

Tua Helve

Costume design and collaboration in Finnish contemporary dance in the early twenty-first century

The public defence of MA Tua Helve's doctoral dissertation in Costume Design was held at Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture on 9 December 2022. Professor Astrid von Rosen (University of Gothenburg) acted as Opponent and Professor Sofia Pantouvaki as Custos.

In costume designer Marja Uusitalo's words, "looking, watching, [and] experiencing" the dance-making process are the main tools for her work within contemporary dance productions.¹ In every new project, Uusitalo asks herself, "[w]hat is already in place when I begin?"² She notes the importance of listening to the creative team and the choreographer in particular and, in her words, to "look in the same direction and try to see what [they see]".³

Uusitalo further verbalizes her work during the dance-making process: "I see the dancers and their movement, energy and physical characteristics, but behind my eyes images form and questions abound: Who are they? Do they have a gender? Do they feel something for one another, or towards the world? Do they constitute a collective unit, a whole spectrum of feelings, or one shared emotion? What is happening? Is it happening to all of them? Is the space hazier after the show? Is the world a better place? [--]"⁴ From such visions, Uusitalo moves towards concreteness: "Is the material going to be hard-wearing enough? Will synthetic fibre burn the skin when it rubs against it? Are knee pads required? Can they be visible? Does sweating matter? Will the cloth stick to the skin or will make-up rub off on a neighbour's shirt? Is the dancer able to lift [their] legs freely, is the material going to stretch enough or too much, [are they] going to have baggy knees? [--]"⁵

The previous quotes illustrate what I find to be at the core of costume design for Western contemporary dance performance from the perspective of the costume designer: an abundance of choice, creativity, and care for the project. As contemporary dance includes various styles connected by the aim of experimentation, and even the challenging

1 Uusitalo 2006, 97.

2 Uusitalo 2006, 97.

3 Uusitalo 2006, 97.

4 Uusitalo 2006, 98.

5 Uusitalo 2006, 98.

of pre-existing norms, traditions and habits, it lays the ground for artistic creation that is open-minded and innovative. In many cases in this genre, there is no need to depict people or to help the spectators connect the performance to a certain temporal or geographical context. The performers may appear on the stage as energies or living things other than people. Repeating Uusitalo's words, the designer wonders about the performers, "Who are they? [--] Do they constitute a collective unit, a whole spectrum of feelings, or one shared emotion?"⁶ At times, the designer's response to the world of the performance may be an unforeseen costume creation through the abstraction of the theme. In other cases, realistic expressions may feel truer to the performance world. Both avenues and everything in between is possible. Only imagination limits the design – yet the designer's imagination must align with the artistic team's creative thought.

The collaborative creation of contemporary dance performance is influenced by both artistic and extra-artistic elements. The teams are often built based on previous collaborations but also frequently between people with no previous experience of each other's ways of working. The team members' visions may be contrasting, and limited time and resources may cause stress and unease. Although the artistic work per se is inspiring and free from limitations, collaboration in a team is not always easy.

These strands form the landscape for my doctoral thesis: the designer's creative freedom on one hand and the aspects of co-creative process and collaboration on the other hand. With these areas of interest, my thesis widens current knowledge by highlighting the active role of costume in the creation and reception of contemporary dance performance. In particular, it places the focus on the relationships between people, first and foremost between the costume designers and choreographers. I approach this topic from the perspective of the work of freelance costume designers in Finland. The selected time frame arises from my personal relationship with the topic.

Dance as a form of corporeal expression has been dear to me since I first began dance classes at the age of three or four. I grew up rehearsing various techniques as a hobby, focusing on the styles of modern and later contemporary dance and classical ballet. In the late 1990s, I began to follow dance as a spectator. My understanding of dance was shaped by performances I attended as an audience member at Zodiak, Stoa, Helsinki City Theatre, and the Finnish National Ballet, both in the Alexander Theatre and the new Opera House. However, costume in dance only caught my attention in the early 2000s. I realized that this area, costume design in dance, could be the place for me to develop my specialization as a fashion student.

Since 2003, I have looked upon dance performances with a growing scholarly interest. It was clear that it was this period, the early twenty-first century, that I wanted to explore due to what I had experienced as a spectator and due to my preconceived notions of the creative processes in these productions – as well as my realization that this period remained virtually untouched in terms of scholarly investigation.

