

SENSE OR NON-SENSE OF COSTUMES IN CIRCUS ARTS

The presence
or absence of
costume design in
contemporary
circus



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THE *WONDERS* OF COSTUME DESIGN

How to translate an idea into reality
when creating a production

ALINE BREUCKER

I have always been fascinated by the body and how it moves on stage, by how it moves within and relates to the space. Because for me the very first thing which defines the space is the body. Even when there is nothing on stage but a single person, it's enough for a whole world to open up in front of you. When making a production, the best situation for me is to be in charge of both the costumes and the set design – because the two are deeply intertwined, and because that way I can make sure that the aesthetics, codes and references on either side fit with and complete one another.



WHAT IS A COSTUME

Everything you wear on stage is a costume. Everything that relates to the body, everything that is attached to it, that is necessary to perform, whether visible or not to the audience, IS a costume. The costume is a crucial tangible element in a theatrical representation – a reference to the imaginary.



Wonders by Side-show cie
© ARTHUR ANCIEN

Speaking of 'a costume' often brings on a lot of resistance. How many times have I heard, 'Oh, no I don't need a costume!' Nowadays there is a sort of opposition to having costumes, one which has led to a fashion for the 'non-costume'. A non-costume is what I call a stage outfit which clearly hasn't been given any prior thought. But just because you wear something simple on stage doesn't mean there's no need for an initial thought process. A training outfit IS a costume; black trousers or a white t-shirt IS a costume. It is important to be aware that whatever you wear on stage will be perceived as a costume. So if you chose a simple garment, do so consciously. Make it a deliberate choice! It is important to have a thought process and an artistic approach, and to make choices that help in translating the content or purpose of your creation/show.

A costume is closely linked with the dramaturgy of a show. It establishes codes and applies an extra layer of information on stage which can reinforce or define the meaning of a performance. A costume is not something that follows the rules of fashion! It follows the rules of the production! Every performance has its own rules, or needs to invent them in close relation to the dramaturgical framework of the show. Every time I create a costume, I need to reinvent the rules again. You have to keep coming up with new approaches, new ideas. And that's what's interesting: you never work the same way twice. It's very challenging.



The art of it is to weave the threads between imagination and reality and to interlock them. This process has an impact on the person wearing the costume. As a costume designer you help to create a character on stage. You try to visualise the director's intentions and to help performers become characters.

It's therefore very important to engage a costume designer at an early stage in the creation process. A costume designer needs to be part of the whole creation process and not just an add-on at the final stage.

A very simple example: the choice of footwear is crucial. It defines everything: the way the body will stand on stage, the way the character will walk, the way the performer will feel. It can be a deliberate choice to go for not-so-comfortable shoes, for instance, in order to create an extra tension for the actor/performer. So footwear is an element I try to bring into the creation process as early as possible.



Wonders by Side-show cie
© ALEXIS BERTHOLET

Circus artists often don't want to wear shoes, nor costumes. They are more concerned with technical needs: are the shoes or the trousers comfortable enough? Can I perform all actions and movements easily while wearing them? Is the material strong enough? Because these are fundamental preoccupations once you master circus techniques, circus artists tend to forget to start with the first question: 'WHAT do I want to say or show? What codes do I want to give to the audience to understand my world?'

In my opinion, technical issues can always be solved. The thing is to focus on and communicate the idea that you want to share. It is the imagination that must come to bear in designing the costume, not the technical requirements. The duty of the costume designer is to reconcile the artistic and technical rules of the discipline with the art of costume design.

As a costume designer you have different responsibilities and need to be knowledgeable about a number of things. You work closely with the director but also with the performers/actors. Not only are you supposed to read the intentions of a director and bring them to life, you also need a lot of psychological insight because you are very close to the actors' bodies and often very close to their egos...

Case study

THE HAIR DRESS FROM *WONDERS*

This dress was made for *Wonders*, the first creation of our company, Side-Show. *Wonders* (2013) was the first part of what will become our 'trilogy of the imagination'. *Spiegel im Spiegel* (2017) was the second part, and we are currently writing and working on the third part, "*Permit, oh permit my soul to be rebel*" (creation 2022). With this trilogy we wanted to take the time to forge our own identity, as makers and as a company.



Wonders by Side-show cie
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Wonders is a performance about perception, about making the impossible visible, about creating a world where the strangeness of the other is both reassuring and challenging.

This hair costume is a symbolic garment in the creation of our company. In the old days, sideshows were the little tents on the margins of fairgrounds, next to the big top, where curiosities and freaks were exhibited. *Wonders* started with this very strange character who wore a dress, made from hair, which looked like a beautiful evening dress. I wanted to visualise the paradox of the freak show with this costume. I wanted to shift perspectives and propose a new way of looking at things by using hair as a material, questioning the fashionable dictat for clean-shaven skin, of wanting no hair on one's body, and instead constructing something made of hair that can be both beautiful and intriguing. Freaks, as the name suggests, tend to freak people out or even scare them, and yet when they're put on stage audiences are willing to pay to meet them up close and they become fascinating.

In *Wonders* every character was in a permanent state of transformation. We zoomed in on very specific characters with strong identities and zoomed out to images of a homogenous group where the members all had the same look and wore the same uniform. It evoked the idea of an identity lost in the large crowds of a city: a space where everybody looks alike, yet one where, when you take a minute to look closely, to observe everyone separately, personalities always jump out. This is what's wonderful: beauty lies in everything if you look with enough attention.

