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MOVEMENT IN PERIOD COSTUME

PAUL D. REINHARDT

Lynn Fontanne tells the story of her first acting lesson, which she received at a very early age from Ellen Terry. Miss Terry took a large bed sheet, wrapped it around her small pupil and pinned one edge on her shoulders, leaving the full width hanging onto the floor all around her. "Now, learn to walk in it," were her instructions. There can be little doubt about how well Miss Fontanne learned her lesson.

But unlike the training which Miss Fontanne received, the training of the contemporary actor places little emphasis on his movement as a technical skill worth development, and usually ignores the specific technical problem of movement in period costume completely. As a result, the contemporary actor often receives a considerable shock when he is confronted with a period costume, and is understandably dismayed, perplexed, defensive, and frustrated, a state of mind which is conducive neither to pleasant relations with the costume technicians nor to a confident and competent performance.

The source of this confusion is primarily the shock which the actor receives when he realizes that he can no longer move in period costume in the same way he moves in his comfortable, casual, informal modern garments. The

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actor who has rehearsed a role in sport shirt and slacks encounters a good many problems when he is confronted with wigs, hats, padded doublets, high heels, swords, and the like. But I maintain that it is not the garments themselves which confuse the actor, but the fact that he has not prepared to cope with them. This may be primarily a semantic splitting of hairs, but it is justified by the fact that there is no confusion present when an actor has assimilated and mastered the handling of the items one by one during the rehearsal period (or preferably during his entire training as an actor). Such an actor moves into dress rehearsals with ease and confidence, incorporating his period clothes without having to divert his entire attention from his performance. There is no shock involved.

But there is a major factor which must be recognized by actor, director, and costumer. *Any kind of period costume demands a kind of movement which is more or less different from the actor's contemporary movement.* It is impossible for an actress to move in an Elizabethan farthingale the same way she moves in a dirndl skirt. This means that the producer has four choices in approaching a production: (1) demand "period" costumes which will allow the actor to move in a "modern" way, (2) allow time and make specific plans for teaching the actor how to incorporate

period clothes, (3) don't do period plays, or (4) ignore the entire problem and let chaos reign. Of these four choices, we can rule out the third, since period plays form a substantial part of the current repertory and we *should* be able to rule out the fourth, though I'm afraid this is the choice most often selected by producing groups, if only because they do not recognize that the problem exists. But the problem does exist, so we will consider the two positive solutions: (1) "period" costumes which allow "modern" movement and (2) training the actor to cope with period costumes.

In order to view these two solutions adequately, we must look at the reasons for using period costume in the first place.¹ In some cases, period costume is used because it is picturesque, quaint, or pretty, merely something unusual or interesting for the audience to look at. Such a reason is superficial, however, and has nothing to do with the play being produced, and therefore does not actually contribute anything positive to the production. If this is the only reason "period" costumes are being used, if they are not expected to contribute anything beyond a quaintness, then the actor might as well move as he moves in everyday life, and the costumer is faced with the problem of making "period" costumes which allow such movement. The result, however, is more likely to be a "modern" costume with a few period touches than anything which can be called a period costume. But if period costumes are used because they have a quality which contributes directly to the interpretation of the play—because they are, for example, stiff, regal, elegant, and such qualities are

necessary for the proper understanding by the audience—this quality can be best projected when the clothes demand the corresponding movement from the actor. What could be more elegant than the way an actress is forced to move when she is wearing a large pannier and high wig? If elegance is a desirable quality in the role, the demanded elegance of the pannier and wig will be an asset to the actress because her movement is prescribed by what she is wearing. In this case, it is certainly worthwhile to take time to train the actress in the art of wearing her costume properly.

It is necessary for actor, director, and costumer to agree on the approach to period costume and movement. It is senseless for the costumer to make clothes which demand detailed attention to wearing if there is to be no time spent in learning these skills. If the director does not recognize the value of period style or is unwilling to incorporate the special movement which period clothes demand, the production is much better off in modern dress. If, however, the director and actors are willing but feel there isn't time in rehearsals for learning period movement, the training of the actor can often be directed by the costumer, especially if he has a knowledge of the fundamentals of movement. Often the costumer understands the problems of movement better than the director because he is more directly aware of the demands of the costume. On the other hand, the costume should not make arbitrary demands on the actor's movement. The movement should be described by the demands of the role, and should be agreed upon by director, actor, and costumer.

I should point out here that "period movement" is a relative term which includes an infinite number of variations.

¹ The present paper is concerned only with modern productions of period plays. The production of modern plays which demand period costumes offers the costumer problems which have ramifications beyond the scope of this discussion.

