

# Research Report

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An 'armour' against Anguish

## An 'armour' against anguish: Costume design considerations around protecting actors in emotionally distressing roles

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Received 30 October 2019; Accepted 8 October 2020

### Abstract

Actors and singers frequently portray characters who experience distressing events, yet this may cause anguish for the performers themselves and require them to perform personal emotional management to cope with their own feelings during a production.

This case study discusses and documents my costume design ethos and processes for the Sydney 2018 production of Clare Barron's play, *You Got Older* (2015), which required the two lead actors to play characters who were experiencing profound fear, grief and loss. The design approach drew on [Monks's](#) work on the relationship that actors have with their costumes and [d'Anjou's](#) interpretation of Sartrean ethics within the context of a design practice. Once I had determined that the nature of my role as designer for this production would be to offer the actors emotional support through costume, I applied [Woodward's](#) notion of comfort in everyday dress to the context of performance costume to ascertain how costume might contain a talisman and/or function as a form of psychological, 'soft armour' within the context of the play. Finally, this report uses [Tonkinwise's](#) writing on ethical design alongside a semi-structured interview with the lead actor in *You Got Older*, Harriet Gordon-Anderson, to examine the forms that such protections took within my designs for the play and offers methodological considerations regarding designing costumes to protect and comfort performers playing emotionally distressing roles, should the actors require it.

## Keywords

costume

comfort

armour

talisman

materiality

emotionally distressing roles

## Introduction

Benjamin Britten's opera *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) tells the story of the Roman Consul Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus's wife, Lucretia, who is horrifically raped by Prince Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the last legendary king of Rome before the establishment of the Roman Republic, who lusts after Lucretia because of her virtue and beauty. Lucretia's resultant pain and shame are so great that she stabs herself to death, which moves the opera's Choruses from being detached observers to become the moral conscience of the work in an attempt to drive social change on- and offstage. Themes of trauma and of emotionally distressing events, and an exploration of their effects have been pivotal to the development of western drama since its earliest textual extant manifestations within the ancient Greek tragedies. Performances of ancient drama employed, for example, conventions of 'tragic costume', which included the use of masks to signal how, 'passion and suffering [were] not introvertedly wrung out through tiny, intimate gestures [...] but [were] put directly before the audience's sympathetic concentration' (Taplin 2003: 10). More than 2500 years later, costume remains one of the key means within theatre through which a character's physical and psychological trauma can be exposed to the audience. Barbieri's discussion of Elektra's costume designed by Brigitte Reiffenstuel for the 2002 Royal Opera House production of Strauss's opera, *Elektra* (1909) for example, provides a specific analysis of how contemporary costume is used to shape the 'inner and outer conflicts' of the 'characters drawn from Sophocles' play dating to the fifth century BC' (2017: 207). Similarly, the inner and outer conflicts of Lucretia were eloquently communicated through Nicky Gillibrand's costume designs for the 2013 Glyndebourne production of *The Rape of Lucretia*.<sup>[1]</sup> Towards the end of Act 1, Lucretia retires to bed in a white, calf-length, shift that resembles a nightie and echoes the linen that the women

have been weaving in her home in the previous scene, underscoring the domesticity of the character. Her feet are bare and she lies comfortably in bed reading a letter from her husband, the whiteness of her nightie also signalling her virtue and loyalty to her husband. The set is largely bare, save for a floor covered in a thick layer of dark earth. The dirt provides a visual tension with the white shift and acts as a metaphor for Lucretia's debasement and for Tarquinius's violent, loathsome behaviour. After the rape, Lucretia's hair is wild, her hands, feet and body are filthy, and her white shift is smeared with dirt from the floor of the set, signalling her defilement at the hands of Tarquinius and her inner and outer shame and pain.

