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Witnesses of the Past: Costumes as Material Evidence of the Ephemeral Performance

Abstract

This article focuses on the theory and methodology of historical costume research, which starts with the garment in the archive and contains a comparative, collaborative, interdisciplinary and international approach. It includes the study of preserved eighteenth-century stage costumes in the Swedish Royal Armoury (*Livrustkammaren*), French costume designs, inventories, dance treatises from the period, experimental reconstruction and performance. Since the early Swedish theatre repertoire was based mainly on French plays and operas, and the costumes were heavily inspired by French design, this study can offer insights into the practice on French stages as well, from where little garments have been preserved. The study departing from costume's materiality can provide insights into the long-lost performances of the past. Some examples will show what we can learn about costumes' relation to the movement in the past, their relation to the lighting in the historic theatre, and the overall effect on the audience.

1. *Introduction*

It all starts as an anecdote. A conservator, a tailor, and a theatre scholar meet in the archive. They pick a big white box from the archive shelf, put it on the table, open the lid, and carefully remove the silk paper – a moment of suspense. A colourful object appears, somewhat cramped in the box, with sleeves tightly placed along the bodice. The silk fabric, bleached with time, still slightly shimmers in the light, and so does the silver-thread lace, despite it being blackened and looking pretty dirty. In one split second, several 'aha moments' occur, like: 'So this is how they cut the tunic!' and 'This is how it closed, across the body!'. Many more questions arise.

The encounter with a costume in an archive is an informative, frustrating and emotional event. We are physically so close to the performance and the body of the past. Sometimes, we can even observe the body's remains in the form of sweat and blood. And yet, we are so far from the past, and getting the answers to our questions seems almost impossible. However, the study of a material object itself can provide glimpses into the ephemerality of performance – not only does it contain information about its physical and aesthetic aspects, but it also inspires our imagination more concretely than text.

As the editor of this volume stated, "[i]n order to exist, [...] ephemerality needs materiality, since any creative process intersects with the material requirements that both artworks and performances need: materials, location, scripts, costumes, and even bodies". Therefore, the preserved objects and spaces are crucial to understanding these past events.

This article focuses specifically on the object of stage costume, which was and is a crucial actor in the performance. It creates the character through visual codes and symbolisms, shapes the actor's movements, and constitutes the aesthetic and dramaturgical framework of the whole performance. After summarizing the theoretical and methodological background for the study of costume and performance of the past, I present concrete examples of the encounters with the costumes, how we can 'talk' to them, and what they 'say' to us today.

2. *Ephemerality and Theatre Historiography*

Theatre and dance of the past are often considered "the most transient and ephemeral of all the arts".[1] In contemporary theatre studies, theatre is no longer reduced to the "synonym of drama" (Balme 2008, 1) (dramatic text), which was the primary study object of the discipline in its origins. The theatrical event is instead understood as a communicative encounter between performer and spectator (Sauter 2000), a complex process that includes various modes of performing (acting – declamation of text, speed and tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, blocking, movement; dancing, singing etc.), spatial and scenographical framing, lighting, the interaction between humans and objects

1 Polish dramaturge and theatre critic Władysław Zawistowski cited in Sajewska 2015. See also "A small history of ephemerality" in Schneider 2011, 94–96.

(costumes and props), the interaction between actors and audiences, not to speak about broader contexts of aesthetics and politics. A good half of the elements composing the theatrical event are thus immaterial, difficult to capture, and, consequently, ephemeral.

Before the invention of the video camera, these immaterial and fleeting aspects of theatrical performance could be captured by the imperfect act of translation into another media: the non-verbal language of acting, such as gesture and expression, but even speed and intonation of speech, could be translated into a text or drawing, filtered through the complex and imperfect mechanisms of memory. Even if specific notation systems were invented, such as Beauchamp-Feuillet notation for seventeenth and eighteenth-century dance, these only captured a few aspects of the complex body language, leaving many parts of the physical performance up for interpretation. It should also be stressed, however, that in our present times, even video recording is a translation into another media, which can never communicate the whole theatrical event and its effect, since each 'live' event is unique and co-created with the audience in one specific time and place.