6 Uusitalo 2006, 98.

Key findings and overview of the research process

The key result of my study into costume design in contemporary dance in early twenty-first century Finland is the interconnection between the costume outcome, creative process, and collaboration. The findings show the ways in which the collaborative process informs the designer's choice from the range of potential expression. In addition, when the process is experienced as trustworthy and encouraging, the designers are equipped with an artistic space that supports their creative practice and the rewarding observation of being formative to the performance-making.

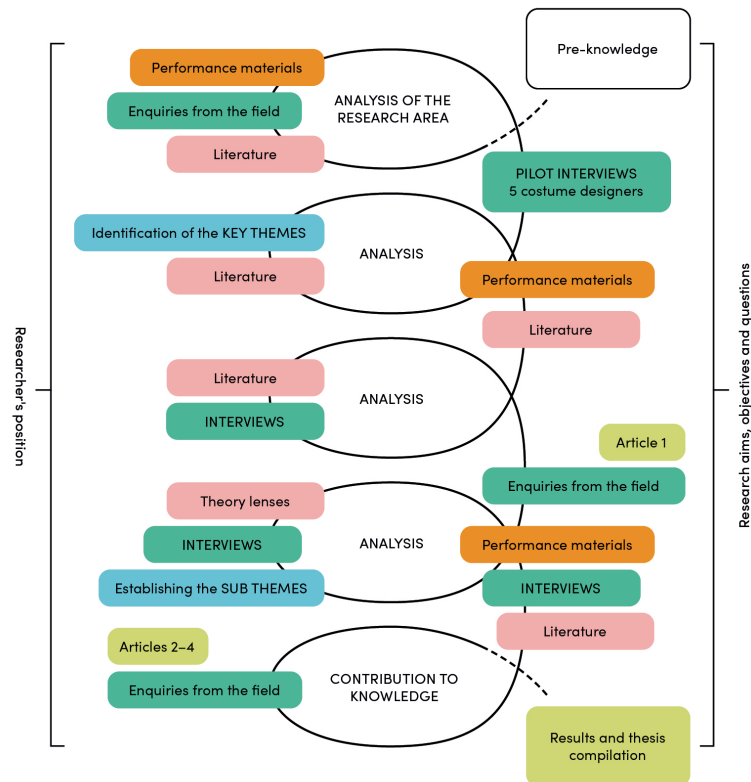


Figure 1. Guided by the researcher's subjective position, the study developed in a cyclical manner, from top to bottom. In figure 1, Figure 2, next page, presents the same process in a linear format, from pre-knowledge and the review of the research area to the results.⁷

To reach the conclusions, my research developed in iterative cycles, or following a hermeneutic circle, as this process is known in scholarly contexts (Figure 1). This means a continuous back-and-forth movement between the various elements of my research: the research people, materials, questions, terms, and methods.

I began my process by first examining the research area to form an overview of the designs and designers in Finland in the selected time frame (Figure 2). Out of a large number of designers, I shortlisted people who had continuity, even specialization, in designing for dance: I selected five designers for pilot interviews. From the pilot interviews, I iterated the key themes for this study: costume outcomes, creative processes, and collaboration. I also chose three designers for further interviews and connected aspects of the key themes with each of the designers.

⁷ Helve 2022, 36.