[Monks](#) writes that, 'costume is a body that can be taken off' ([2010](#): 11), but there is anecdotal evidence, including informal discussions with a personal friend who had performed the role of Lucretia, that some singers may still feel upset even after taking off the metonymic body of Lucretia each night due to performing such an emotionally distressing role. Costume's function as a removable body, however, is based on the notion that costume, 'does more than decorate the surface of the body; rather, it comes with risks and possibilities for the body and the psyche of the actor' ([Monks 2010](#): 3). The risks of dressing to perform emotionally distressing roles may, therefore, be something of which a performer is aware, but the intimate interactions between an actor and the costume also means that there may be possibilities to offer a performer physical and emotional 'protection' via their costume while they work in such roles. Such intimate interactions may include the personal physical experiences of warmth, comfort, coverage, restriction or movement that a performer has when wearing a costume made from a specific type of fabric, cut of garment and/or accessory. They may also include physical

experiences of cold and/or exposure when undressing or appearing nude in a scene. Could the intimate interactions between a performer and their costume, therefore, contribute to the use of costume as an ‘armour against anguish’ when performing in an emotionally distressing role?

As Watkins writes, ‘[a]lthough the term *body armor* [*sic*] has traditionally been used to describe apparel that provides physical protection [...] it can be argued that the term applies equally well to protective garments for any situation in which humans face danger from impact’ and some ‘cultures use armor [*sic*] to ward off evil spirits [...] rather than to provide physical protection’ (Watkins cited in Eicher and Tortora 2010: 97).

Watkins’ definition points to the potential of performance costume to act as a form of armour that could minimize the personal impact on an actor of playing an emotionally distressing role, but what of costumes like Lucretia’s nightie that are unable to operate as armour because their function as the character’s metonymic body sees them end up as violated as the character herself? Might performers feel protected from the mental anguish that such roles can inflict were there some kind of material comfort and/or talisman built into their costumes to safeguard their psyche? If so, what kind of material and symbolic forms might such talismans take and what might the role and/or

responsibilities of the costume designer be in affording such protections and comforts?

These questions were among the key considerations within my design, making and fitting processes when working as the costume designer and wardrobe manager for the 2018 Sydney Mad March Hare production of American playwright Clare Barron’s 2015 work, *You Got Older*. It quickly became apparent during the initial rehearsals and design process that the production, which charts the mental unravelling of a young woman called

Mae Hardy, would likely be an emotionally draining role for Harriet Gordon-Anderson, who played Mae.<sup>2</sup> The discussion with my friend who had experienced disquietude from playing Lucretia consequently motivated my decision to consider how costume might offer psychological protection and comfort for actors performing an emotionally distressed character. This case study, therefore, discusses my ethos and processes for designing, fitting and making the costumes that functioned as a form of armour for Gordon-Anderson in *You Got Older*.

## Emotional buffers and the role of the costume designer

Barron's play centres on Mae Hardy, a lawyer from Minneapolis in her early-30s, who loses her job, her apartment and her boyfriend (who was also her boss) in a short period of time. To make matters worse, Mae then has to go home to Spokane, a small town in Washington State, to care for her sick father during his cancer treatment. Upon moving home, Mae seems to regress to a state of teenage rebellion and is barely coping. She sneaks out to the local bar, avoids Dad's discussions about finding a job, and sneaks a man into her room. Mae tries to find comfort in knitting, in rough sexual fantasies about a Canadian cowboy, and in awkward companionship with her siblings, who meet at the hospital to support Dad's cancer treatment. Nothing, however, helps to prevent her downward spiral throughout the play. Mae's anguish also manifests as forms of corporeal corruption: she can't sleep or eat and she has a painful, itchy rash across her entire back. Even her hot, fantasy cowboy ends up covered in boils and coughing up blood. The themes in *You Got Older*, therefore, include an exploration of personal grief and loss and how they play out in intense family relationships.

