

Fashion Information in the Late Nineteenth Century

-Focusing on the Stage Costumes of Oscar Wilde's Comedies-

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1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde, one of the quintessential authors in the late nineteenth century, was famous for his aestheticism and was associated with the costume of the dandy.

In this essay, I will study the costumes of his comedies and relation between the characters and their costumes, examining the magazines of the day which showed many photographs and illustrations. Next, I will outline the relationship between fashion in stage costumes and the audiences of the time.

In those days, almost all the costumes were influenced by Paris fashion, but new dressmakers in London gradually took part in stage costume.

2. Four comedies of Oscar Wilde

1) *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Lady Windermere's Fan was first presented on 20th February 1892, at George Alexander's St. James' Theatre. This comedy was well received by the audience.

George Alexander, actor-manager of the St. James' Theatre, was involved with the first performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Furthermore Wilde asked Florence Alexander, the wife of George Alexander, to be in charge of the costume in this comedy, and she made many designs of the character's costumes. She said that she was rather 'extreme' with clothes on the stage for in those days people went to see the St. James' plays before ordering a new gown.

On that occasion, many members of the upper class came to the St. James' Theatre wearing their best clothes and they were very much interested in the stage dresses. The people of the other classes wanted to see not only the stage but also the dresses of the London Society. Dresses of the comedy were made by the House of Mesdames Savage and Purdue, which was one of the new dressmakers in London. This House became a house dressmaker of St. James' Theatre.

Therefore, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was not merely a

society drama to indicate the features and thoughts of the characters, but also a costume play in which the costumes and accessories are used effectively. So many people imitated these things which became fashion of the day.

*Theatre and Fashion*¹⁾ says that a full-length cloak was in vogue in London, because short Parisian capes were being snubbed by London's fashion critics. This means that stage costume was noted and illustrated by fashion writers and illustrators, and many things used in the play could be obtained in the consumer society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Let's take a look at figure 1 which first appeared in *The Lady* 10 March 1892.



Figure 1 *Lady Windermere's Fan*

On the left, it shows Lady Windermere's party dress which is tight silhouette, décolleté and having little sleeves on the shoulders. The skirt has a long train with ornaments. She also wears long gloves reaching to the elbow and a choker on the neck.

In figure 1, on the right, Lady Windermere wears a embroidered gown over a skirt and sleeves with true-lovers' knots. Over her bodice was a sleeveless coat of purple velvet inclining to brown which is called a Russian coat.

Mrs. Erlyne appears at the party 'very beautifully dressed and very dignified'. *The Fashionable London* ²⁾ says about her dress that is a magnificent white and yellow brocade with touches of heliotrope. A berth of lace fell from the low-cut bodice. She wears a long mantle of brocade which is the reason why the full-length cloak was in fashion in London.

In figure 1 (upper part), she wears, like Lady Windermere, a smart mushroom-brown overdress, Russian jacket braided in the Hussar manner and a bonnet. She says that it is important to her that she wears a modern dress in fashion, and she is always twenty-nine or thirty. Wilde says that to wear a modern dress is a pleasure and I think these dresses express well the character of Mrs. Erlyne.

We have seen characters' dresses with photos and illustrations. The dresses of Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlyne are beautiful and the top fashion of the day. Many women wanted to wear the same dresses and accessories.

2) A Woman of No Importance

This play was presented on 19th April 1893, at the Haymarket Theatre. Mr. Beerbohm Tree, actor-manager of the Haymarket Theatre, played the part of Lord Illingworth. At the Haymarket, the fashion press and the non-fashion press keenly observed the costumes of the play. Fashion critics must advise readers in their papers on wardrobes for the coming season. So, the stage costumes of the play were described and illustrated in several papers.

The Queen ³⁾ says 'the fashions to be seen at The Haymarket Theatre at the present moment are not the fashions of today, but the fashions of the day after tomorrow. Besides, the dresses resemble even more than our styles, those of our grandmothers.'

Figure 2 shows the dresses which were illustrated in *The Queen*, 13 May 1893.

The dress on the upper left is the one worn by Mrs. Allonby. She represents what *The Westminster Budget*

calls 'butterfly women' who are typified as rather cynical and modish exquisites⁴⁾. She wears the modified Empirestyle : the trained skirt is of pink satin, with a brocaded design of rose trellised across it. Full sleeves of white chiffon appears to be caught up by a wreath of blush roses.



Figure 2 A Woman of No Importance

To the right of Mrs. Allonby, Mrs. Stutfield wears a gown which has a bodice of crêpe de Chine brocaded blossoms, draped below the waist. Her sleeves and skirt are of an eau de Nil satin, and lace epaulettes fall over her shoulders almost to her waist. This dress is described as 'quaint and old-fashioned'⁵⁾.

The lower dresses are those of Miss Hester Worsley. The left one is an evening dress. This is of white satin, covered with white chiffon embroidered in pearls and silver, glittering paillettes outlining each seam, while an embroidered chiffon decks the bodice of this, and the sleeves, which are large, are made of white satin.

The one on the right is made of pink silk, spotted and lined with black ; on the skirt of this are two groups of flounces, while a fichu of soft lace edged with frills is folded over the bust ; the lower portions of the sleeves are of lace.

The dresses of Miss Worsley are characterized as

'pretty Puritan Maiden'.

