Hoping for Chekhov:
COSTUME DESIGN FOR *THREE SISTERS*

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts

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This project is dedicated to the future.
Chapter I: Introduction and Production Situation

*Three Sisters*, by Anton Chekhov, directed by Associate Professor Mark Monday was produced for Kent State University’s 2008-2009 season. The production team was Associate Professor Raynette Smith as the scenic designer, undergraduate student Ben Starett as the lighting designer, and I completed the team as costume designer.

As the costume designer, my challenge was creating rich, dynamic costumes with color and texture that would capture the passage of time that director Mark Monday wished to achieve. The concept for the costume design was ‘hope’ and how it changed during the passage of time within the content of the play. In contrast to the somber style of costumes I had usually seen in Chekhov’s works, I created a Russian style of clothing for the turn of the 20th century that reflected a lighter, more joyful palette within the costumes through color, texture and weight. Using Victorian and Edwardian design aesthetics I worked on recreating period details of uniforms, dresses, other clothes, and historical undergarments to create a collective silhouette. I designed costumes to show each character’s changes in mood and situation within the household and community. Given the existing stock of garments at Kent State that were appropriate for the time period and stylistic choices I made, I knew I would be renting from other locations. I took into consideration how I would create consistency between built, pulled and purchased costume items.

The School of Theatre and Dance staged *Three Sisters* in Wright-Curtis Theatre at the main campus of Kent State University. It has a seating capacity of 300 patrons. Wright-Curtis can either be a thrust stage, an arena stage or theatre in the round. The thrust configuration was used for this production. From the first row of seating, the actors
could be one foot away, or at the extreme, 100 feet from the audience. This required that the costumes collected from different sources reflect the same intricate detailing and quality construction.

Support for the construction and management of this project was provided by my thesis advisor, Associate Professor S. Q. Campbell, the Kent State University Costume Shop managed by Robin Ruth and Marti Coles and undergraduate and graduate costume practicum students. I also worked with a graduate cutter/draper, Sarah Russell and had two assistant designers, Shaquita Harvey and Stephanie Giammarco, who were undergraduates in costume design.

The Kent State University Costume Shop had two fitting spaces that doubled as dressing rooms and classrooms. This often compromised their use. For alterations and construction purposes, a sewing lab equipped with cutting tables, industrial and home sewing machines, sergers, industrial irons and a hemming machine were available.

I began the initial design process before the summer of 2008’s school recess. I used this time to collect research, develop individual character analysis’ and create costume plots. *Three Sisters’* production period fell during the Fall 2008 semester; it was the second show of the season; and opened during the last weekend of October 2008. The breaks between Acts 1 and 2, and Acts 3 and 4 were removed; so many costume changes were eliminated or simplified to accommodate the lack of an intermission.

The costume budget for this production was $2,800. This budget covered the costuming of a cast of fourteen who had from one to four costume looks, depending on the needs of each character. The production required thirty-nine looks, four of which
were constructed. All other costumes and pieces were rented or pulled from Kent State
University costume stock and other regional sources with major alterations and detailing.

Chapter II: Design Concept and Costume Breakdown

In my first meeting with Director, and Associate Professor, Mark Monday, he stated that the main theme being explored in *Three Sisters* would be ‘Hope’ and how hope, leads the Prozorov family in a variety of directions, affecting each individuals perception of hope and the passage of time. The Prozorov family trudges through time and individual phases of hope, ending at a hopeful point. In his conceptual statement for this work, Monday explains:

Time is extremely important in this play. At once the sisters seem anxious for change and yet allow time to pass—months and years without realizing their goals. Perhaps it was inherent in the culture of the aristocracy that s/he thought s/he all the time in the world(left a word out). But time does pass and times do change and time pressures everything, especially Hope. Hopes rises and falls depending on how close we are to getting what we want.