It became apparent from early in the rehearsal process that Gordon-Anderson herself would be required to be physically and emotionally vulnerable in every performance in addition to acting physical and emotional vulnerability. Roles that encapsulate intense emotional vulnerability, however, require that the actor also performs an intense form of personal emotional management labour in addition to the labour of performing the role. As Orzechowicz writes, '[e]motion management is a critical aspect of the work actors do in rehearsal and onstage, be it the suppression of pre-performance anxiety and feelings not associated with a role, or the evocation of emotion in a particular scene' (2008: 143). During a production, actors may rely on physical, psychological and concentration strategies to manage their emotions, including cast warm-ups and bonding with cast and crew members after each show and many of these strategies are taught at drama schools to help actors transition out of roles. Gordon-Anderson, for example, explained that,

Training as an actor should include how you get out of a role. I was given some tools by practitioners. You develop your own processes and rituals; these can be physical, a song, and/or practicing this with discipline. I don't think an actor has to suffer. My work is not better if I'm personally unhappy. If you're working with a crew that understands and supports that, then that's what you're looking for.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018)

Such processes, rituals and tools form what Orzechowicz terms, '*emotional buffers* [that] structurally enable actors' feeling management' (2008: 146). Gordon-Anderson's comments, however, articulate that actors may also rely on theatre professionals including costume designers, stage managers, dressers and directors to help manage their sources of emotion and distraction, as well as – more recently – experts in coordinating

scenes that include potential elements of physical or emotional exposure. This can particularly be the case in sex and/or trauma-related roles, as well as in other emotionally-charged roles. Many organizations, for example, now hire intimacy coordinators/directors who are professional advocates who set out the ground rules and look out for the actors' physical and emotional well-being during sex and nude scenes (Metz 2018: n.pag.). Part of the intimacy coordinator/director's function is also often to liaise the costume department so that the actor can gain comfort by knowing exactly what they will wear in such roles and scenes. Alicia Rodis, co-founder of the New York non-profit organization Intimacy Directors International, notes however, that in the absence of an intimacy coordinator, costume department professionals often traditionally perform the, 'extra emotional labor [*sic*] by trying to help the actors and getting them to have conversations [about intimacy and nudity on set]' (Metz 2018: n.pag.). Stage productions now also often opt to use an intimacy director whose role is similar to an intimacy coordinator's, but with certain techniques adapted for stage use (Mink 2019: n.pag.). However, while intimacy coordinators/directors can be valuable for the actor's emotional well-being, many smaller production companies simply do not have the financial resources to hire one. This means, therefore, that the director and the costume department will often act as the key communicators and professional emotional supports for actors performing in potentially distressing or uncomfortable scenes.

The Sydney 2018 staging of *You Got Older* was produced by Mad March Hare, an independent theatre company with limited financial resources. The intimacy director role was, therefore, conducted by the play's producer and director, Claudia Barrie. While there was no full nudity within this production, Gordon-Anderson was required at one



point to be topless under a sheet while simulating urination, and to perform short make-out sequences and simulated, rough sex. These actions within the play were in addition to scenes which required Gordon-Anderson to act profound emotional vulnerability around grief and loss, meaning that she had to perform significant personal emotional management as well as the emotions of Mae seven shows a week within the context of the play. Gordon-Anderson explained,

I see aspects of my life and self in this script and so it's not my favourite territory to step into each night – embarrassment, humiliation, grief. [...] I come off stage feeling drained, some nights more than others [...] and you're at the bottom of your tank emotionally. [...] There's a lot of propping up and supporting in the community and it's necessary during a role [like this]. I lean very heavily on my family.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018)

The types of emotional support that a family member, partner or friend offers an actor differ markedly from the type of emotional support that a production's cast and crew provide: the former is deeply personal, the latter is tied directly to the actor's professional environment. Nevertheless, each type of emotional support has its own value to the actor. The intimate nature of designing, making and fitting costumes can therefore mean that one of the costume designer's key functions is to act as an emotional buffer for the actor, even before the fitting process begins. The awareness that I would likely be a source of emotional support for the actors of *You Got Older* came from my initial reading through the script. From the outset, therefore, I considered what my role as costume designer would entail within the context of our production, which included the ethical position that I would adopt to underpin a design and fitting process to help support the actors emotionally.