These four dresses are made by the London firm of Lewis and Allenby, a distinguished company of Regent Street silk mercers which were engaged by Beerbohm Tree to dress these three ladies. The other fashion critics describe these dresses as 'a safe middle course between the antique and ultra-modish' or almost '1830 in style'. *The Theatre and Fashion* says that Messrs. Lewis and Allenby harped upon an 1890s vogue for all things early Victorian, creating garments praised in the fashion press as belonging simultaneously to 'yesterday' and 'the day after tomorrow'⁶.

3) *An Ideal Husband*

This play was presented on 3rd January 1895, at the Haymarket Theatre, and Wilde collaborated with Lewis Waller, the actor-manager of the theatre, who also played the part of Sir Robert Chiltern. They decided to ask 'the ultra-modish' Mary Elizabeth Humble to make dresses for the play, because they wanted to show them to London society.

In the issue of 9 January 1895, *The Sketch* says:

So much for these fascinating last-century costumes : and now, if for a change you would like some eminently up-to-date gowns which are full of good ideas, you had better let me tell you about the dresses in the new Haymarket piece, *An Ideal Husband*, for they are distinctly worthy of notice.

The new dresses used in modern comedy attracted the attention of people. Wilde himself took special notice of dresses to show his view on the characters of the comedy. The figure 3 was illustrated in *The Queen*, 12 January 1895.

In figure 3 lower center, Lady Chiltern wears the evening dress which is a white satin gown, brocaded with a large conventional floral design, the skirt and the whole of the long train being bordered with small bunches of Neapolitan violets. In figure 3 upper right, she wears a walking dress with a hat. This dress is made of white satin brocaded with shadowy pink roses, and the bodice being veiled with accordion-pleated pink chiffon.

Mrs. Cheveley is a female villain and she has some very striking and elaborate gowns but two of them did not by any means meet with approval. In figure 3 lower right, Mrs. Cheveley wears an evening dress of emerald green satin. On the shoulder and the skirt, there are swallows and on the waist, some nestles. The fashion reporter comments negatively on the ornament of swallows

because in spite of the dress being original and effective, the ornament of birds damaged the harmony of the dress.



Figure 3 *An Ideal Husband*

Another of her dresses is shown in figure 3 upper left, which is worn on the visit to the Chilterns. *The Sketch* says that it consists of yellow mirror moiré, and has a deep square colour of scarlet velvet, which forms crossed rivers in front, and in order that there may be plenty of contrast, there is a collar-band of bright-green velvet, with a bunch of violets set at each side.

Here are some descriptions of the effect of this combination of colours upon the dress. At that time, Mabel Chiltern says about her, 'that dreadful Mrs. Cheveley, in a most lovely gown.'

The dress which is shown in figure 3 on the left side is that of Mabel Chiltern. *The sketch* describes it as follows:

...a pale-tan crepon gown, the skirt having a tiny pointed panel at each side of turquoise-blue mirror velvet, with an applique of white cloth, stitched with gold thread and sequins, and fastened in quaintly to the crépon with little gold buttons on one side and black buttonholes on the other and tied at the top with a black satin bow.⁷

This dress is made by Mary Elizabeth Humble who,

three months before the opening of the play, had received 'special congratulation' from the *Lady's Pictorial* for offering readers 'the most advanced fashions of the season.'⁸⁾

4) *The Importance of Being Earnest*

This play was presented on 14th February 1895, at St. James' Theatre. Wilde collaborated again with George Alexander.

Figure 4 shows three ladies. The upper is Miss Gwendolen Fairfax, her dress is of white chiné silk, brocaded with irregular wreaths of flowers in a pale shade of violet, the collar is of violet velvet. Over the shoulders fall capes of violet silk, covered with white openwork embroidery and cut out in three square battlements.



The Sketch, 20. Feb., 1895



30. March, 1895

Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News.



2. March, 1895

Figure 4 *The Importance of Being Earnest*

On the left, Lady Blacknell wears a dress of golden-brown velvet, with a plain, full skirt, and a deep and very

full cape of the same material, arranged in a wide box-pleat at the back, and bordered in front and at the sides with a deep flounce of magnificent creamy-hued lace.

These two elaborate dresses were made by the Maison Jay, Regent-street.

On the right, we see the dress of Cecily. It is of white silk-striped crêpon, tied round the waist with a broad white silk sash, and with transparent yoke and cuffs of muslin and insertion, and rose-trimmed Leghorn hat. This seems altogether in keeping with the exquisite garden-scene⁹⁾.

3. conclusion

As mentioned above, Wilde's comedy is a comedy of manners, and it shows the ordinary life of the upper class with witty words and fashionable costumes.

Ada Leverson later said about these years :

London bloomed out into a sudden flamboyance of taste and of expression. Art, poetry, beauty, dress and decoration became the fashion : such subjects were talked about by everyone, however little most of them knew about it.¹⁰⁾

I can conclude that it is important on the stage to use effectively the costumes of the upper class which are made by 'ultra-modish' dressmakers. Therefore, the dresses which were used in the drama, were in vogue in those days through magazine articles and stage dresses were one of the most important fashion information of the day.

Notes

- 1) Kaplan, J., Stowwells, S., : *Theatre and Fashion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.17, 1977
- 2) *The Fashionable London*, November 12, 1892
- 3) *The Queen*, March 5, 1893
- 4) *The Westminster Budget*, April 28, 1893
- 5) *The Queen*, op. cit..
- 6) *ibid*.
- 7) *The Sketch*, January 9, 1895
- 8) *Lady's Pictorial*, January 12, 1895
- 9) *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, March 2, 1895
- 10) Leverson, A. : "The Last First Night", Michail E.H.: *Oscar Wilde, Interviews and Recollections*, Macmillan Press L.T.D. London, p.268, 1979