How the costumes for each character reflected this passage of time was my primary focus. I found an arc within the timeline of each character to pinpoint where they are closest to what they wanted. Using a lighter color and staying away from grey tones, I used the costumes to visually portray the arc of each characters’ hopefulness, as well as the progression of time from the beginning of the play to the final tableau. Director Monday requested that costume transitions show a lighter, more humorous side of the characters that he felt Chekhov evoked in *Three Sisters*. He stated that the play could explore either the hopefulness or darkness that time can create. I found this hopefulness
reflected in the Prozorov family and friends evident, existing mainly in the relationship between the brother and sisters as they fight to create their own social standing in a town that they desperately want to leave. My design concept shows how the family grows into the environment and underscores that the Prozorov’s do not have the ability—either practical or emotional—to leave the town to move to Moscow. Conceptually, the only characters in the final scene to have any agency, or the power to leave and change their situation, would be in saturated, bright colors. In Act IV, Natasha, having soaked up the family’s money and power, is in a bold, rich red. The soldiers, as they are leaving the town, are in the uniform green. All others in the final tableau who stay in the town for various reasons, are costumed in recessive colors, receding into the environment.

The scene design by Professor Smith explored the concept of time, as well. A visual representation of time was reflected through the inner workings of a clock, which was suspended from the grid, above a sundial paint treatment on the floor. The lighting designer then used lighting to show the movement of the sun or moon around the clock and sundial. The birch trees, important to the *Three Sisters*, as they are mentioned in the script as being a beautiful aspect of the home, would be created as a postmodern linear forest in the upstage area. The main floor and setting of the stage was period furniture pieces and few architectural pieces.

The Lighting Designer and I worked together, checking fabric color and texture underneath representative stage lights. The Lighting Designer’s initial color palette was soft blues and yellows, which he incorporated into the sundial lighting effect and the painted sundial on the floor. Throughout the process, I was able to check each costume piece against the scenic model and paint samples. In creating the look of the final
tableau, an important aspect of my design concept, I made sure that the colors in the stage lights did not shift colors in the costumes against the scenic elements.

Director Monday stated he wanted a realistic representation of the time period, 1901 to 1906. Russia had little “middle class” to speak of, compared to other European countries. However, the Industrial Revolution would see the number of the middle class grow. Using rustic, ethnic Russian folk clothing in tandem with period, turn-of-the-19th century garments, I created a class distinction between the Prozorov family and other characters, such as Natasha. Using my research on women’s clothes I learned that the ‘S’-curve silhouette was the height of fashion during the first decade of the twentieth century (worldwide). The ‘S’-curve emphasized the female form. To achieve this look, I used special corsets, bodices with full fronts and skirts that clung tightly to the hips and flared at the hem. This fashion ideal mimicked the aesthetic ideals of the Art Nouveau movement. While *Three Sisters* spanned a time period of five years, 1901 to 1906, popular fashions changed very little.

Director Monday and I had discussed the portrayal of the sisters as light and playful in color and trimmings in the first act (see Appendix G, figure 66). As the show progresses, the Act IV Birch Tableau would create a sharper contrast. Details and texture would be taken away so the sisters would appear less opulent, sophisticated and refined. Irina is most hopeful during Act I. She longs to enter the work force and fall in love. Both goals would prove to be a strong motivation for her to leave the town. As the show progresses Irina slowly loses hope. Her dialogue and actions throughout *Three Sisters* suggests the hope to be married and fall in love, which she believes would be the solution to her boredom. In Act I, she spouts idealistic speeches about working, and the working
class. Irina believes that if she worked hard enough she would become part of this working class so she can leave the town she despises. She eventually decides to marry Baron Tuzenbach, not for love, but to leave. Inevitably after Tuzenbach is killed in a duel and her fate is not certain, she spouts a similar monologue to the one in the first act, as she is back where she started. From this character analysis, Director Monday and I discussed how we wanted Irina to look like a bride during Act I, and as the show progresses, she slowly becomes darker, as she desperately tries to find something to cling too.

Olga, the eldest sister, is the matriarch of the family. She fights against her position in the town even as she rises to the rank of headmistress. To reflect this, I made her costumes grow darker and heavier as the show develops (see Appendix G, figures 66 & 90). During Act I, which is Olga’s most hopeful point, she still believes she is different from the town people, being of higher education and breeding. In Act I, she is only a school teacher, but as the action unfolds, her duties at the school grow exponentially. By Act IV, she is the headmistress. She speaks in Act IV of how all of her siblings had great plans but none have accomplished their goals. Olga wears a school teacher uniform during Act II and III. Olga is scripted by Chekhov to be in this uniform the entire show. My design concept was faithful to Chekhov’s stage direction. Olga may grow to accept her responsibilities as a sister and as a teacher, but she will never change who she is or where she will be. To show her as a loving woman and devoted sister in Act I, we see her on her day off, at home and celebrating her sister Irina’s birthday. In this act, Olga’s slightly matronly look is clean, sophisticated and shares the family color,
a dusty rose. By Act IV, she has grown into her environment, dressed in black and dark taupe, joining her family during the final image or tableau.