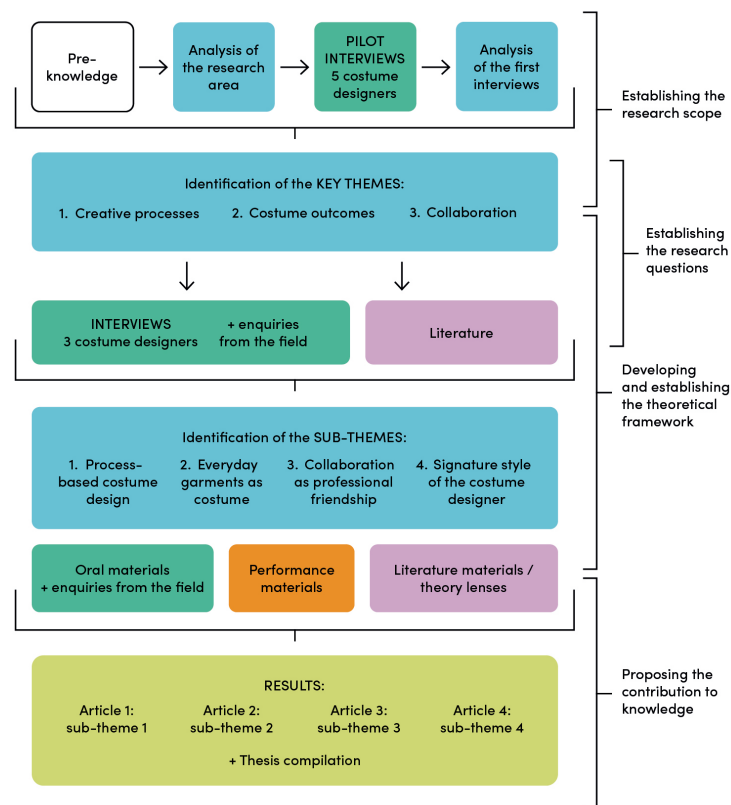


Figure 2. The research process constructed in a linear format.⁸

While collecting more research material through the interviews, I was able to examine more specific sources of previous research. In costume studies, these included Christina Lindgren’s succinct articulation of the postdramatic understanding of costume in performance (2021) and Astrid von Rosen’s research on costume as a “co-creative agent” of performance (2020). To build upon previous research on artistic collaboration in contemporary dance and performance, I drew from Colin and Sachsenmeier (2016). In dance studies, my key sources included Burt (2017) and Lepecki (2006). The interviews also shaped the final research questions, showing the need for complementary inquiries in the field, and confirming the selection of productions for the analysis. This means that my research is data-driven: all successive steps including engagement with theory have followed the analysis of the main research materials – the interviews with the costume designers. I wrote four research articles in which I provide results that contribute to knowledge in the field of performing arts.⁹

In the course of my research, I conducted 16 interviews and analysed 15 productions. My main interviewees were costume designers Marja Uusitalo, Erika Turunen, and Karoliina Koiso-Kanttila. These designers have shown significant activity in designing for dance during the time frame of this research. In their contributions, they not only provide diverse design concepts, different from each other in visual and multisensorial

⁸ Helve 2022, 37.

⁹ The articles that comprise this thesis are Helve and Pantouvaki 2016, Helve 2018, Helve 2021 and Helve 2022.

terms, but they also engage with several modes of co-creation and a variety of contexts for their work.

What is common to the designers is that their work is primarily in projects convened by choreographers. To differentiate my investigation from costume-led projects that are prominent in recent research in the field of costume, I have termed the examined productions as choreographer-led projects. In such projects, costume designers are invited as freelance artists to collaborate in the creative process towards a performance. They enter a team and project not defined by themselves but initiated by the choreographer. To enrich the research materials with the perspective of the artistic co-creators of dance performance, I also interviewed two choreographers: Sonya Lindfors and Carl Knif.

Contribution to knowledge 1: The influence of costume in contemporary dance (performance)

Designers Uusitalo, Turunen, and Koiso-Kanttila's bodies of work framed my inquiry into the diversity of artistic processes, collaborative synergies, and costume outcomes. My inquiry into their work and the related materials demonstrates the ways in which costume carries action and agency in contemporary dance production. However, through my focus on artistic collaboration, the concept that costume carries "action" not only denotes the impact of costume on experiencing contemporary dance performance, for example, by the performers and spectators. It also investigates the agential capacities of costume in the preparation of and beyond the event of dance. This means that I have given equal emphasis to examining and articulating the costume designer's artistic creation, visible in the performance, and their collaborative work during the artistic process building towards the performance.

The first area of contribution to knowledge in my study is costume outcomes. The research into this area makes explicit the versatile meaning-making potential of costume in performance. "Meaning-making potential" in this study is understood in light of notions about postdramatic performance as defined by German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann.¹⁰ Meaning-making potential thus connects with the transformation and event-ness of costume, highlighting its processual and interrelational aspects. Considering costume outcomes against this backdrop, I reveal a prism of techniques through which costume builds and is central to the performance experience.

Through this discussion, I also shed light on the previously underexamined, and often underrated area that is the use of everyday garments as costume. Even when such costume appears realistic, "not designed" to some eye, or otherwise visually simple, it might evoke more internal processes of transformation and meaning-making. As I argue, costume from minimal to extravagant, detailed to robust, familiar to alien, and associative to representational, may be equally powerful in performance, depending on the thematic and conceptual choices of the performance.