d'Anjou's (2010) exploration of how Jean Paul Sartre's views on human freedom might be applied when determining the moral character of a designer was the basis for my approach to supporting the actors through costume within *You Got Older*. That meant that I had to strive to understand and accept my human condition of the freedom to make and then change design decisions in order to avoid projecting my, 'own choices on circumstances and on others', instead placing the actors at the centre of the design process (d'Anjou 2010: 104). This is because, as d'Anjou extrapolates from Sartre's work, '[h]umans are not to be apprehended as objects by whoever practices design; they are to be treated as free subjects' (d'Anjou 2010: 102). This involved the understanding that the design process included a frequent need for compromise with the actors, often working through multiple costume options, because every actor has different requirements for support, especially when playing emotionally distressing roles, while the degree of discomfort and/or distress an actor experiences within a role is highly individual and subjective. The Irish actress Fiona Shaw, for example, deliberately wore an uncomfortable, rigidly corseted costume when playing the emotionally distressing role of Hedda Gabler in the production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 1991. The physical experience of discomfort within her costume was important to Shaw's process as an actor because it allowed her to simultaneously feel, symbolize and communicate Gabler's 'entrapment in bourgeois society' (Monks 2010: 29). This subjectivity is why drawing on Sartrean interpretations of what constitutes the moral character of the designer validated my decision to place the actor as a working person at the centre of the costume design and making processes, rather than to treat the costuming of *You Got Older* as strictly an aesthetic and semiotic exercise. In other words, the actor

is a free subject whose agency must be respected and who has a complex, intimate relationship with costume and in *You Got Older*, the actor Steve Rodgers who played Dad, for example, chose to wear many of his own clothes as part of Dad's costume. The most ethical process when working with Rodgers, therefore, was for us to have regular discussions about his agency within the costuming process so that he felt understood and supported in the role. This included my accepting that Rodgers would draw more comfort in the role from wearing an old hat onstage that had belonged to his father, rather than the hat that I had designed and knitted for his costume (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Steve Rodgers as 'Dad' in the 2018 Mad March Hare production of *You Got Older* (2015). Photograph credit: Clare Hawley. Here, Rodgers wears a hat that had belonged to his own father. The hat was so old that it had almost felted, which also felt softer and more comfortable than a newly-knitted hat.

## Ethical design and costuming the actor

Employing a Sartrean-based perspective on design ethics in *You Got Older* also freed me to develop a process that would help to identify and meet the individual actors' emotional needs for comfort within the context of the production. Once possible sources of anxiety or stress had been identified within the script, the next step was to start working in consultation with the director, and with the actors, to confirm whether these sources might be problematic for them and to understand their anxieties. Rodis, in her role as intimacy coordinator, also reads a script first to identify any potential areas that may cause emotional or physical distress (Metz 2018: n.pag.). There may be other anxieties for the actor, however, that are not immediately apparent within the script and these may be related to the actor's prior experiences as well as to design decisions, rather than to the

script itself. This is because an actor often brings events from their lives and previous acting experiences to a role to help them shape the character. For Gordon-Anderson, additional sources of anxiety included wearing jeans, having to simulate urination onstage, the hospital scene at the end of Act 1 when the family meets to support Dad during his cancer treatment, and breaking down when Mae learns that Dad's cancer has aggressively returned.

The initial costume design was to have Mae wearing jeans in the first scene to signal the external world that she had just arrived from when she gets to Wenatchee. The design concept was to change the costume throughout the play from jeans to tracksuit pants to signal Mae's personal need for comfort while looking after Dad. Gordon-Anderson, however, was uncomfortable at the thought of having to wear jeans. After several discussions during the design process, we determined that Gordon-Anderson's concerns were based on a negative experience she had wearing jeans in a costume that had restricted her movement onstage. Therefore, even though the first scene was not emotionally harrowing for Gordon-Anderson, we changed the costume to include a shortish denim skirt which, because of its fabric, fastening and pockets, had a similar look and feel as jeans and also signalled clothes that Mae would wear outside the home. This costume change removed a potential source of anxiety for Gordon-Anderson, which also helped to establish trust between her and the crew, allowing her to feel personally understood and supported in her acting process and within the broader context of the production.