During Act I, Masha, the middle sister, is stuck in a loveless marriage to Kulygin. During the party scene in Act I, she meets the man-- Colonel Vershinin from Moscow-- whom she will ultimately fall in love with. During Act II and III as Masha falls in love, she becomes more open and full of hope. To show this, I opened up the actress’s face by lowering her necklines. In Act III, she is in soft pink and ivory, her lightest color and her most hopeful point in the arc of her goals--she has found both love and respect in Vershinin. During Act IV, her love Vershinin leaves and she is in mourning (see Appendix G, figure 90). Pulling the birch tree colors into her costume with a taupe piano shawl and taupe boots she became the darkest of the sisters in the final tableau.

In contrast to the sisters, Natasha marries into the wealth and social standing of the Prozorov family. She is the only character to climb in social standing during the show, as the Prozorov’s siblings sink. Natasha begins out of place in the fashionable Prozorov home. I showed this by heightening the volume of trimming and fabric, while I minimized the scale of the patterned fabric. As she replaces Olga as the matriarch of the family, she becomes streamlined, brighter (see Appendix G, figures 74 & 91). As the sisters sink into uncertainty, Natasha immerses from the house, vibrant, powerful and commanding by absorbing the sisters’ color, rose, from Act I (see Appendix G, figure 89) and transforming into a burgundy red.

Andrei, Natasha’s husband and brother to the sisters, starts the show hopeful and in love with her. He hope is to one day become a great scholar in Moscow. However, as the show progresses, he too becomes worn-down, ragged, and subdued by his oppressing
wife and the passage of time. He grows into the environment and is unable to take charge of his own fate, as he is now encumbered with a wife, family and a position on the city council. During Act I and II, Andrei is in a green suit, vest and pants, complementing Natasha’s yellow tones. As the show progresses, he drifts away from his wife, growing visually darker and by Act IV, he is sunken into the environment, in black and white.

Masha’s school teacher and husband, Kulygin, is often used as a tragic, yet comedic character. Kulygin, watches his wife engage in an affaire, hoping for the day that the soldiers will be reassigned and Masha will return to him. His color arc is the opposite of Masha’s, for he is happy when she is complacent, and is unhappy when she is adulterous. During Masha’s affaire with Vershinin, Kulygin is at his darkest and his clothes reflected little humor. Kulygin’s school uniform matches Olga’s navy blue uniform in color, and gave him the most severe look of the men. The color matching on Olga’s uniform and Kulygin’s uniform, ensured that they looked to have come from the same institution.

One of my favorite challenges on this project was to show several characters in the appropriate military uniforms for the period. Three Sisters has a wide range of military ranks: Colonel Vershinin, the battery commander, Baron Tuzenbach a first lieutenant, Solyony a captain, Chebutykin an army doctor, and Fedotik and Rohde, both second lieutenants. Pictures from the first performance on January 31, 1901 of Three Sisters, showed the numerous rankings and personalities of the solider, confirming what I had found through my character analysis of each character. The military commander Vershinin, is given a sense of style and personality appropriate to the time period within the confines of regimented military dress (see Appendix G, figure 87). According to several Russian military books and photographic volumes, the color of the uniforms was
often conflicting. I finally found a description of period Russian uniforms (see Appendix A, figures 6-10 & 13) worn during the early 20th century that consisted of an olive tunic with red piping around the cuffs and collar; collar insignia embroidered on gold bullion; and each trouser leg had a wide red stripe. Medals and ribbons were of great importance and worn on the chest.6 My research further showed that uniform culture was extremely important during this time period to people who were not soldiers, Highly regarded civilians, like doctors, lawyers, teachers, and pupils at state schools were required to wear uniforms as well.7 In a conversation with Russian Language Professor Brian Baer, he explained that during the time period of Three Sisters, the Russian military kept two separate ranking systems: one for the military ranks and another for all associated military positions, such as doctors and teachers. During the 1890s to 1910s men’s civilian clothes were practically a uniform, with certain minor distinctions in quality, cut or style of tie8. For Kulygin and Chebutykin, I blended men’s wear looks of the period with military touches, adding shoulder boards and medals to create a similar, yet, regimented style (see Appendix G, figures 66 & 84). We could have rented uniforms from a variety of theatres and rental houses. However, the difficulty was finding a set of matching uniforms that would fit the size range of our military men. We found an appropriate set of uniforms that matched my research at the Guthrie, including a matching double breasted coat that would fit our Chebutykin, our largest actor. One of my assistants, Stephanie Giammarco, was put in charge of arranging the order and we agreed to rent the set of five uniform jackets, matching pants, stock collars, and shoulder boards with the ranking system that matched my research. With my assistants help, we created honorary medals for the soldiers depending on their ranks and/or special skills.
Vershinin, the commander, had a medal of Alexander, one of the highest honors given, while Solony, who murders Barron Tuzenbach in a dual, received a medal for marksmanship.