The historiographical issues of approaching the theatrical events of the past have been amply described by theatre, dance, and performance scholars in the last decades, who devised various methodological strategies for studying them through archival material.[2] Finally, positioning herself against the narrative of ephemerality, Rebecca Schneider (2011) reintroduced the body into performance historiography. The bodily practices in performance became the latest object of historiographical exploration, often conducted through reenactment, (experimental) reconstruction, or recreation (each carrying its own theoretical, methodological and artistic implications).[3]

This article is inscribed in the theoretical and methodological vein of experimental reconstruction. It claims that despite the fact that we can never truly access the physical (and thus emotional) experience of the past, we can approach it through studying and reconstructing physical practices and interacting with historical material objects.

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2 See, for example, Adshead-Lansdale and Layson 1994; Taylor 2003; Carter 2004; Postlewait 2009; Canning and Postlewait 2010.

3 Jordan 2000; Franko 2017; Jaquet and Deluz 2018; Bouffard 2020; Chaouche 2020; Wagner and Schneider 2023.

2. *Costume as agent*

In material culture studies and new materialism, objects are often endowed with agency. Agency was until recently assigned only to humans, while objects were considered passive, handled by people, and perhaps imbued with symbolic meaning. The idea of objects as agents means that the object does something; it actively shapes the actions and emotions of others. The effects of action and reaction of objects/non-human agents are well studied in the natural sciences, but they have also secured a firm place in the humanities and art studies.[4] Costume scholars Sofia Pantouvaki and Barbora Příhodová (2021, 146) stated that "[c]urrent scholarship positions costume as an active agent on a sensorial, spatial, cultural, social and political level, capable of dynamically intervening between the body and space and carrying significant communicative and performative agency".

Today, a considerable body of research investigates costume agency in performance: what costume does and how.[5] By extension of these contemporary studies, we can conclude that costume also had agency in the past. The costume could have a sensory or affective agency on the beholder. Another agency of costumes, perhaps more apparent, is that of shaping the performer's movement, which was very important on the eighteenth-century stage. Today, we often shape the body to fit certain clothes and socially constructed standards through sport, diet and aesthetic surgery; theatre costumes (especially dance costumes) are adapted to dancers' movements, leaving them completely free to showcase their technique and trained bodies. In the eighteenth century, clothes shaped the body to fit those standards, imposing a specific body posture and movement by their materiality. Therefore, the costumes shaped the bodily appearance and physical practice on stage, too.

The sensorial agency, in relation to the spectator (aesthetic, affective, or even kinaesthetic) and to the performer (physical, emotional), belongs to the ephemeral experience of theatre. This agency is very little recorded or described

4 See, for example Miller 2005; Barad 2007; Ahmed 2006; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2013. For the latest studies in theatre and performance from the perspective of new materialism and materiality, see the special issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies Journal* edited by Petra Dotlačilová and Martynas Petrikas (2023).

5 See Barbieri 2017, Pantouvaki and McNeil 2021. Cf. also the special issue of *Studies in Costume and Performance* edited by Sofia Pantouvaki and Barbora Příhodová (2021).

in textual sources since it belonged to everyday experiences, 'ordinary' sensations that were rarely considered worth noting or were difficult to explain. How can we access it or at least come closer to understanding its effects? An option is to re-activate this sensation through the study of physical costumes preserved in the archives, through more imaginative work when interpreting the sources, through the reconstruction of costumes based on these sources and their return on the body at the stage.

3. *From the stage to the archive*

Garments dating from the eighteenth century (and prior periods) are a relatively rare appearance in the archives, and stage costumes even less so. These objects were not supposed to be preserved for posterity, which does not mean they were not highly valued. They were supposed to serve as a tool in the fabrication of performance, in constructing the ephemeral. Their value was not that of the timeless work of art; on the contrary, their value was precisely in their immediate effect on stage, from a certain distance and in candlelight, in their sudden appearance that creates the *meraviglioso*, an unexpected feeling of awe and wonder.