Within the context of the script, the scene where Mae urinates was also a source of anxiety for Gordon-Anderson. The scene required her to wear a bag filled with water

that had a valve and nozzle attached to it under her costume in order to simulate urination. In this instance, Gordon-Anderson was concerned that technicalities around the costume would fail and that aesthetic design choices would highlight that failure; that is, that the nozzle on the bag might leak making it look in the next scene like Mae had wet herself. Gordon-Anderson said that support in this instance was:

As simple as trust in the costume designer. That's where conversations are important around [...] where are you coming from with your process [...]. In this instance, we had to discuss which was more important: design aesthetics, or my experience wearing the costume. Just knowing that I ... [was] feeling heard was important. For me, protection was about feeling that there's a support network. We've got you. We won't let you look like an idiot on stage. You can focus on your role. This is not always the case.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018)

The original costume design for the scene was light blue tracksuit pants, but the decision was made to use black tracksuit pants in the scene following consultation with Gordon-Anderson and Barrie. This was because the dark fabric obscured the outline of the water bag and would not show water stains as clearly as a lighter-colour material, if the nozzle leaked. More importantly, however, the rapport that we developed during this consultation meant we were able to make costuming decisions better suited to helping Gordon-Anderson feel comforted during the hospital scene and the emotionally gruelling scenes in Act 2. Barrie regularly collaborated with me throughout the rehearsal process to make sure that the technical aspects of Gordon-Anderson's costumes within difficult scenes would function in order to prevent potential wardrobe malfunctions. These conversations about how we could best use costumes to support the actors emotionally as well as to help them transition into their character continued throughout the making and fitting processes and during rehearsals and continued right until opening night.

## Comfort in performance costume

Exploring the notion of comfort in dress and how it could be adapted and applied to performance costume was central to the design and making ethos of *You Got Older*. Not only did I want to connect the actors' bodies with the material world of the play, but I wanted them to have the option to connect with material worlds outside of the stage in order to comfort themselves in potentially emotionally charged scenes should they need to. This was in part because, as Trimingham writes, '[c]ostume in performance – a socially situated, communal act, time limited, deliberate and discrete – connects the body with the material world as no other stage “object”' (Trimingham cited in Barbieri 2017: 164). Woodward writes that, '[t]he notion of “comfort” [in dress] incorporates a physical sensation of comfort; but also in a more nuanced sense, comfort involves the notion of aesthetic fit: the wearing of clothes which are “you”' (2005: 21–40). Within the context of performance costume, the notion of 'comfort' can also be as much psychological as it is physical. While some actors are undoubtedly concerned about whether they look and feel good when performing, the notion of 'comfort' within performance costume can also extend to the actor feeling that their costume is an appropriate aesthetic, semiotic and expressive fit for their character in the scene. Furthermore, Monks writes that, '[c]ostume's interaction with the actor's sensate body is one of the most private experiences for the actor, and can never be absolutely known by the audience' (2010: 23). Psychological comfort in performance costume can also, therefore, extend to the actor's personal, physical experience of the costume's materiality.

Within the context of *You Got Older*, this material and corresponding psychological comfort within costume was afforded to Gordon-Anderson by providing

her with hand-knitted woollen blankets, fleecy-lined tracksuit pants, and costume changes. The hospital scene scenography for example, incorporates two hand-knitted blankets which the script states are a present that ‘Tiffany’, a colleague of Dad’s, has made for Mae and him to show her support for them during Dad’s cancer treatment. The knitted blankets were not strictly costume items, but costume designers, because of their deep knowledge of textiles, are often required to collaborate with scenographers when sourcing fabrics and dressing the set. In order to obtain the aesthetic look and feel that Barron stipulates for the blankets within the script I chose to knit the blankets myself. It quickly became apparent, however, that the act of hand-knitting the blankets would imbue them with an extra, psychological level of comfort for the actors both in the hospital scene and within Act 2 where Gordon-Anderson chose to incorporate them into her costumes ([Brayshaw 2020](#): 9). This decision to knit the blankets, therefore, was also partly, ‘inspired by the ethical desire to [...] relieve another’s pain’ ([Tonkinwise 2004](#): 5). In addition, hand-knitted objects symbolize the time spent dedicating oneself to another person. Such ‘objects are [...] made with love and are connected to personal histories’ ([Johnson and Wilson 2005](#): 117). The knitted blankets became, therefore, both symbols of Dad’s colleague Tiffany within the play as well as symbols of the support that was being created for Gordon-Anderson through costume.

