They have the right to go on the platform, since they have the right to go to the scaffold" (Béraud 233). Because of Olympe's strong views regarding activism and her own occupation as a writer, her t-shirt phrase is thus justified.

Marianne's t-shirt reads "Black Lives Matter." In *The Revolutionists,* Marianne explains to Marie Antoinette that "the slaves who have suffered under your lash have started a revolution of their own." […] It's the same revolution, the same rights, the same freedoms, just applied to your slaves instead of your peasants" (Gunderson 24). This desire to be seen as the same as all other citizens is reflected in *Revolutionary Ideas* when author Jonathan Israel writes that ending slavery "was not just a matter of legal emancipation but of absorbing former slaves into society in a nonviolent, meaningful, and durable manner" (Israel 397). On the official Black Lives Matter website, the following phrase can be found: "The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation" ("About"). Clearly, the issues of equality regardless of race, color, and ethnicity are as important today as they were in the time of the French Revolution. It is these ideals that influenced the t-shirt design for Marianne.

Finally, Charlotte's t-shirt reads "Women's Rights are Human Rights." Her t-shirt phrase is reflective of the concerns her character expresses in the play and is based on t-shirts worn by marchers in various years of Women's Marches. On the home page of the official Women's March website, there is a call to action: "Join the movement: We're marching. We're mobilizing. We're making history" ("Home"). These qualities reflect Charlotte's determination and action-based decisions. Other qualities I wanted to highlight about Charlotte based on the script were her youth and sexual purity. These qualities were supported by Béraud's description of her in *Twelve Portraits*: "This twenty-year-old beauty's expression was extremely grave and virile, but when she talked, her voice sounded very childish" (Béraud 222). Specifically, Charlotte's youthfulness is reflected in my choice of a body-hugging silhouette that emphasizes her youth, as well as her footwear: white converse.

Charlotte has the most costume changes of anyone in my costume design, her second outfit being a torn-up and destroyed version of the first. While researching Charlotte's assassination of Marat, I found that the death was a violent one: "She pulled out her knife, raised her arm, and pushed the dagger up to its hilt into Marat's heart. This extremely violent blow crossed the lung, cut the arteries and went straight to the heart. The blood spurted" (Béraud 225). Her second costume subsequently has blood spattered across the front of her corset, t-shirt, and skirt. The skirt is also ripped up to her knees to emphasize the invasive and violating nature of her arrest (Gunderson 42) and to reflect the account that, while in prison, Charlotte "mended her clothes which had been torn by the mob" (Béraud 226). In these ways, Charlotte's first two costumes reflect descriptions in the script as well as the historically documented violence associated with her final days.

Charlotte then changes into her third costume, a white execution dress with a fichu. A fichu is a small triangular shawl worn around the shoulders and neck. Because of its placement, the fichu was in the way of the blade at the time of her execution. To rectify this, "the executioner tore away her fichu and her virgin modesty suffered" (Béraud 229). White is a color symbolic of purity, meant to reflect both the sexual purity taken from Charlotte in the play and her view of her actions as pure. The fichu is thus both historically accurate and symbolically important in my design.

Olympe also wears white when she goes to the scaffold. Similar to Charlotte, this is partially symbolic of her innocence. Béraud provides additional meaning to this outfit, however, when he writes of the "Society of the Friends of the Constitution," a women's group formed in Bordeaux that were "all dressed in white" (Béraud 211-212). Béraud also writes that "no important event took place with which the women were not connected" (Béraud 211),

emphasizing the importance of the revolutionary women and their symbolic white outfits, just as Gunderson's play and my design do.

Marie Antoinette's first costume differs from the other women in that it is entirely time-period appropriate, rather than the combination of t-shirt and 1700s fashion. This decision was made because rather than being guided by important issues that led her to revolt, Marie Antoinette is the one being revolted against. Although Austrian by birth, Marie Antoinette's fashion was carefully catered to be French. Before even leaving her home court of Austria, her name was changed from Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna to Marie Antoinette, and her clothing was made to match this change (Weber 28). However, upon arrival at the French court, all of the clothes she wore were literally stripped from her to symbolically separate her from her past, despite the fact that these clothes were meant to make her appear French (Weber 25). The focus on appearing French and the symbolic representation of Marie Antoinette as the object of revolt is thus reflected in her elaborate costume.

