



Symbolism in Costume Design Elements and Expression Modes in Handel's Opera *Giulio Cesare*

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Abstract. Nowadays, the development of opera culture is always accompanied by the continuous innovation of performing arts and stage art, which is the key for traditional plays to retain vitality under the changes of the times. Among them, the costume design is the most intuitive and effective way of visual communication on stages, which constitutes the overall style tone of the play, and conveys the subjective purpose of the adaptor and the mood of the work. Based on *Giulio Cesare* opera directed by David Macvicar as a reference version, this article will analyze the costume design for the leading female actress Cleopatra from the perspectives of color combination, historical archetypes, era features, material texture, and the impact of specific makeup and hair designs on the character's styling. And how the interaction of stage lighting scheduling and character dynamics echoes the plot, conveys emotion, and renders atmosphere. This article will consider, both subjectively and objectively, the special purpose of the costume design and the groundbreaking creation of the role of Cleopatra.

Keywords: Costume Design · Giulio Cesare in Egitto · historical costume · stage design · Symbolism · Handel opera

1 Introduction

With the development of opera, stage performances have fully integrated modern concepts and designs, far from stylized performances in ancient costumes [1–3]. Nowadays, in most operas, the costume and the script design are unusually trendy or even avant-garde. Even if the same repertoire is performed, the audience will get a new experience due to different stage designs. *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (Italian for Julius Caesar in Egypt) was an opera composed by George Frideric Handel in 1724, based on historical events during the Roman Civil War of 49–45 BC [4]. The series tells the story of the love affair between Giulio Cesare and Cleopatra, and the revenge plan of Pompey's widow Cornelia and her son Sesto, told in parallel through multiple plot lines. All the main characters in this play have historical evidence, but the specific plot and personal characters are endowed with romantic fantasy elements and cannot be unverifiable. Given that the main action is set in Rome and Egypt, the collision of these two very different traditional clothing styles is a challenge for stage costume design. This essay will take

the performance version of the 2005 Glyndebourne Musical Festival directed by David Macvicar as the main research sample, and gradually analyze the artistic expression of the costumes of the heroine Cleopatra from the perspectives of silhouette, pattern, textile, and color-matching, and their influence on the portrayal of the opera as a whole [5, 6]. At the same time, the author will also refer to and compare the overall costume and stage design style of several other performance versions, and analyze the different ways of showing the stage effect of *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* since the 21st century.

2 Analysis on the Presentation as a Whole

Symbolism originated in France; painters and writers no longer devoted themselves to faithfully representing the external world, but instead expressed illusory through symbolic, metaphorical, and decorative pictures to inspire others. Symbolism is the idea that things represent other things [7]. Symbolism is not based on intellectual or objective observation but focuses on the inner power and imagination beyond the intuition of appearance.

Limited by the times, Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* is an inevitably biased look at Egypt from a European perspective. *Giulio Cesare* enters Alexandria as a winner. Tolomeo, bidding for the throne against his sister Cleopatra, ingratiated himself with *Cesare* by beheading his political rival Pompey. *Cesare* was furious because Pompey's pride as a Roman had been trampled on by the lowly Egyptians. The director David McVicar shrewdly picks up on this racially charged point of view and moves the story to the colonial era of the early 20th century, turning Rome into the British Empire and Egypt into British-ruled India. This is the most macroscopic and intuitive embodiment of symbolism in the play. Just as the Romans regarded the Egyptians as heretics, the arrogant British, while feeling superior to the people and customs of India, the Middle East, and other regions they ruled, were unwilling to understand them deeply, which often led them to confuse these Eastern civilizations as being the same [8]. Thus, David McVicar portrays *Cesare* and his army as British officers in bright red uniforms, and the Egyptians as a mix of regional cultures, including India, Asia, and the Middle East.

The costumes of the 17th and 18th centuries were gorgeously crafted, far more visually and in popularity than any other period in history. Therefore, it was very common to use all contemporary costumes when performing ancient Greek or medieval historical and mythological plays [9]. Romanticism advocates praising the past and longing for medieval civilization. The version directed by David McVicar is following this doctrine. However, it is not limited to the confusion of different regional cultures, his directed version seems to be chaotic even within the limitations of the times, which makes the whole opera reveal a sense of absurd comedy mixed with symbolism [10, 11] (Fig. 1).