Watkins writes that armour can take the form of ‘flexible fabric garments’ (Watkins cited in Eicher and Tortora 2010: 97). Like armour, knitted fabrics can also operate as a kind of soft, flexible, protective outer shell, while their material qualities can lend themselves semiotically and physically to supporting metaphors and functions of costume as an ‘armour’. The Lady Macbeth costume for Ellen Terry designed in 1888 by

Alice Comyns-Carr contained for example, ‘a chain armour knitted out of wool and tinsel’, which portrayed the inner and outer conflicts of the character as a fierce warrior who is nonetheless terrified by what she must do to gain power for her husband (Barbieri 2017: 214). Mae’s apricot-coloured blanket also functioned as a kind of armour within the hospital scene when Gordon-Anderson incorporated it into her costume to protect her against the scene’s emotional intensity and the comfort she obtained from her private interaction with the blanket helped her to express Mae’s inner and outer conflicts. She explained:

Mae’s supportive [of her siblings in the scene] by letting them get their anxiety out. She jokes and teases, but she’s over tired and stressed. [The blanket is] a barrier [that keeps] something in and something out; keeping out Mae’s fear of Dad’s death and the other characters’ fear. I’ve taken to pulling Mae’s knitted blanket up to my chin and my instinct in the scene is to cover myself because it feels like *I’m* cozy and at home and it feels good.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018)

Physical comfort from the materiality of the costumes was also required for Gordon-Anderson in Act 2 of *You Got Older*, which charts Mae’s downward spiral and ultimate breakdown. Mae’s trauma plays out onstage in scenes in which she argues with Dad, smuggles a man into her room but they fail to connect emotionally and sexually, and in scenes of her sexual fantasies with the Cowboy that become increasingly dark and terrifying. Furthermore, just as it appears that Mae’s life is back on track, she learns that Dad’s cancer has returned and that it is terminal. The costume design decision was for Mae to wear grey tracksuit pants throughout this act to symbolize that Mae is too upset to care about her appearance, but it became apparent from collaborating with Gordon-Anderson during the rehearsal process that she wanted these to be very comfortable. We



knew that we had found the right garment among several potential costume options when Gordon-Anderson pulled on a pair of fleecy-lined tracksuit pants during the fitting process and said, '[t]his is the hug I've been looking for'. Gordon-Anderson's private interaction with the materiality of the fleecy tracksuit pants was, therefore, an important source of comfort for her while playing the emotionally difficult scenes of Act 2.

The actor can also be helped to transition out of an emotionally gruelling scene via a costume change. The final scene of *You Got Older*, for example, sees the Hardy family siblings have a dance party at Jenny's wedding reception twelve months after Dad has died from cancer. The scene gives the actors and the audience catharsis from the overwhelmingly emotional scenes and themes of the play, but also requires a significant costume change for Mae. The Sydney 2018 production costumed Mae in a short, pink, bronze and black sequinned dress to symbolize the party and to signal the passage of time. Gordon-Anderson explained how the costume change helped her personally, too:

Mae's tracksuit pants [in Act 2] are 'private' clothes and that's the point. They're comfy. She's going through something that's personal and doesn't want to present for anyone. But the costume I put on at the end of the show is a dress that isn't worn at home – it's a party dress. I have a thing I can touch that helps Mae and shows me that she's moving on. It's sparkly, pink and fun and it feels like her soul is a little more robust. The weight of the [...] sparkly dress and the feel of the material is different [from the previous costume]. It makes me think of times I'd personally wear it and those times are fun. It's a psychological shift for the actor to a less private costume.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018).

