

Opinion



Clothes Make the Character

An acclaimed stage and screen actor reflects on the inspiration she draws from her costumes, and on their role in revealing a story’s layers.

By Laura Linney as told to Elaine Lipworth Illustration by Andrew Bannecker

AS AN ACTOR, putting on the clothes of your character can open the door to a new insight about the person that you didn’t have before. A costume has a drastic influence on your feelings and behaviour. You feel different if you’re wearing velvet or wool, if you’re in a bikini or a coat.

As a child, I wore sweatpants and T-shirts in real life and I didn’t care about clothes at all. But growing up in the theatre world, I was acutely aware of the role of costume in plays and in opera. It’s interesting what clothes say about someone, how they’re wrapped up in our psychology or identity.

The first costumes I recall were in a famous production of *Dracula* with Frank Langella [1977]. Edward Gorey did the costume designs. Everyone was in black and white until Lucy was bitten by Dracula. Then there was a spot of red in her clothes, and her face flushed. The introduction of the passionate colour suddenly changed the atmosphere. The power of that aesthetic to transform the story stuck with me.

This year, in *The Little Foxes*, Cynthia Nixon and I were corseted, which literally moves your body into a certain position. You can’t be casual in that clothing. She and I

switched roles every evening, alternating between Birdie and Regina, two completely different women. Birdie’s clothes are nostalgic, while Regina’s are more modern. In the first act, Birdie is wearing a pink dress, lacy and delicate. By contrast, Regina and her family are in black, and they look like vampires. Regina uses her body and her femininity as a source of power, to charm and to please. This difference in the characters’ clothing affects both the audience’s perceptions and the behaviour of the actors. You change when you step into someone else’s shoes. I am an introvert; I am not as confident as Regina, but you put on her tightly tailored emerald dress and you just preen and exude strength. Costume designer Jane Greenwood [who won a Tony Award] outdid herself with these pieces, which tell their own story on the stage.

Clothes are the outside layer of any character and contain everything else. The silhouette is always the most important thing. Is the person round? Does she look like a square, or a triangle, or an hourglass? If you imagine people in different shapes, it will change the way you think about their lives. Clothes can emphasize a personality trait, like

vanity, or someone’s attempt to hide themselves, as with the clothes I wore as Wendy Savage in *The Savages* with Phillip Seymour Hoffman [2007]: a huge overcoat that drowned me, and underneath, a mishmash of texture and colour. My new series *Ozark* is about a family full of secrets; their clothes likewise don’t say much, beyond speaking to their comfortable middle-class life, until the story goes on and more is uncovered.

I’ve learned that clothes from different eras reveal what was considered at the time to be the sexy part of a person’s body—what’s constricted and what’s free; what’s exposed and what isn’t; where the eye is trained to go, whether it’s the décolletage or the legs. You learn a lot not only about your character who’s wearing the clothes, but also about the people who are looking at your character in the clothes.

Clothes are just as important to a film or play as an actor or the script or lighting design. It’s about intertwined elements that come together and explode in a full telling of the story. When the aesthetics of clothing are used with purpose, it can be striking. Designer and director Tom Ford is a master of how to tell a story visually. My character in last year’s *Nocturnal Animals* is in a Chanel suit and very coiffed, and in just one scene, the clothes tell you an enormous amount about her.

In *The Truman Show* [1998], our costumes were very heightened and presentational, because the film depicted such an unnatural environment; within the story, the clothes were selected to be product placements. I was in a nurse’s uniform most of the time, but when I first started working on the film, director Peter Weir gave me an old Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue and I based my body movements on its images. The clothes were basically advertising happy family life—everything was homogenized in bold, bright colours.

Just as there are many characters I’d still like to inhabit, there are costumes I would like to wear that I haven’t already worn. There’s nothing like a good tuxedo—and I’ve always wanted to wear a chicken suit! Fashion should be fun. ■

Emmy-winning and Oscar- and Tony-nominated actor Laura Linney recently completed a run on Broadway in Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes*. Her latest TV project is the Netflix drama series *Ozark*.