For the same reason, their construction often differed from the other types of clothes of the period: the fine fabric was only on the outside of the garment, and only on its visible parts; the embroidery or painted ornaments were larger and not necessarily finely finished; the decorative elements were spectacular, but often of cheaper materials (glass or semi-precious stones instead of diamonds, fake silver and gold, metallic sequins). These objects were certainly not supposed to be examined up close, which was occasionally mentioned in internal communication and *mémoires* of theatre professionals. For instance, Denis Pierre Jean Papillon de la Ferté (1737-1794), the director (*intendant*) of the 'Menus-Plaisirs' department of the French Royal House and de-facto organiser of the festivities and performances at the court, wrote: "Bien de gens qui voient ces habits sans examen, les croient d'étoffes d'or et de broderies en fin, tandis que tout cela n'est que de l'or et d'argent faux" (Papillon de la Ferté 1887, 126). His *Journal* contains several mentions about the discrepancy between the appearance of luxury, absolutely necessary on the tragic and lyrical stage, and the careful economy that accompanied the costume-making process

and the whole theatre management.[6] That said, the costumes still represented a considerable amount in the total cost of the spectacle because they were at least partly made of expensive fabrics such as silk taffeta, satin and velvet. For that, there were no alternatives yet.[7]

Based on this utilitarian function and theatre economy, costume historian Veronica Isaac formulated a "typical biography of stage costume" based on anthropologist Igor Kopytoff's concept of object biographies (Kopytoff 1986). This 'life cycle' can be divided into six periods: "design and creation", "first performance", "return to wardrobe", "repair or adaptation for the same or a new wearer", "second performance", "transfer to hired wardrobe" and "disposal through sale, gift or destruction" (Isaac 2016, 564–65). This typical biography, which has the potential to become even more complex (or less), shows that the costume was an object destined to be used and reused, worn and torn, not primarily to be preserved. When a costume ends in a museum or archive collection, it is "a departure from the typical biography of such a garment" – in such a collection, "the costumes take on a new role as 'effigies' working to re-member their original wearer(s) and performance(s)" (Isaac 2017, 130).

Most of the French stage costumes from the eighteenth century succumbed to their typical fate, which was reinforced by the coincidence of particular historical events, both on aesthetic and political levels: the radical change of fashion, theatre fires and change of regimes – most notably, the French Revolution.

In Sweden, on the other hand, the relative political stability, continuity and established tradition of preservation of the royal wardrobe secured a very unusual collection of eighteenth-century costumes for various genres.[8] This was, of course, reinforced by the fact that King Gustav III (1746–1792), and also his mother Louisa Ulrika (1720–1782) and his brother Carl (1748–1818, King Carl

6 For analysis of this text, see Chaouche 2008.

7 For more about the costumes at the French court and Paris Opera, see Dotlačilová 2023b, 2023c.

8 Another similarly unique collection of eighteenth-century theatre costumes is preserved in the Baroque Theatre of the Český Krumlov Castle in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, the Theatre and Performance of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Centre National du costume et de la scène in Moulins, Musée de la Mode or Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra in Paris, preserve examples of seventeenth and eighteenth-century costumes. These will not be taken into account for the purpose of this paper.

XIII between 1809–1818) were very engaged in public and private theatre productions (Dotlačilová 2023d). For further examination, it is essential to note that (not only) theatre culture in Sweden was highly inspired by French culture. The first theatre troupes came to the Nordic Kingdom from France at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The early repertoire was predominantly French and even set and costume designers were French or at least studied in France. Therefore, the comparisons between the French designs and the costumes preserved in Sweden are not incidental, but they show a real exchange between the two countries. For this reason, the Swedish objects can inform French design and performance history.

4. *Between materiality and imagination – Three encounters with costume*

The great joy of discovering historical objects in the archive is often mixed with the difficulty or even frustration that accompanies the process of 'reading' them and interpreting them in relation to our research inquiry. In the eighteenth century, these stage costumes dressed the bodies of the past and helped them create characters, contributing to a 'marvelous' effect. Today, they lie flat in a cardboard box, without the body, the stage, the props, and other actors and costumes to play with. They are so out of context that we could even ask, what can we learn from these lifeless and mute objects, and how?

Art historian Jules Prown (1982) formulated a particular method of how to study objects in the archive, which later became the primary methodology for material culture studies, called 'object-based'. Prown (1982) insists on starting with a description of the object – its substance, content and form. A careful description means careful looking, which helps us to note things. This phase should be freed of any interpretation, although, in reality, it is tough to avoid the reflections that come immediately. The second phase is deduction, which takes into account the relationship between the object and the perceiver, sensory engagement (weight, size, the feel of texture), intellectual engagement, and emotional response; the third phase is 'speculation' – creative imagining, which leads to formulating theories and hypothesis, and finally, the fourth phase includes investigation of external evidence.