Each individual character, distinct persona, was built from this rented military base costume. Vershinin, the battery commander, was to be half a romantic poet and half a strict military soldier. Solony was a loner with a social disorder and a slightly exaggerated mustache (see Appendix G, figure 73). Tuzenbach, as a civilian in Act III and IV and a Baron, is dressed as a man of wealth and position (see Appendix G, figure 88). He desperately tries to win Irina’s heart and transforms from an army lieutenant to a brick worker.

Chapter III: The Construction Process

Pulling costumes from Kent State University School of Theatre and Dance stock, I found several items that would work for the sisters; several suit options for Andrei; and pants and vest options for Chebutykin. The actor portraying Kulygin, the school teacher, was very slim. After going through our stock, we had no suits that fit this actor in the colors that I needed. After a shopping trip, I found a few missing pieces for Andrei but still could not find any suits that would fit Kulygin, the actor had a thirty-seven inch chest. After discussing this with Robin Ruth, she suggested that I try looking at suits for teenage boys. I soon discovered that my actor fit the largest boys’ size perfectly, finding two suit options for the beginning and end looks. These I purchased from Amazon.com. They were school masters uniforms.

I attended many rehearsals, talked with the actors and collaborated on their characters’ looks and personalities. I shared my research collages with the Masha, Olga,
Irina and Natasha early in the rehearsal process, so they had an understanding of what we would be creating. For this show we built four period corsets, one for Masha, Olga, Irina and Natasha; built physically different from modern undergarments in that corsets of this time period were boned and restricting; and they were available for the actresses to wear during the early part of the rehearsal process, along with petticoats, shoes and boots. This changed our build schedule so that there was time to create corsets that would be available during fittings.

During a design meeting, Professor Smith mentioned the Steam Punk fashion movement, known for incorporating raw machinery, mainly clock pieces, into clothing and jewelry from the early 1900s. Since Director Monday and I had talked early in the production process about having each male member of the cast carry a pocket watch, this Steam Punk Fashion was easily incorporated through a watch piece—that underscored the passage of time—on every member of the cast.

Pulling from the Kent State stock for the three sisters and Natasha, I had collected half of the pieces I needed. My next option for acquiring costumes was regional theatres like The Cleveland Playhouse and Great Lakes Theatre Festival. Great Lakes Theatre Festival could not allow me to peruse their stock because of the construction turn-over in their new facilities. I called the Cleveland Play House and made an appointment to look at their stock. During this trip I found many costumes for the sisters. I chose a suit for Masha with a bold, sweeping pleated train for Act I. I then chose a sophisticated maroon dress that was feminine, pretty, not too fussy or overly decorated for Olga during Act I, The Playhouse also had a variety of looks to fit my final scene as they mirrored the taupe, gray, black and white colors of the set. I found a tailored suit for Olga and a light taupe
traveling outfit for Irina (who would be after leaving after the final act for her new job as a teacher).