There is not a set of movements which are known as "period" which are applied willy-nilly to all plays which are not in modern dress. The movement demanded by one period is not necessarily that demanded by any other period. Each period in history has developed a style of dress and a manner of movement which are direct products of the general tenor of its time. The dress and the movement depend upon each other and each is partially determined by the other. Both are the product of a certain era, and unsuitable to the time-spirit of any other age. The Elizabethan court lady moves differently from the Napoleonic court lady, and this difference is directly related to the difference in dress. In the same terms, there is no single way of moving which is demanded by all costumes in a single period. The Elizabethan court lady will not move like the Elizabethan milk maid, whose costume is conducive to movements and actions which are denied the court lady. It is entirely possible to tumble the milk maid in the hay, whereas such behavior in the court costume would permanently cripple the wearer. "Period movement" is the product of a specific costume rather than a standard way of moving in all costumes in all periods. There is a tendency toward a single kind of movement within any one period, however, which is produced by the general spirit of the time and the general similarity or unity of costume within the period.

In attempting to discover the movement required by period costume, then, we find our major source of information is a detailed study of period clothing. Not modern "costumes" which have been "adapted" from period clothes, but clothes actually made and worn in any period. Since it is not always possible to have access to such gar-

ments, the next best source is patterns made from such garments. Such a pattern can show where the garment restricts, where it permits freedom, where it demands a gesture, where it forbids a gesture. It takes an experienced eye to deduce all this from a period pattern, but anyone can deduce it from the garment made from the pattern. The only requirement is that the construction process remain true to the original, and that variations be made only after the intention of the original is so clear that it is not violated. For example, the modern suit coat sleeve is cut so that the coat and sleeve hang smoothly with the arm at the side. When the arm is raised, the sleeve begins to bind and the elbow cannot be taken to shoulder height without pulling the entire coat completely out of shape. The seventeenth and eighteenth century coat, however, was cut with a smaller armseye and lower sleeve cap, so that the coat and sleeve hung most smoothly and the arm was most comfortable when the elbow was away from the side, a position achieved by resting the hand on the sword or hip, by carrying a walking stick, staff, or handkerchief, or by engaging in sword play. With this knowledge at hand, the costumer can construct coats which permit actors to engage in all the necessary period activities without destroying the hang of the garment, but if he is not aware of this refinement of cut and makes eighteenth century coats from twentieth century "Uncle Sam" patterns, it will be impossible for the actor to achieve any kind of period movement of his arms. So we must acknowledge the importance of exact period cut if the actor is to move well, and such cut is available only through a study of period garments and patterns.

Another source of information for period movement is found in the few

period treatises which discuss it. Discussions of fencing techniques, the handling of arms, and dancing can be of use. Even William Hogarth concerns himself with the problem of movement, and in his *Analysis of Beauty* he argues that the most beautiful movement is based on the serpentine curve. He admits that a person can go through life in a straight line, but he firmly believes that the more gracious, elegant, and beautiful actions are performed in S-curves. Although we may not accept Hogarth as the definitive voice of his time, his is a theory that is important enough that no seventeenth or eighteenth century play should be produced with the staff unaware of its existence. (Even if we completely disagree with his serpentine line theory, we will profit from his ability to discuss movement in linear terms.)

In analyzing the movement which a period costume requires, we should consider what is worn on the torso, feet, head, legs, and arms.² The following examples, though certainly not complete, will demonstrate some of the possible effects of period costume on movement.

The torso is either corseted or free. In corsetless periods, the torso can move much as in contemporary movement, but a corset will revise the posture as much as the shape. The kind of corset is of great importance, and we must note that corsets have produced a great variety of curved or curveless figures over the years. Lyn Oxenford's advice on corsets is given from the point of view of a director and choreographer who realizes the advantages of such garments:

Much the best way to tackle movement in these is to hold the body so that it is as comfortable

²Lyn Oxenford in *Design for Movement* considers only head, feet, and corsets, but I feel legs and arms require individual consideration.

as possible. Hang up the dress or corset and look at it well to see exactly how it ought to set. Then put it on carefully, draw a deep breath, and find out where there is room for the ribs, where it cramps the body, and where it really fits. Then draw another deep breath, rise on the toes and settle well into the spaces left. Sometimes the weight has to be pushed forward, sometimes tilted back, the bust lifted well away from the waist, or the back more arched than formerly. Stand in the costume until it is familiar, then walk and sit. If it digs sharply into the ribs the posture is not erect enough.³

I have also found it is helpful to put on corsets in two steps. If the actor is put into the corset when he arrives at the theatre, half an hour later he can replace the corset into a more exact and comfortable shape.