More recently, dress historians Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim (2015) adapted this method for fashion and dress studies. They specified what should

be included in the first phase when we examine garments: one should note the materials (including the presence and size of sequins and other decoration), the cut – how the garment is shaped, and the style of sewing, which helps to identify the period (pre-machine or machine). After the phase of object examination, one should start to ask complementary questions, compare with other sources, and imagine. In our case, the question is: how could this costume, via its composition, cut and decoration, act in the performance? In the following paragraphs, I share three examples of my encounters with costumes in the archive of the Swedish Royal Armoury (*Livrustkammaren*), the process and the results of their analysis.

It should be noted that, as a theatre and dance historian, I approach the costumes in the archive with a specific 'baggage' of prior knowledge. I am aware of the historical development and aesthetic context of the stage costume, and I studied the performing arts forms, genres and repertoires of the period. On the other hand, I have less knowledge about costume-making/sewing techniques and about the materials, which I learned to identify and analyse only during the process of examination through discussion with the conservators and the costume-maker who accompanied me in the archive.

The first encounter involved two objects, illuminating my prior knowledge of male eighteenth-century heroic costume (Figs. 1 and 2). The so-called 'Roman civil costume' (*Romersk civil drägt*) and 'Greek costume' (*Grekisk dräkt*)[9] appeared to be similar in shape, despite their names that – at least at first read – should indicate very different types of garments. In the French inventories and drawings from the period, the type called *à la grecque* would be distinguished from *à la romaine*. The latter was originally inspired by the ancient Roman uniform, and thus composed of an embroidered or painted bodice imitating the structured harness of the uniform (usually in fabric, but also materials such as leather or cardboard could be used), shoulder straps and straps hanging from the bodice down over the hips, imitating the leather pieces used for groin protection (in French, these were called *lambrequins*). The woollen knee-long tunic of the Roman

9 These names come from the inventory of the costume collection, written in 1806, which were matched with the preserved garments through very detailed descriptions: "Inventarium uppå Roserbergs Theaters magasin", in *Konung Karl XIII / Cirkulär angående kröningen. Strödda räkningar*. Bouppteckningshandlingar, MS, Riksarkivet, Stockholm (accession number SE/RA/710003/01/II/16/K 66).

uniform transformed in the early modern stage costume into the combination of shirt and skirt called *tonnelet*, which in the mid-eighteenth century reached the form of a stiff and broad skirt. Such costume *à la romaine* was completed with breeches, cape and plumed helmet, as seen on many costume drawings from the period.

However, this is not the form of the Roman civil costume encountered in the Swedish archive. This garment is a loose knee-length robe or tunic closed across the body and fastened with a belt or sash. This corresponds more with the other type of stage costume, called *à la grecque*, which appeared during the eighteenth century as an alternative garment for Greco-Roman heroes, the main protagonists of the tragic and operatic stage.[10] It was destined mainly for characters who were not warriors or not in a war situation, such as princes, kings, senators, Gods and 'the people' (*peuple grec*) (Figs. 3 and 4), so them wearing a military uniform would not have appeared as verisimilar to the spectators of the time.

In this perspective, it is important to note that the inventory description of the archived garment is Roman civil costume, which underscores the fact that this costume was indeed not a military uniform, normally understood under the denomination Roman costume, but a garment destined for a Roman character in an urban setting. In that case, the only alternative the costume designer had was to use the cut customary for the 'Greek' dress (*à la grecque*), as there was virtually no difference between Roman and Greek garments in the perception of the time. That seems to be why the two garments in the archive – the 'Roman civil' and the 'Greek' costume – have very similar cuts.

10 The reason for this particular form of *à la grecque* costume (the knee-long cross-over tunic) is still rather mysterious. My hypothesis is that it was inspired by the contemporary dress worn in Greece in the eighteenth-century, which was essentially Ottoman dress, consisting of layered garments, including long tunics and belts. It was visually distinct from the Roman uniform. The Greek and Roman dress known from the ancient sources and interpreted in contemporary painting was considered too revealing for the eighteenth-century stage until its last two decades.

Figure 1. Anonymous, *En Romersk Civil drägt*, white atlas tunic with red atlas edging. Stockholm, Livrustkammaren / Statens historiska museer, 29279_LRK. Photo: Petra Dotlačilová.