The look, weight and materiality of the sparkly dress therefore offered Gordon-Anderson comfort both her and for Mae; indeed, Gordon-Anderson chose to keep the dress after the production run so that she could wear it to clubs and parties. In this respect the dress was

a comfortable aesthetic and psychological fit for both Mae and for Gordon-Anderson; Gordon-Anderson could express how Mae is moving on, while the dress itself helped Gordon-Anderson leave Mae's sadness behind after she had concluded the performances each night.

## A talisman within costumes

Another way in which emotional comfort and support was extended to Gordon-Anderson in the hospital scene was through the use of a talisman in her costume. A talisman is an object believed to bring good luck or to keep its owner safe from harm. In contemporary western cultures, objects such as jewellery are often used as a talisman because they are seen as, 'a physical extension of the body [...] [that] often emerge as metonymic representations of a person. [...] [it becomes] the symbol of corporeal integrity and psychological security' (Vainshtein 2012: 140). The idea of a talisman within costumes has existed in western drama since ancient Athens where, as Taplin proposes, masks 'may also have given the actor some kind of protection against what one might call the danger of acting', providing ordinary Athenians-turned actors with the ability to perform actions and roles that may have otherwise been unthinkable for them (2001). The French stage director, Ariane Mnouchkine, maximized the idea of the costume as talisman with the all-enveloping costumes for her production of a ten-hour cycle of the Greek tragedy, *Les Atrides* (1992). These costumes were highly influential, but are now considered contentious due to their use of makeup and costuming techniques and aesthetics found in Japanese Kabuki theatre and the South Indian Kathakali dance drama. However, the costumes also explored how various states of being are, 'embodied into the highly crafted costumes which become valued talismans' (Barbieri 2017: 23). In addition, Mnouchkine

points to the power costume has to influence the performer, demanding absolute respect for costumes, and noting that well-costumes, ‘can be your friends. They are your enemies if badly made’ ([Féral 1989](#): 78, 84), A talisman, however, need not be an entire costume; rather it can take the form of any object that may help the actor and many designers work with the idea of talismans in costume to help the actor bring a character to life.

Hollywood designer Arianne Phillips says for example,

As a costume designer you [...] help the actors access this character, whether it’s the kind of shoes they wear, or the length of skirt. I’m always really aware of what will serve the actor, maybe you won’t see it on film maybe you will, but it’s a talisman of sorts.

([Falk 2019](#): n.pag.)

The work displayed at the *Critical Costume 2015* conference by the costume designer and academic, Sofia Pantouvaki, included costumes that interrogated the relationship between actors and their costumes through insights gained in collaborative co-creation ([Osmond 2016](#): 116). This work included incorporating personalized embroidery in opera costumes that had individual meanings for the actors, based on a sharing of actors’ personal memories with the costume designer during the performance-making process, in order to connect them emotionally with their costumes ([Pantouvaki 2015](#): 4). A talisman may, therefore, also take the form of a specific garment, a piece of jewellery, a type of fabric, an embroidered motif, or even something stitched into the hem of a garment. Discussions during the design process for *You Got Older* revealed that Gordon-Anderson wished to incorporate items from her own wardrobe into Mae’s costume in order to help access the character and to stay present as herself in the hospital scene, which she found personally emotionally gruelling.

Johnson and Wilson write that, hand-knitted items are, ‘made with love and are connected to personal histories’ (2005: 117). Gordon-Anderson chose a scarf that her own mother had knitted for her to act as a talisman in her costume because it had these properties. Vainshtein also notes that a talisman involves ‘memories and nostalgic associations that are invested within the acquisition of the object’ (2012:140). Gordon-Anderson explained that the scarf for her was,

really important. My mum has been chronically ill since I was twelve and the easiest way into [the character of] Mae was that I’ve been a carer for an ill parent. So, having Mum’s scarf, especially in the hospital scene was a great access point [...] for me. I’m staring at the hospital bed and holding my Mum’s scarf and it’s intensely personal. It feels for me in ways that another object never would. It brings my memories.