Cleopatra's looks did not conform to the traditional, or even stereotypical, ancient Egyptian style. In the first act, Cleopatra's clothing is full of Indian style, mixed with some Turkish elements. Her top has exaggerated bishop sleeves with cinched cuffs, and a pleated green skirt at the waist lined with layers of tulle to create a puffy A-line. The skirt has a center front slit, revealing her skinny trousers. Her waistband was tied in a Turkish way. Also notable is the beaded jewelry on her head and neck, beaded tassels, and coin-shaped decorations, which symbolizes her high position in Egypt (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Cleopatra's clothing in Act One, George Frideric Handel: Giulio Cesare. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3-4)



Fig. 2. Cleopatra's clothing of H-shaped short dress, George Frideric Handel: Giulio Cesare. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3-4)

Another suit of Cleopatra is a style popular in the United States in the 1920s called the flapping dress. It is an H-shaped short dress with embroidery all over the body and fringe with black rhinestones on the skirt. Her hairstyle was also the ear-length short hair that was popular at the time. Small, delicate jewelry prevailed during this period. Cleopatra wore a pair of black beads on her earrings and a narrow beaded bracelet. She stepped on a pair of small high-heeled shoes and held a long-handled parasol that resembled the Parasol straight-handled parasol standard but without lace decorations as a prop. This attire is a reflection of her avant-garde ideas of advocating freedom. In the traditional concept, black clothing often means a funeral, but here only is the embodiment of mystery and charm (Fig. 3).

In this scene, Cleopatra is almost in the whole body covered with glittering gems. The shape of her crown is like the semi-dome of the Islamic church. The radial lines are decorated with bright gems, like the halo of the goddess. The structure of the tiara also



Fig. 3. Cleopatra's clothing of glittering gems, George Frideric Handel: *Giulio Cesare*. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3–4)

references the crown of the Egyptian queen: a ring around the head, with a prominent main decoration at the forehead. She has a broad collar on her shoulder, derived from Egyptian tradition, that has been deconstructed into a radial necklace that wraps around her neck. The armbands on her wrists are made of the same material. Her conical jeweled bra has hanging beads connecting between two apexes. Her belt is also studded with large gems, and her hemline is semi-transparent, leaving her legs barely visible (Fig. 4).

It is inevitable that costume styles will change according to the fashion trends of the performance era, but some design techniques still correspond to fixed metaphorical formulas. In order to pretend her maid Lydia, Cleopatra wears a light beige suspender nightdress with light and close-fitting gold thread jacquard. This even simple garment-cutting nightgown, has no chest darts, only a narrow waist in the side seam, and there were high slits on the side to reveal the characteristics of her sexy charm. Compared with the previous colorful style, the light beige highlights the purity and a low-key but luxurious temperament, forming a strong contrast and visual impact under the background of the luxurious purple flannelette sofa and ultramarine-blue stage lights (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Cleopatra's clothing of nightdress, George Frideric Handel: *Giulio Cesare*. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3–4)



Fig. 5. Cleopatra's clothing of a traditional American suit, George Frideric Handel: *Giulio Cesare*. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3–4)

It was a traditional American suit with a white shirt base, a suede waistcoat, breeches, and a pair of traditional ponies. Her coat has a long, wide hem that adds some feminine features to her. The lapel collar of the coat also presents a smooth, graceful curve. Her baggy brown checked tie, with loose necklines and cuffs, lends itself to Cleopatra's tense, embarrassed, and troubled mood, reflected in the deliberate imitation of male looks (Fig. 6).