Figure 2. Anonymous, *En Grekisk Klädning*, tunic and breeches in striped crimson and white atlas, decorated with silver lace. Stockholm, Livrustkammaren / Statens historiska museer, 29281_LRK, 29282_LRK. Photo: Petra Dotlačilová.

Figure 3. Fesch et Whirsker, *Molé en Britannicus*, (ca 1770–1776), gouache, 9,6 cm x 11,6 cm. Paris, Comédie-Française, © P. Lorette.

Figure 4. Louis-René Boquet, *Grec*, 1766, ink drawing and watercolour, 36, 4 cm x 27, 3 [dimensions of the volume]. Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Warszawie, Inw.zb.d. 20828/60.

Furthermore, studying these garments' cut, shape, and dimensions reveals how they 'acted' on stage through their volume. From the images from the period, we can see that the skirts could be very wide in the mid-eighteenth century; however, they do not reveal how this was achieved. This can be partially examined when the costume lies in the box. We can extend and measure the wide skirts and imagine that they probably necessitated additional support below because otherwise, the wide pleated skirt would hang down awkwardly. Mounting the costume on a mannequin, fabricated to its measure, is the next step for understanding its effect (Figs. 5 and 6).

While mounting, the curators had to find a solution to place the costume on a 'body' and re-create the right support and missing parts needed to hold the costume together, in this case, a belt. Once mounted on a mannequin, we can finally see – and feel – its impressive presence through the volume of the skirt, the large hanging sleeves with pleats (in the case of the 'Roman civil' costume), which must have been prominent on the (relatively small) stage of a court theatre, where it most likely performed. The prolonged sleeves also functioned to emphasise or prolong the actor's gesture.

Finally, we can also investigate the effect of the fabric (white silk atlas with red atlas bordering for the 'Roman civil' costume, and striped white and pink silk atlas for the 'Greek' one), which strongly reflects the lights when moved in space, or when a source of light is pointed at it directly. The red bordering also emphasises the cross-over cut of the tunic, which is a recurring feature in the period drawings. The shape of the Greek costume is emphasised through applied metal embroidery along the borders of the garment. Furthermore, the skirt on the Greek garment is prolonged on the right front side with a strip of fabric, which is lined inside with dark cherry red silk and metallic embroidery, implying it should be folded upwards and fastened by a belt at the waist. This is another typically theatrical feature known from the drawings (which, however, do not explain how this effect was achieved), adding another visually attractive element to the garment.

Apart from revealing how the spectacular effect of these costumes was created through the brilliant fabric, the contrast of colours, embroidery and volume, the examination also shows the practicality of their use on the stage. They could be put on the body in one movement, and their fastening did not contain buttons but a simple overlap of the two parts of the garment, fastened with a belt. Both features certainly contributed to the easier change

of costume backstage. Finally, since the wide skirt was supported by a *tonnelet* attached at the hips, the main weight of the costume rested at the hips, making the upper part of the body freer to move and gesture.

Figure 5. Anonymous, *En Romersk Civil drägt*. Stockholm, Livrustkammaren / Statens historiska museer, 29279_LRK. Photo: © Helena Bonnevier (CC BY 4.0).

Figure 6. Anonymous, *En Grekisk Klädning*. Stockholm, Livrustkammaren / Statens historiska museer, 29281_LRK, 29282_LRK. Photo: © Helena Bonnevier (CC BY 4.0).

With the second encounter, I present the 'Roman' costume – *à la romaine* – in its most known form. The specimen in the Royal Swedish Armoury archive (Fig. 7), named *En Antique Chevalier Klädning* according to the 1806 inventory, is most probably from the last third of the eighteenth century, which explains its flat skirt, without the volume requiring a wide *tonnelet*.

While still applying to theatrical procedures, this costume looks similar to the form of an ancient Roman uniform known from historical sources than to the costumes from the mid-eighteenth century. We can identify the straps of fabrics descending from the shoulders and waist, typical for this type of uniform, as well as imitation of the fish scale pattern on the bodice/lorica. Even the form of the lorica is respected, covering the front and back of the body and attached on the sides with straps and buttons. On the other hand, the fabrics and applications were typical for stage costumes: the harness and breeches are in black silk atlas, richly covered with large silver sequins and metallic foil. Under the harness, a long-sleeved waistcoat in a light blue silk atlas decorated with sequins should be worn, covering the body and arms according to the laws of propriety.