WORKING PROCESS

I wanted to achieve a special status for my character on stage. I wanted a physical transformation. And because I was performing in the show, painting live on a big wall and also interacting with the acrobats, and yet was not an actress myself, I also needed a costume that would help me get under the skin of a character without having to act or to play a role. This is where shoes come into the picture. As I said earlier, shoes are so important and shape so much about posture and about the way the body stands and moves on stage.



So the shoes were the starting point in building the costume. I wanted to be as incredible as a circus artist, by doing nothing other than wearing this amazing dress. I wanted to be as strange, as alienating, as weird, as awkward, as freakish and fascinating as circus artists can be. Basically I wanted impossible shoes, ones that would allow me to gain a lot of height while forcing me to walk slowly.

My working process usually starts by association as I go about collecting images, details from pictures, atmospheres, colours. In short, material that helps me to visualise, communicate and define what I'm searching for. I also often start to draw. In the beginning very intuitively, not really looking for the perfect image, but gradually ideas take shape and my thoughts get more structured. The creative dynamics of the process are more important than the result at that point. Just take the initial inspiration as far as you can, without thinking of the final result or even how to make it!

I use all kinds of different techniques to communicate my ideas: sometimes drawings, sometimes pictures, sometimes videos, sometimes words. Everything that might help to get closer to the idea, that will feed a discourse or enable a dialogue.

You need to have confidence in the process and give it the time it needs. Some days you will get stuck, but often you will have a revelation the very next day.



IN SEARCH OF THE RIGHT MATERIAL

In search of the right material you will often discover or stumble upon new ideas. Sometimes the material allows you to do things you didn't expect; or, the other way round, you reach the limits of the material earlier than expected. With these shoes, for instance, I made them on impulse in a single night. I simply had to make them. When I found these shoes, I couldn't wait until the next day to buy some hair, so I ended up cutting up three old wigs I had lying around in my atelier and gluing them on.

For the hair for the dress I went to different stores in Matongé, the African neighbourhood in Brussels. I mixed up real and synthetic hair. Variations in colour, price, length and quality were all factors in determining my choice of material. I discovered as well that you can buy hair that has already been sewn on a ribbon, which made the sewing process for the dress a lot easier than I had anticipated.



REHEARSE, TRY THINGS OUT A LOT, AND KILL YOUR DARLINGS

The hair dress from Wonders consists of a bustier and a long skirt. For the bustier I started off with one of my bras. For the main fabric I worked with tulle. As the hair is quite heavy, the dress needed to be as light as possible. Manufacturing the dress was not as difficult as anticipated; it just took a lot of work. But you never know beforehand how these things will turn out, especially when you're working with an unusual material. You need a bit of luck.



↓ Paper crinoline dress for *Wonders*
© ALINE BREUCKER

The dress fastens with Velcro. It's a good way to secure the costume and also means you can change quickly – which would be a useful feature on stage if not for the loud noise the Velcro makes as it's pulled apart. The hair dress, like a paper crinoline dress that I also made for Wonders, is a costume that is both labour-intensive and involves a lot of repetitive work. But I don't mind if the results are only visible after many long hours. As I make the costume, as my hands work, my mind finds fulfilment. Even if it is a slow process – hair by hair, paper by paper – I know that after one, two, five or eight hours, the final result will emerge as the culmination of all the initial ideas and the preliminary work.





» Paper crinoline dress for *Wonders*
© ALINE BREUCKER

Rehearsal time is very important; rehearse as much as you can WITH your costume! For instance, when rehearsals began I wore the hair dress a lot, almost all the time, because it helped me to be confident on stage (and because I didn't have anything else to wear!). But at a later stage of the creation process we found that, even though this costume was key to kick-starting the whole creative process, the dress itself didn't need to be on stage for the whole performance. So at a certain point we decided that it would be used only briefly at the start of the show.



Eliminating the dress from the rest of the performance was not a problem for me. What really mattered were the dynamics it brought to the performance, as there was more meaning to be found there than in the garment itself and its immediate associations.

I generally create a lot of stuff/gear that's not actually used in the final version of a production. I don't mind as long as I understand why, or as long as the decision is the outcome of a thought process that has helped to get at and define what's essential. Creation is an act of searching, exploring, making, losing yourself in a forest of ideas and then sifting through them as you find your way back.



DON'T BE AFRAID TO CHOOSE!

» Wonders
© RAZZIPHOTO



The more I make, the more I fall. The more I search, the more it gives me new ideas, and the more I find it fascinating to find a path between what exists in my head and the act of making it real.

The mere physical action of my hands allows me to formulate and develop my vocabulary and thoughts. Reflection and the creation process are one. I think about what I am doing while I am doing it; there is no separation.





Aline Breucker (BE) is a visual artist, a performer, a scenographer and a costume designer. She graduated from Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels de La Cambre in Brussels in 2005. Her fascination for the relation of body and space, and for the machinery of theatre-making, has led her to explore new forms of performance and presentation. Since 2009, she has co-directed the circus company Side-Show together with Quintijn Ketels. She co-created and performed on stage in the first two pieces of their 'trilogy of the imagination': *Wonders* (2013) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (2017). She is currently working on the last part of the trilogy, "Permit, oh permit my soul to be rebel" (2022) and on "Portraits" (2021) (two duets, with Sander De Cuyper and Camille Paycha).
More info on www.side-show.be.

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