For the wedding and coronation near the end, Cleopatra's garb returns to the flamboyant style of the Rococo era. Cleopatra's corset is essentially a slab formed by several boning chimes. Without the cupping design to support the chest, the Cleopatra corset does not emphasize the shape of the chest. Instead, the bottom tip is emphasized in the center front, creating an inverted triangle to accentuate the slender waist. Unlike traditional Rococo French palace dresses, the dress has no sleeves, preserving skin on the shoulders, neck, and chest, adding a sexy touch to the Cleopatra. The dress was split at the top and the bottom, a petticoat that bulked out laterally but flattened at the sides, as the French court dress of the Rococo period characterized: the more senior the woman, the wider the hemline. Historically made from stretchy strips of bamboo or supportive baleen woven like a birdcage, but the shape in Cleopatra's dress has been sewn with boning directly onto the petticoat to secure it, with an extra layer of pulled fabric, draping in a way that reflects Egyptian characteristics. Even the silhouette of the garment shows the pyramidal triangle, and the champagne gold color is a nod to the pyramid. But the matching earpiece and necklace are a combination of white and gold jewels in the shape of a myrcia leaf, reflecting Cleopatra's stance as the victor in the race for the throne and echoing Cesare's crown of laurel in this scene.



Fig. 6. Cleopatra's clothing of a flamboyant style garb, George Frideric Handel: *Giulio Cesare*. *The Opera Quarterly*, 24(3–4)

3 Hairstyle

Handel's *Giulio Cesare* libretto, from the arrangement of the original libretto to the present performance, is full of Orientalist fantasy from the perspective of the early Western civilization sequence. The term Cleopatra is a conflation of orientalist fantasy, conceived by Westerners crossing the boundaries of their own civilization, inspired by real historical figures, and itself steeped in Western stereotypes. Western commonly used to depict beauty techniques, can be reflected in the depiction of the character's hair. Beauty in the eyes of the West is characterized by thick, strong, long, and curly hair. As shown in the tempera painting *Allegory of Spring* (1482) created by Italian painter Sandro Botticelli during the Renaissance, each goddess has a long hair of wheat gold or golden brown. In another tempera, *The Birth of Venus* (1486), the goddess of beauty at the center of the picture has a golden fleece of curly, knee-length hair that can even be used to cover her body instead of clothing. Not only does David McVicar's version of *Giulio Cesare* have black hair fitting the character's Egyptian background, but for the first few scenes, Cleopatra has opted for thin, straight hair that is far removed from the classic Western beauty image. For the first and third looks, Cleopatra opted for a Braid with hair held close to the scalp, making it easier to fit headwear into the contoured head. The first look was a gold and silver beaded tiara, embellished with rhinestones and sequins, while the main eye-catching part was a row of beaded tassels that swung to and from the cast, bringing out the choppy, voluptuous Cleopatra characters.

Cleopatra's second look drew on the 1920s image of the American flapper popular in the 1920s. The style is matched by short straight ear-length hair, curling at the end, and short flat bangs that cover only half the forehead. This is a thoroughly Westernistic design by director David McVicar, which completely dismisses Orientalist fantasies. Still, the look bears some resemblance to traditional female hairstyles in ancient Egypt. Short haircuts above the shoulder and short flat bangs were common to the ancient

Egyptians for living and operating in wind-whipped sand and scorching heat, but the ability to iron and straighten hair was not afforded to lesser commoners - a sign, perhaps, of Cleopatra's exalted status and extravagant lifestyle.

The shape of the crown of Cleopatra's third look is like the semi-dome of the Islamic church. The radial lines are decorated with bright gems, like the halo of the goddess. The structure of this piece also references the crown of the Egyptian queen: a ring around the head, with a prominent main decoration at the forehead. Compared with the previous crown, this piece was mainly silver and iron gray, and the overall shape also ignored superfluous colors and emphasized sharp lines. Rather than advocating a luxurious and lazy exotic temperament, more emphasis is on the expression of a cold and noble, solemn and inviolable aura. This expression of emotion, in turn, is in sharp contrast to the relatively bare-chested attire required for Cleopatra's sexy, philandering but still dignified and untouchable identity.