The position of the waistline also influences the torso. High waistlines often tend to pull the upper torso back, especially if the skirt has a train, while low waistlines tend to pull the lower torso back or emphasize the movement of the torso.

Shoes are of vital importance to movement. Heelless shoes are worn in many periods, and the only major difficulty encountered by modern actors and actresses who are used to heelless shoes is moving with grace and elegance. Men need practice if they are to wear heeled shoes, and should be allowed to wear similar footwear throughout the rehearsal period. Movement in heeled shoes need not be effeminate, especially when we recall that no male heel in history was any higher than contemporary cowboy boots, to which no feminine stigma is attached.⁴ Heels give the actor vigor and sharpness, as well as a

³ *Design for Movement* (New York, 1952), p. 34.

⁴ Shoes with proper heel height and shape are available in all but the most gigantic of sizes for moderate cost in any major mail-order catalog, and they come in styles which are as masculine as could be wished. The addition of a tongue or trim converts them enough for the most critical eye.

crispness, which are vital to playing period comedy. After seeing Restoration or eighteenth-century comedy in well-managed heels (both male and female), you will agree that low heels make the entire performance seem "flatfooted."

Wigs and hats determine the carriage of the head; the heavier and larger the headgear, the more influential it is. But the movement of the head is only slightly hampered if the headgear is firmly attached. Most period headgear is designed to balance itself on top of the head, but occasional items pull it backward. In this case, over-all balance is achieved by the design of the entire costume. For example, the weight of women's medieval headdresses is balanced by the pulled-up skirt in front and the heavy train behind.

Legs, when uncovered, must be displayed to best advantage. This means that an actor unaccustomed to wearing tights must be supplied with rehearsal tights and required to wear them through the entire rehearsal period. Dress rehearsal is too late for him to become aware of his own legs. When legs are covered with skirts or gowns, rehearsal costumes must also be simulated. Trains of the exact size and shape of the costume must be worn in all rehearsals so there is no last-minute crisis about how much space they will occupy. Trains, incidentally, are designed primarily for forward movement, and retreat is possible only with expert skill and training.

Arm movement is controlled by the size of the armseye (the smaller the armseye, the more freedom for the arm) and the height of the sleeve cap. Some sixteenth century garments have no height in the sleeve cap at all, and give the greatest freedom possible. A hanging or puffed sleeve, or eighteenth cen-

tury sleeves with large cuffs demand special attention.

These examples show that well-made period costumes, cut upon the principles evolved by tailors of other centuries and apparent in garments and patterns which are still available, can not only enhance the actor's movement, but can actually simplify his problems. The one thing to remember is that every period garment existed for very specific reasons, primary of which was the choice of the wearer. This choice is influenced by conscious and subconscious desires, by personal taste, by the symbolic value of the garments and by the spirit of the times. But no costume has ever been arbitrarily imposed and no movement to force people into clothes they did not like has ever been successful. People adopt a mode of dress because it expresses feelings, fulfills needs, and satisfies desires. We must understand these feelings, needs and desires in order to understand the clothes.⁵

The following generalization is important. Period clothes are either (a) comfortable to the wearer when he conforms to certain movements, or (b) intentionally uncomfortable for a specific purpose. Corsets are never comfortable but corset wearers are willing to sacrifice comfort to gratify more immediate desires. Remember that the modern shirt collar is not worn because it is comfortable, but because it is a symbol.

It seems to me that there are two possible approaches to period movement, which might be called the "Pure" and the "Eclectic" approaches. The Purist approaches period movement from the philosophy that the period is a homo-

⁵ For a complete analysis of the reasons behind clothes, see James Laver, *Clothes* (New York, 1953); C. Willett Cunnington, *The Art of English Costume* (London, 1948); and Frank Alvah Parsons, *Psychology of Dress* (Garden City, N. Y., 1923).

geneous unit, and that movement is inseparable from the total quality of the period. He chooses his period because it says what he wants said, and then uses the period costume to prescribe the actor's movement. He believes that the complete period best expresses the play. The Eclectic, on the other hand, selects only those aspects of period costume which produce or enhance this

movement. Both of these approaches have their separate uses in the theatre, and a director and costumer should be aware of the possibilities of each.

But both of these approaches rest on the firm conviction that period movement, as enhanced and partially determined by period costume, has a positive contribution to make to the theatrical production.

The Purpose of Poetry

So as it appeareth that *Poesie* serueth and conferreth to Magnanimitie, Moralitye, and to delectation. And therefore it was euer thought to haue some participation of diuinesse, because it doth raise and erect the Minde, by submitting the shewes of things to the desires of the Mind, whereas reason doth buckle and bowe the Mind vnto the Nature of things.

—Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*