The scarf is a kind of talisman. It’s a token of Harriet which is not all that present in this play. I don’t have the same rhythms as Mae. The scarf knits Harriet and Mae together in an immediate way in that scene. It feels like an identifying mechanism. It ties me to me and it makes me feel that as much as I’m living Mae it’s comforting to have Harriet there as well and there’s less of a danger of getting lost in a role. It keeps the perspective that there’s more in life.

(Gordon-Anderson 2018)

The intensively personal relationship of the actor to their costume will mean, therefore, that the audience may not even realize the importance of the talisman to the actor, or even that the actor has one. An actor can also wear a talisman in one scene only or in as many scenes as needed as the talisman can take as many different forms within costume as needed. From a practical perspective, too, the inclusion of a talisman did not require any extra cost or design work within this context as Gordon-Anderson already owned the

scarf. Such considerations are vital within theatre making, which is often increasingly bound by commercial constraints.

Figure 2: (Left to right) Harriet-Gordon Anderson as Mae Hardy, and Alex Beauman as Matthew Hardy in the 2018 Sydney production of *You Got Older* (2015). Photograph credit: Clare Hawley. Here, Gordon-Anderson uses Mae's blanket as armour qua armour against the intensity of the events in the scene, and her own scarf as a talisman to connect with the character and keep herself grounded.

## Conclusion and considerations

This article has traced how costume, and the costume designer's work within a production, can act as a powerful emotional buffer for actors when helping them to manage their feelings in emotionally-charged roles as well as roles that could cause them personal discomfort and distress. This is because the materiality of costume and the intimacy that an actor has with their costume can function as a soft, flexible armour qua armour to help them better express the character's inner and outer conflicts, or it can itself function as or incorporate a talisman with the power to support and protect the actor emotionally and in their process. There is scope, therefore, to consider costume as a talisman and/or armour supporting performers in emotionally distressing roles across all genres. Might future designers collaborate with the lead singer in *The Rape of Lucretia*, for example, to include a talisman in her costume should she need one to protect herself against the gruelling events of the opera? The idea of 'costume as armour' could also be extended to offer psychological comfort where the materiality of costume might be limited, for example for actors who are costumed in flimsy garments or have to remove their costumes within a scene. It may even be possible to offer the actor the option to

have a form of talisman for comfort in psychologically difficult or trauma-related roles where they are required to appear nude.

This work has also discussed how an ethics-based approach to the costume design and making process was used to support actors in psychologically difficult scenes where the actor wanted and needed that support. This is because, although a key function of the costume designer is to create material bodies and worlds for actors to inhabit, there is a great deal of freedom, as well as responsibility, around the ethical decisions that the designer can make in how they choose to approach each project. Choosing to place the actors at the centre of the design process in *You Got Older* in 2018 enabled them to feel supported and heard. This was achieved by working with them and with the director to understand their personal relationships to their costumes, their understanding of their roles, themselves and their personal limits and anxieties within their process. Playing Mae, therefore, remained an emotionally draining experience for Gordon-Anderson, but her distress was nonetheless alleviated to a degree by the comfort gained from her costume and from knowing that the costume designer would not let her down.

## Acknowledgements

This project is situated within ‘Imagining Fashion Futures Lab’, led by Peter McNeil at UTS Australia.

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## Notes



1. The 2013 production of *The Rape of Lucretia* was directed by Fiona Shaw and featured Claudia Huckle in the role of Lucretia.

2. I contacted Gordon-Anderson via telephone after the production's run to explain the purpose of this particular study related to my costume design process and her role within the study. I informed her that this study would contain observations made during the rehearsal and fitting process for *You Got Older* in 2018, along with a semi-structured interview. It was stressed to Gordon-Anderson that her participation within the study was entirely voluntary, that she could terminate our semi-structured interview at any time, and if that were the case, then the study would not proceed.

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