Creating a contrast between the sisters and Natasha proved to be one of the toughest problems I faced while designing the show. I had created a yellow and orange color palette for Natasha in Act I. This complemented her soon to be husband Andrei, and the bold red in the final scene. She would be seen as evolving into family power. While searching Kent’s rental stock, contacting rental houses and other universities/colleges, I found that most of the costumes built for this time period and color range were the type usually used for farces or musicals but were not a workable option for the realism required in *Three Sisters*. Director Monday and I decided to build the final “power” look for Natasha. By the end of the play, her sisters-in-law are all without hope and grow into the environment, rooting themselves into the trees through silhouette and color while Natasha has pushed all three sisters out of their house and begins to control the family affairs and money. Director Monday wanted her to look “like money,” reflecting the power of the new matriarch of the family. I designed Natasha’s final dress referring to a period textile print for trim inspiration (see Appendix F, figure 60) from a Russian textile book.9 My advisor and I then used a devore burn out technique on the burgundy red rayon velvet. She had learned this technique at the 2008 USITT Costume Symposium. It required creating a stencil using a light sensitive film. Scanning the image found in my research into Adobe Photoshop, I created a stencil by exposing the film to the image for the appropriate time; screen printing a burnout mixture onto the silk rayon velvet fabric; and then rubbing away the burnt out fibers to create a faux devore fabric modification. My fabric choice, the rich, luxurious velvet, suggested she had absorbed all of the power
and wealth from the family, and the final scene highlighted her most powerful moment of the show (see Appendix G, figures 89 & 91).

Since I still could not find some missing costume items from local regional costume shops and rental houses, I scheduled a renting trip to Ohio University and Ohio State University to see if I could secure missing looks. My trip was not as fruitful as I hoped it would be but I did find a beautiful white dress for Irina for Act I; secured all the looks for Olga, Masha and Irina; but the trip had not secured any items for Natasha.

With Natasha’s final moment designed and resolved, my dilemma with finding appropriate other period looks for Natasha required contacting several more rental houses, and universities resulting in finding few options. Professor Campbell then suggested I rethink my concept for Natasha and take a closer look at the Kent State stock to see if I could revisit a forgotten option. I ended up choosing three suits from our stock, modifying Natasha’s color palette to include green. Two of the suits were from a production of *She Stoops to Conquer*. The enlarged scale of the silhouette, exaggerated design details, an exaggerated triple breasted vest with matching jacket and skirt, became the Act II Natasha costume. Another suit with a high collar, tailored jacket, asymmetrical skirt and similar in silhouette to the before mentioned outfit became Natasha’s Act IV look noting that it would assist the transition into the final Act IV red dress. I chose a taupe suit and dyed it yellow for Natasha’s Act I costume. The slightly outdated silhouette with added trim and a lace underskirt clarified her class status and that she had tried to update the look herself. She enters as an outcast and is considered by the sisters to be socially awkward; have poor taste; and lacks the sophistication to create an updated fashion.
After searching the Kent State stock and multiple sources, I had not found an item that would fit our Anifisa, the nurse and household maid to the sisters. Given the actress’s size, I decided to build one for her so I could be sure of the fit and look of the costume. Anifisa belongs in the Birch tree environment and her costume would reflect that through linear construction lines. I was heavily influenced by an image of Tolstoy’s maid that I found in a Russian Photography Book (see Appendix A, figure 12). The maid was wearing a pocket watch as a pendant, a simple, yet visually dynamic image for the concept of hope and time explored by my design concept. I altered the garments historical design to fit the actress’s proportions creating a distinctive, period shape for her body (see Appendix G, figure 80).

Ferapont, the janitor at the County council building where Andrei works, provided, along with Natasha in Act I and Anifsia, being a servant in the Prozorov home, contrast to the wealth and station the Prozorov family had. Ferapont, who often provides comedic relief, needed to look as though he was from a much lower class. I chose a cutaway suit design and distressed it. This gave the appearance that Ferapont had owned this garment for an extended period of time.

Because of timing, several costume looks were finalized before the scenic design. Given this, my work was more influential to the set design. I had created a family color for the sisters, a rose pink in varying shades. During a meeting to approve fabric for Masha’s Act III dress, Director Monday decided that he wanted this color to be part of the scenic design. He asked the scenic designer to incorporate the color into the sundial painted on the stage floor. This dress would also be the dress for Masha in Act III, when she would be fully in love with Vershinin. Director Monday and I discussed how this
would be the dress she would wear when she plans to run away with him. Her look
needed to reflect her maturity and straight forward, frank attitude. Therefore, I designed
a dress in soft pink, a romantic color but I kept structured pleating in the bodice reflecting
her maturity.