¹⁰ Lehmann 2006, 61.

Across the styles of costume, my thesis reveals not only the expressive variety but also the level of conceptual thought ingrained in the examined designs. It highlights the artistic diversity of costume design in twenty-first-century contemporary dance in Finland. Consequently, it builds on the disparate understandings of Finnish performing arts through costume, from 2000 to 2015.

Contribution to knowledge 2: The influence of costume designer in contemporary dance (production process)

The second area of contribution of my thesis concerns the centrality of collaboration. Here, my aim has been to present the relevance of the co-creative practice of costume design in contemporary dance, with a focus on collaborations that the interviewed costume designers had experienced as supportive and rewarding.

By analysing choreographer-led productions and the designer's creative process, my thesis shows varying approaches to artistic co-creation and how this translates into a collaborative relationship between the costume designer and the choreographer. This means that in the diverse milieus for artistic co-creation, the implications of collaboration on the designer's work may significantly vary: the designer's anticipation of the performance to come, their leeway, and the role of costume in the production process develop in exchanges between people and their artistic visions. Therefore, drawing from the work of Uusitalo, Turunen, and Koiso-Kanttila, I have highlighted concrete aspects of collaboration including the ways of finding openness, reciprocity, mutual trust and bespoke communication. As I argue, processes aiming at sustainable collaboration tolerate a broad range of pathways for the development of the costume outcome, including creative collisions. Within a milieu of trust and communication, risk and fortuity may find space in and benefit the artistic process. Moreover, such a milieu may emerge as an opportunity to extend the designer's creative process, scale of expression, and expertise.

Although these findings arise from well-established collaborations, I assert their relevance and applicability to emerging companionships, or for a reconsideration of existing partnerships as well. As a result, my main findings offer tools for building more supportive and sustainable work milieus for future co-creations. Sustainable milieus for collaborative work support costume design and the entire performance process.

Conclusions

In these two areas of contribution, my study makes explicit the wide range of parallel and overlapping modes of being a designer and collaborator in Finnish contemporary dance in the twenty-first century. In this context, costume creation is not only the creation of a physical garment, but also the creation of a performance. With these conclusions, my study invites further inquiries into this topic. Research into practices of costume design in contemporary dance in Finland and abroad has only just begun.

References

- Burt, Ramsay. 2017. *Ungoverning Dance. Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons*. Oxford Studies in Dance Theory. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Colin, Noyale and Stefanie Sachsenmeier (eds). 2016. *Collaboration in Performance Practice. Premises, Workings and Failures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Helve, Tua. 2022. "The costume designer as co-author of contemporary dance performance: Erika Turunen's signature style." *Studies in Costume & Performance* 7:1, 27–53. https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00059_1
- Helve, Tua. 2021. "Time, being, discourse: Elements of professional friendship in the collaboration between a costume designer and a choreographer." *Choreographic Practices* 12:1, 67–89. https://doi.org/10.1386/chor_00029_1
- Helve, Tua. 2018. "Political by Design: Costume Design Strategies within the Finnish Contemporary Dance Productions *AmazinGRace*, *Noir?* and *The Earth Song*." *Nordic Journal of Dance* 9:1, 14–31. <https://doi.org/10.2478/njd-2018-0003>
- Helve, Tua and Sofia Pantouvaki. 2016. "Sharing 'untamed ideas': process-based costume design in Finnish contemporary dance through the work of Marja Uusitalo." *Scene* 4:2, 149–172. https://doi.org/10.1386/scene.4.2.149_1
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lepecki, André. 2006. *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Lindgren, Christina. 2021. "The costume designer's 'golden list' of competence." In Sofia Pantouvaki and Peter McNeil (eds). *Performance Costume: New Perspectives and Methods*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 307–313.
- Uusitalo, Marja. 2006. "A dancer's costume: visionary and concrete." In Kaisa Korhonen and Katri Tanskanen (eds). *Theatre People – People's Theatre: Finnish Theatre and Dance 2006*. Helsinki: Like, 96–102.
- von Rosen, Astrid. 2020. "Costume in the dance archive: Towards a records-centred ethics of care." *Studies in Costume and Performance* 5:1, 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1386/scp_00012_1