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From Concept to Stage: Costume Design and Collaboration

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From Concept to Stage: Costume Design and Collaboration

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for  
the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Ting Xiong

Committee in charge:

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair  
Professor Mark Guirguis  
Professor Victoria Petrovich  
Professor Jordan Rose

2025

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The Thesis of Ting Xiong is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2025

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

From Concept to Stage: Costume Design and Collaboration

by

Ting Xiong

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2025

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair

Costume design is a dialogue—a balance between vision and function, individuality and collaboration. It is not about the designer alone, but about shaping a world that serves the story. In *I Found a Zipper* and *Vinegar Tom*, I explored this tension, weaving creativity into structure, adapting vision through collaboration. Each costume became more than fabric; it became a voice within the production, a bridge between concept and stage.



## INTRODUCTION

Costumes are not just about dressing characters—they are about shaping the space between performer and audience, reinforcing meaning without words. I've learned that designing them is not just about creativity but about navigating the balance between vision and collaboration, aesthetics and function. In *I Found a Zipper* and *Vinegar Tom*, I worked within different creative landscapes, adapting ideas through dialogue with directors and costume shops to bring each production to life. This thesis reflects my process of translating concept into reality, finding my own artistic identity within a shared vision.

## **Chapter 1 I FOUND A ZIPPER: A STAGE FOR CREATIVITY**

I Found a Zipper is an imaginative piece about an alien who disguises as a human to search for “love,” which symbolizes the ultimate source of energy and life. Costume design for this production needed to reflect the nuanced relationship between the alien and the human world.

### **Professionalism: Learning to Adapt Through Artistic Collaboration**

Professionalism in costume design is not just about creativity but also about learning to change—adapting designs through artistic dialogue to align with the evolving vision of the production. A key example of this was my collaboration with director Kim Rubinstein, particularly regarding the Witch character’s costume.



Figure 1: Production photo of Witch.

Initially, the Witch had a distinct hat, which was designed and constructed early in the process. However, as the script and character development evolved, discussions with the director led to the decision to remove the hat. This shift allowed for a more authentic artistic representation of the character, emphasizing femininity and aligning better with the play's themes.

Through this process, I learned that costume design is not solely about executing an initial vision but about engaging in artistic communication—listening, interpreting, and adjusting to best serve the overall production rather than focusing only on the costumes themselves. This experience strengthened my ability to navigate artistic collaboration with directors and other creatives.

### **Human Costume: A Stitched Identity**

The protagonist, Human Costume, was designed based on the concept of being pieced together, reflecting their origins in the script as a being artificially created and stitched together by aliens. Their costume incorporated a color-block patchwork hoodie and mismatched plaid shorts to symbolize their attempt to disguise as a human.

This aesthetic choice was crucial in visually communicating Human Costume's duality: they appeared human but in a way that was subtly unnatural. It was as if they had been assembled without any real experiential understanding of the human being.



Figure 2: Production photo of Human Costume.

## **Other Aliens: Unique Accessories and Design Challenges**

Beyond the protagonist, the other aliens' designs played with stereotypical alien cartoon imagery while introducing distinctive characteristics to differentiate each individual. While green skin and tire-like bodysuits reinforced classic alien imagery, each character was distinguished through carefully curated accessories, such as jewelry, belts, fishnet stockings, and tattoos, reflecting their unique personalities.

One of the greatest design challenges was the headwear and antennae placement. Each alien had a uniquely designed antenna, varying in length, shape, and balance, requiring extensive testing to ensure stability during movement. I worked closely with the costume shop and fittings team, iterating multiple versions to achieve a balance between visual impact and functional wearability.



Figure 3: Production photo of Other Aliens.

Additionally, the aliens' eye design played a crucial role in their otherworldly appearance. Their exaggeratedly large eyes were achieved using diving goggles, ensuring a distinct alien look while being practical for stage use. These goggles had to be designed for quick costume changes, provide clear visibility in dim lighting, and still create the striking, oversized eye effect. Through extensive testing, I refined these elements to ensure they met both aesthetic and performance demands, reinforcing the technical aspects of costume design.

Working on *I Found a Zipper* allowed me to embrace artistic change while honing my professional skills. The process of adapting to directorial shifts, conceptualizing unique character designs, and addressing complex technical challenges deepened my understanding of costume design as both an artistic and functional discipline.

This project not only expanded my perspective on the limitless possibilities within costume design but also reinforced my ability to collaborate, communicate, and evolve within a creative team. Most importantly, I learned that costume design is not just about making clothes—it is about shaping narratives, supporting the production's artistic vision, and crafting designs that serve the story as a whole.



## Chapter 2 VINEGAR TOM: LAYERS OF HISTORY, LAYERS OF RESISTANCE

In contrast, Vinegar Tom is a starkly different production, set against the backdrop of 17th-century witch hunts, exploring themes of gender and power. This production demanded costumes that were both historically grounded and thematically reflective.

At the beginning of the design process, when there was more time, I worked closely with director Allie Moss, going through details and having ongoing discussions to refine the costume concepts. We explored different possibilities together, ensuring that the designs aligned with both the historical period and the themes of the play.

As the production timeline progressed and the deadline approached, I had to make more decisive choices to ensure the designs were completed efficiently. It was at this stage that I introduced Pieter Bruegel's paintings to Allie, showing her how the colors, textures, and styles were not only historically accurate but also fit within the visual and thematic framework we had already established. These references helped us solidify the final look, as they aligned with the 17th-century aesthetic while also supporting her vision for the production.



Figure 4: Pieter Bruegel 's painting *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*.

The historical costumes drew inspiration from Bruegel's paintings, featuring muted earth tones and traditional materials like linen and wool to evoke the harsh realities of the time. In contrast, hidden beneath each female character's outfit were vibrant punk-inspired garments, symbolizing resistance and individuality. This interplay between the outer and inner layers created a visual narrative, emphasizing the tension between societal oppression and personal rebellion.



Figure 5: Vinegar Tom Joan historical collage and rendering.





Figure 6: Joan punk collage.





Figure 7: Production photo of Susan.



Figure 8: Production photo of singers in their punk look.

Through this production, I deepened my understanding of how to merge professional rigor with creative expression. It challenged me to incorporate historical authenticity while making room for contemporary relevance, ensuring the costumes communicated both the play's themes and my own design voice. The collaboration with Ali reinforced the importance of balancing artistic dialogue with practical decision-making, allowing me to navigate both the detailed conceptual phase and the efficient execution required as deadlines approached.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout my time at UCSD, I have explored the limitless potential of costume design as a narrative tool through a variety of theatrical productions. These experiences have taught me how to balance creativity with professionalism, using visual language to articulate complex emotions and themes.

This journey has not only equipped me with technical expertise but also helped me cultivate an independent design perspective. I have come to understand that costume design is more than aesthetic expression; it is a medium that drives storytelling, reveals character depth, and conveys social significance. Moving forward, I aspire to continue exploring the intersection of history and modernity, reality and fantasy, infusing each project with its own unique vitality and forging deeper connections with audiences through my work.