Silhouette is one of the guiding principles of my design. I gave Charlotte a simple one to emphasize her youth, Olympe an additional top skirt to age her by adding some size and weight to her hips, and Marianne an apron to highlight her past as a worker before becoming a revolutionary activist. Marie Antoinette's silhouette is excessively extravagant comparatively. Marie Antoinette took meticulous care of her appearance: "The first decision of Marie-Antoinette's day was the choice of her outfits" (Thomas 94). The queen "changed clothes at least three times a day" (Weber 119). To reflect this exuberance, my design includes many qualities of "the formal court dress of Versailles," such as being "lavishly beribboned, [with a] tight fitting bodice, [and] voluminous hoopskirts draped over wide *paniers* ("baskets" fastened to the hips underneath the dress)" (Weber 13), resulting in the desired silhouette. All of this is topped,

literally, with a three-tier wig, making her, in several ways, larger than life. Marie Antoinette's silhouette in her first costume, then, demonstrates her extravagance and frivolous lack of seriousness as compared to the other three women.

This silhouette is radically changed when Marie Antoinette is taken to the scaffold. Like Olympe and Charlotte, Marie Antoinette wears white to her execution. During her time in prison, Marie Antoinette wore black, but right before her execution she changed clothes: "She would go in white to her end" (Belloc 530). One thing that scholars disagree on is who cut Marie Antoinette's hair. In *The Revolutionists*, Olympe says, "They cut her hair" (Gunderson 59). This is supported by André Castelot in *Queen of France: A Biography of Marie Antoinette* when he writes:

> Then Sanson, [the executioner] who towered over Marie Antoinette, suddenly took off the bonnet she had arranged so carefully a short while before, and with a large pair of scissors cut off the wonderful hair which had gone white, but in which ash-blonde lights could still be seen. (Castelot 405)

However, Hilaire Belloc writes in *Marie Antoinette*: "she, perhaps, herself, before they bound her, cut off the poor locks of her hair" (Belloc 531). The discrepancy in historical account is interesting, but regardless of which is true, they both have the same end result: the queen went to her death with short and hastily cut hair. In my second costume design, then, Marie Antoinette is sans wig and her hair is irregular and grayish-white.

Another detail of Marie Antoinette's final outfit is that she, like the other women, is barefoot. For the other three, this is to symbolize the executioners' attempts to remove the women's self-expression and activism. In Marie Antoinette's case, however, including bare feet in her design is supported by a historical account of her final moments. Castelot writes that "She

hurried, climbed the steep ladder with such precipitation, “in bravado” one witness wrote, that she lost one of her little purple shoes” (Castelot 408-9). Due to this account, I have also chosen to include purple shoes in her original costume.

The final two costumes of the play are worn by the same actresses who play Charlotte and Marie Antoinette. They are Fraternité, the manifestation of the toxic masculinity and violent decisions that send all these women to their various scaffolds. The script calls for Fraternité to be “an almost commedia presence, a stock character of a bad guy, masked” (Gunderson 5). I wanted to reflect this characterization in the costume design by making the two characters’ masks as oversized and grotesque as possible. Below the masks, they wear judges’ robes, men’s dress pants, and men’s black dress shoes to essentially eliminate any silhouette they had in their female costumes and highlight the maleness of the characters.

At the beginning of the semester, I conducted extensive image research to use as my original references. Through reading historical accounts of the time, I now better understand the costume needs called for by the playwright in the script. The images and early research that guided my original designs have also gained new meaning for me, both the fashion trends of the 1700s and the principles of the modern-day movements, Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March. Together, these sources and contexts have influenced me as I have striven for a costume design that honors the timeless and far-reaching issues of Gunderson’s *The Revolutionists.*

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