Chapter IV: Evaluation of the Design

During this project I faced many challenges that strengthened my design skills. I
incorporated costume pieces from a variety sources, intertwining them to create a
cohesive design. I had not had much experience with this manner of designing. I was
organized; provided all spec sheets necessary for construction and modification;
purchased fabric and trims for the costume shop in a timely manner; and worked with
two assistant designers who had never assisted a designer before. I had to teach them
how to be assistants while working on this project and complete many of their tasks
myself because of their learning curve.

Prior to tech week, I had seen each costume piece under stage lights, so color shifts or
texture loss did not surprise me. I had worked closely with lighting designer, Ben Starrett,
to ensure that if there was any color shifting in the costumes, it was to aide in color
matching or contrasting as compared to the set design. I did run into a problem with
costumes receding into the set design in the final tableau. The family sank into the scenic
background because the paint colors were too close to the color of the birch trees and the
paint treatment on the floor. Olga’s black suit and Irina’s taupe jacket visually sank into
the paint treatment on the floor. I had to do some last minute trimming and over-dying to
costumes so that their colors were different enough from those of the set. This kept the
actors from receding but close enough to my original colors of my design concept was
not lost. This change resulted in the sisters gradually becoming darker in contrast to the lightness of the scenic colors. The progression of color on the three sisters visualized what Director Monday called, “the seasons:” from Irina in light taupe, to Olga in taupe and black, and Masha in black (see Appendix G, figure 90). These last minute alterations added to the visual impact of the final tableau. Each character was tied to the environment through love, honor, poverty or pure lathery. I had created enough visual textures and color contrast that nothing was lost in characterization, no costumes receded or matched another character unless it was planned to do so. As Natasha emerged at the end of the play, she was powerful, vibrant and stunning. Her color difference completed the effect that she had sucked all of the power and wealth from the family.

My plan to give each military character individual personality was successful. Yet I realized during tech week that my plan for the soldiers when they were fighting the fire in Act III was not strong enough. My initial plan was to create the illusion of soot smudged on the soldiers hands and faces using gray eye shadow and the lighting and scenic design team had planned to use lighting effects to create a smaller, compacted bedroom floor layout. During the tech process, the plans for Act III had changed dramatically and the eye shadow was not visually powerful enough. Professor Campbell suggested that I pull distressed shirts as I could not distress the rented uniforms. I found several shirt and dickey options to add to the uniforms. After these alterations, I found the scene still achieved the desired effect.

Irina’s Act II and Act III looks were visually heavy compared to the other sisters. I pulled Irina’s Act II suit from the Kent State stock as an outfit for working in the telegraph office. The suit had a matching cropped jacket that paired with the blouse was
heavily trimmed and too extravagant for that scene. Without the jacket, Irina looked too bare since every other character was dressed for the Russian winter. Irina’s Act III look was originally a patterned cropped vest and matching skirt that we tried many different options to lengthen for the actress. During the tech week, I realized the skirt was too large and cumbersome. I created a new skirt and bought trim that matched the vest so that under the stage lighting it appeared to be the same color.

Andrei’s looks proved to be difficult. The actor’s body was extremely stocky and was not a natural fit for the suits of the period with the hip length jackets and tapered pants. Given this actors proportions, I fought with his pant shape and jacket length. For Andrei’s Act I and II suit, I chose to leave the pant fuller than fashionable during that time period in order to flatter the actor’s shape. I was very satisfied with how the removal of the jacket for the Act I to Act II, creating a different visual effect in the progression of time.

Overall, I accomplished my goals. I succeeded in making the actors appear as if they were wearing their own clothes, highlighting what was important within each personal journey by creating a visual representation. Concepts significant to the production, hope and the progression of time were well supported by the costume designs. I was able to create costumes that allowed the characters of Three Sisters to visually portray a family. My costumes portrayed Chekhov’s characters as loving, demanding and dysfunctional. These traits could remind contemporary audiences of characteristics found in their own families.
ENDNOTES


7 Ibid,16.


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REFERENCES


