Abstract

A single read through of Vinegar Tom by Caryl Churchill might impress with brevity a story of tragedy. Two women, Ellen and Joan, are hung for their statuses as witches; however, their arcs are meant as more than a means of storytelling. They represent injustice against those persecuted during the English witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries. As a member of the all female student design team of Production Studies III, I was interested in conveying the struggle and circumstances of these characters through their attire. My research examined the ways I could physically represent the restrictions of women- how a character like Betty could appear otherworldly in pastel colors reserved for richer classes, while also shaping her bodice and skirt in accordance to the feminine style expected of a young woman forced into marriage. The dissection of the socioeconomic and political advantages of exploiting women and corresponding fashion trends furthered my designs, as I looked at ways the female body was controlled in juxtaposition to male counterparts. This analysis was also incorporated in the contemporary costume designs for the musical, as I sought primarily gender neutral and minimalist clothing alternatives for a 21st century understanding of Vinegar Tom.

Costumes Part I

Ellen

Joan

Ellen contemplating ways to avoid torture and death, after learning her community considers her a witch.

Joan (right) accusing Margery (left) of being a greedy, selfish woman.

Depicting a Narrative

75-80% of convicted witches in England during the 16th and 17th centuries were women. Similarly, the story of Vinegar Tom follows the female struggle, focusing not only on the 1600s, but also the 1970s. The play incorporates music as a medium to parallel these moments in history. I replicated this shift through costume by creating an alternate wardrobe for the female singers. The Production Studies III team decided these musical looks should be modern to convey the message that there is a cyclical nature to violence inflicted on women, as a means of scapegoating tensions. The narrative starts with Alice, a young mother who unabashedly expresses her sensuality and is persecuted for it.

Witch Hunts and Oppression

As an indigent single mother, Alice is accused for her presumed sexual relationship with the devil. I originally created designs in shades of indigo for her skirts, as I discovered it was coined the devil's color during the 1600s. My perspective switched, upon further studying the text and production concept, and I found myself dyeing Margery's dress indigo in the vat. In opposition to this antagonist's dress, I found, altered, and dyed Alice's skirt a deep burgundy red to amplify her vivacity and fiery spirit. The mother-daughter duo Joan and Alice are the most socioeconomically disadvantaged family in Vinegar Tom, and as such I designed both of their outfits with textured fabrics, speckled with paint to appear worn beyond repair. Joan's outfit had a similar theme to her daughter's, as I dyed her skirt a dark brown burgundy- accurate for families sharing single color dye pots. Betty's design was inspired by a romanticized view of the time period. As the daughter of the wealthiest person described by Churchill, I wanted to explore the concept of an ingenue who's bright disposition is all the more destroyed by bloodletting and brainwashing.

Gender Identity and Expression

For the social outcast and medicinal genius, Ellen, I decided early on that I wanted to honor her scientific and empathetic impact, as well as the legacy of the women who inspired this character, by allowing her freedom in a male shirt, female skirt, and no bum roll. It was considered standard etiquette of the time for women to wear corsets or bodices, as well as rolls to achieve a curvy figure; I wanted to defy this with a revolutionary character. Ellen's costume was inspired by utilitarianism over the standard of female restriction, and included leather mocassin like slip-ons, a pouch for herbs and tools, a shawl for comfort and warmth, and a flower hair piece for a slight romanticization of all that Ellen embodies.

Costumes Part II

Susan and Alice

Packer, Goody, and Susan

Margery

Margery and Betty

Betty (right) exploring Margery's home with nostalgia and glee.

Photography by Eric Dobbs