The presence of sequins and silver thread embroidery is indeed revelatory because even if their use in stage costumes is well-known from the inventories and descriptions of the time, they cannot be really seen in the period drawings (e.g. Fig. 8). Thus, we could not know how many, how big and in what patterns they are placed on the garment. Only by examining the garment can we discover that their presence was very prominent, and we start to understand the effect they must have created on the stage in the candlelight. Once again, this understanding is reinforced if we mount the costume on a mannequin, move it in space, and point a light source on it.

The costumes presented above were destined to the heroic characters who performed in tragedies. Their status is inherently connected with how they move – elegantly, with grace. The costume supports that – its cut holds the body in an upright, graceful position and weighs it down. The headdress was also an important tool, forbidding the performer from any hasty or reckless movement. It shapes the body of the actor into that of the character, and at the same time, it embodies the character, it literally adds weight and brilliance to it.

Figure 7. Anonymous, *En Antique Chevalier Klädning*, waistcoat in blue silk atlas (21496_LRK), breeches (21497_LRK), lorica front piece (21498_LRK), lorica back piece (21499_LRK) in black silk atlas, all embroidered with silver sequins and blue '*paillons*'. Stockholm, *Photo: Livrustkammaren/SHM (CC BY 4.0).*

Figure 8. Johann Ludwig Fesch, *Agamenon och Achille*, 1770–1788, guache, 9.7 cm x 11.6 cm. Paris, Comédie-Française.

Finally, the third encounter introduces a different kind of garment, which was apparently ubiquitous on the eighteenth-century stage but has been almost forgotten today. The blue and white ensemble, preserved in the Swedish Royal Armoury, was matched with the entry in the inventory (mis)spelled "*Demi Caractairs klädning*" (Fig. 9), and, according to the ink inscription on the costume's lining, belonged to Duke Carl (Gustav III's brother and future king Carl XIII). The *demi-caractère* initially indicated a style of eighteenth-century theatrical dance, typical for lively characters such as shepherds, to the point that it became almost synonymous with these characters. This can be proved by noticing several nearly identical costume designs entitled both "*Demi-caractère*" and "*Berger*" (Figs.10 and 11).

The encounter with this object was perhaps the most exciting for me, since I knew about the designs and costume descriptions of *demi-caractère* and had read a lot about the dance genre. If, on the one hand, the drawings reveal limited information, and many questions remain unanswered, on the other hand, the object provided many answers almost at first sight. First of all, the ensemble's composition: it contains a long-sleeved waistcoat (sleeves decorated with striped gauze application), fastened at the front with buttons, and a short-sleeved open jacket, which belongs on the top of the waistcoat. The longer tails at the back of the jacket are folded up and fastened with decorative ribbons. The two garments are made in reverse colours: the waistcoat in blue silk atlas and white silk atlas decoration, and the jacket in white silk atlas and blue silk atlas decoration. Both are abundantly covered with large silver sequins, placed on the fabric decoration in the shape of undulating lines and flowers. I identified the short-sleeved jacket as '*bombet*' (sometimes written '*bombay*'), a garment that constantly appears in the French stage costume inventories and whose approximate form I derived from one annotated drawing by French designer Louis-René Boquet (Dotlačilová 2020, 206). When meeting the object in the Swedish archive, I finally understood its exact cut and that it was placed over a long-sleeved waistcoat, as I guessed from the images. Further reflection on its construction and eventually the reconstruction of this garment, made by Swedish tailor Anna Kjellsdotter in 2023, offered more ideas about the functionality and role of this garment in performance, as discussed below.[11]

11 The costume was reconstructed for the purpose of the exhibition *Teaterkungen* at the Royal Swedish Armory, which opened on 20 October 2023.

Figure 9. Anonymous, *Demi caractairsklädning [sic], hertig Carl*, bombet and vest in white and blue silk for garments and their cutout trimming, sequins, and gauze. Stockholm, Livrustkammaren / Statens historiska museer, 21494_LRK, 21495_LRK. Photo: Jens Mohr. (c).

Figure 10. Louis-René Boquet, *Demi-caractère*, 1766, ink drawing and watercolour, 36.4 cm x 27.3 cm [dimensions of the volume] Biblioteka Uniwersytecka w Warszawie, Inw.zb.d. 20827/76.

