

“Unearthing History: Museum Costumes as Research Tools”

Mara Gottler, costume designer for Elizabeth Rex, Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival
Instructor in the Theatre Arts Department, Langara College

Thanks to funding from a 2013 Langara Research Grant, many of the costume fabrics and trims in the production of Elizabeth Rex (at Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival) were treated in such a way as to reproduce the colours and textures of 16th century European clothing exhumed from graves then restored and exhibited in historical museum displays. The Mikulov Museum in Prague was a primary inspiration for this study.

A significant amount of research time was involved: the final experimentation results with chemicals, dyes, inks, vegetable stains and other solutions were logged into a journal, indicating all results on the actual materials involved.

Fabrics were then successfully treated with the appropriate products, sent to the dry-cleaners and the resulting colour-fastness of the materials was checked again, for durability of wear during a three month run of this theatre production .

Acknowledgement of this award and its significance is evident in its placement on the page of Bard’s 2013 season brochure dealing with “Professional Development at Bard”.

Weeks of study and research into potential “re-fabrications” of materials resulted in some rather intriguing and useful results. The “aging” attempted by different products on metallic fibres as well as natural and synthetic ones produced some ultimately gorgeous patinas. Darkening these fabrics made the final costumes feel richer and ancient, lending a greater credibility to our production. As did reproducing some of the clothing sourced from museum exhibitions and portraits.

This success in our research allowed me to incorporate the re-textured embellishments into the final design of the aristocratic characters. The Queen’s court all wore elements of this vintage decoration. And the upper class dresses of the players (male actors playing female roles) also displayed a similar, parallel use of these enriched trims and decorations.

I was very pleased with the success of these experiments. And critical responses from both the Bard audiences and the theatre critics suggested a similar positive response to the heightened quality of the costumes involved, particularly Queen Elizabeth’s gown and cape.