Figure 11. Louis-René Boquet, *'Berger' for Fragments /Théonis* (1767). Paris, BnF, Bibliothèque-musée de l'opéra, D216 VII-31.

5. *From the archive back to the stage*

Reconstructing an object from the archive – or recreating a lost object using other sources – is the ultimate step in reactivating the ephemeral past through materiality in the now. While fragile historical objects need to be handled with the utmost care, the reconstructed objects can be put on a living body, on a stage, in movement. To understand the effect these objects had in the past, we also need to study the relationship between the historical object and historical performance practices, such as singing, gesture and dance, which requires accumulating information about these practices and collaboration with

people who can embody them. After experimenting – together with the costume maker Anna Kjellsdotter – with costume reconstruction/recreation and performance on several occasions (discussed elsewhere)[12], I finally saw also the "*Demi-caractère*" costume come alive in 2024.

Before presenting the results of this latest experiment, additional information about the performance practice of *demi-caractère* dance style needs to be mentioned. According to the dance treatises of the period, it was a rather dynamic genre, using a wider range of movement than the serious one (*genre sérieux*). Italian dancing master Giovanni Gallini wrote in his *Treatise on the art of dancing* (1762), published in London, that the 'half-serious' style required "vigor, lightness, agility, brilliant springs, with a steadiness and command of the body" (Gallini 1762, 75), and it was most appropriate for shepherds, exotic characters, nymphs or similar creatures, often with a gallant or coquettish air. Comparison of the textual description with the drawings of dancers in this style also shows that they indeed employed expansive movement, especially higher positions of arms and legs (in comparison to the serious style). Therefore, its costume should suit the physical requirements of this genre, particularly to enable the mobility of arms and legs.

Based on this information, dancer Noah Hellwig prepared short dance solos, which were performed once on the stage of eighteenth-century theatre Confidencen (Ulriksdal Slottsteater), lit with candlelight, and once during a public lecture at the Swedish Royal Armoury.[13] He danced in the replica of "*Demi-caractère*" costume, which allowed us to observe the costume in movement and analyse its role and effect in performance. The waistcoat of "*Demi caractairskläding*" is close-fitting, but the narrow and long armholes do permit a broad range movement of the arms; [14] it is shorter, ending just below the hips, but the buttons at the front only reach to the waist, leaving the lower part of the body free to move – this would allow even elevation of the leg to

12 Dotlačilová 2023a; Dotlačilová and Kjellsdotter 2023a and 2023b.

13 The video from Confidencen stage, made for promotional and demonstrational purpose of the exhibition, can be viewed at https://livrustkammaren.se/utstallningar/teaterkungen/ (last accessed 28/04/2025). The public lecture by the author of this article, which took place on 22 February 2024, can be viewed here https://youtu.be/XXY8LyJSRJw (last accessed 06/05/2025).

14 The cut of the armholes and their relation to movement is discussed in Kjellsdotter 2019, 204.

90 degrees. The jacket, worn on the top of the waistcoat, is open, and therefore, it follows the body's movement freely; the sleeves are wide and short, so they do not limit how high the arm can be raised. The longer tails, heavy with the numerous pleats and folds, are activated especially during numerous turns, spreading outwards from the body, which adds movement and volume to the dance. Finally, the breeches are a reconstruction of another pair from approximately the same period, and their allowing cut of the crouch does not limit the dancer (Waugh 1964, 76).

Regarding the visual effect of this costume, we can state that the light blue and white combination, typical for the shepherd characters in eighteenth-century theatre, is very efficient. This costume was conceived according to the aesthetic ideas of the period and to the practical needs of the genre. The theatrical shepherds represent pure (and imaginary) creatures, far from the appearance of real-life shepherds; their costumes should – and indeed do – stand out against the darker setting and on a generally rather dark stage. The sequins covering the costume also contribute to this visibility and, again, to the *merveilleux* effect expected from the genres of opera and ballet by reflecting the light very efficiently.

5. *Conclusion*

This article examined various ways to access the ephemeral performance of the past through the materiality of stage costumes. Meticulous study of objects in the archive, their connection to other (textual and visual) sources, the employment of imagination, the experimental reconstruction and, finally, their reactivation through putting them on a body and in movement can produce various insights and even experiences. Admittedly, we can only partially access how the performers and spectators of the past felt when moving in and watching these costumes. Still, the above examples show that we can gain a better understanding of how these effects and emotions were created.

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