Cleopatra's fourth and fifth looks have been gradually westernized and modernized in appearance. The fourth look of the shawl long hairstyle, no bangs, hair split in the middle, the overall smooth and straight, only make a slight wavy arc at the end of the hair. Paired with the suspender nightdress, the look is a simple, atmospheric, modern look that shows the lengths Cleopatra has gone to for Cesare. Cleopatra's fifth look is designed to capture the image of an American soldier, with her hair pulled back from the temples to avoid obscuring the view against the chaotic backdrop of battle and smoke, leaving the rest to fall loose. Her hair was curly and frizzy she had no time to groom it after confronting the enemy on the battlefield.

The final hairstyle of Cleopatra is a short shaggy mop, ironed with numerous tiny and elastic spiral curls that bulge wildly at the sides, characteristic of the Iberian Baroque period. Instead of wavy curls, the West's obsession with tiny spiral curls dates back to ancient Rome. In Renaissance fashion, women would style their hair by tying it in strips of muslin fabric or using extremely thin sticks or rolls of paper as curling irons. But for this scene, director David McVicar has borrowed little more than historical silhouettes for Cleopatra's more modern look. This style and not fully restore the characteristics of the period of the modern - Rococo French court dress, in a modern style to reinterpret the romance of the historical costume.

Stage Lighting scheduling

The whole play uses warm yellow as the overall lighting tone, which echoes the earthy yellow pillar stage of the Egyptian palace, presenting the desert scene filled with wind and sand. It is also very integrated with the bleak and solemn atmosphere of war background, adding a heavy sense of historical precipitation, making it easy to distinguish the limitations of Giulio Cesare's story.

For Cleopatra's debut, director David McVicar spared no effort in the use of light and color in the background. Burgundy, emerald green, and royal blue curtains layer upon layer, matching velvet texture and golden tassels edge, can easily create a luxurious palace atmosphere. The lapis blue gradients of pale purple light spread across the stage, adding a layer of blue highlights to Cleopatra's garment and implausible against the warm gold front lights illuminating the actors' faces, adding a dreamlike and Oriental fantasy. Like the crown of the pharaohs, deep blue and gold were characteristic Egyptian color schemes, often seen in Egyptian frescoes and jewelry applications. Such color

combinations have become so well known that they are a stereotype of Egyptian culture. A similar lighting scheme applies to Cleopatra's third and fourth roles. Deep blue lighting gave the silvery gray outfit for Cleopatra's third appearance a cool, restrained, dazzling vibe, reminiscent of the first. While the purple-blue top light poured on the champagne-gold fabric of her fourth look, the collision of two high-saturation colors had a high visual impact, achieving a shift from grim self-sufficiency to an ambiance of seductive ambiance. In Act Four of *Cleopatra*, she can be seen reclining on a bed after bathing and dressing, and maintaining that position while performing an interplay with Giulio Cesare. This is a classic composition. *Sleeping Venus* (1510) by Giorgione or Zorzi da Castelfranco, *Venere di Urbino* (1538) by Tiziano Vecellio, *La maja desnuda* (1800) by the Spanish Romantic artist Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes, and *Olympia* (1863) by the French Impressionist Edouard Manet, all depict a white nude woman lying on her side on a bed or some cloth. These artists reconstructed, interpreted, and reinterpreted images of naked women, for the intention is to show the purity of women's nature and the spontaneous sexiness of women. Unlike medieval art, Edouard Manet was widely criticized by the public at that time for demonizing the goddess Venus in his painting with the shape of a prostitute. Cleopatra was not naked, but the purple-blue lighting silhouettes her graceful body, creating an ambiguous, erotic atmosphere. Her interaction with the bed in this scene may be a clever metaphor and satire for this classic composition, the audience seems to be able to see the contradiction between purity and temptation in her figure.

4 Comparison

The use of symbolism can also be seen in other performance versions. For the 2022 production at the Montpellier Theater, staged by Damiano Michieletto, a minimalist box-shaped stage was chosen. In the selection of scene props, Damiano Michieletto chose to use ribbons as the rendering of mood and atmosphere, with red ribbons symbolizing blood and gray paper fragments simulating the form of ghosts, which is also a reflection of minimalism and abstraction.

For the version staged at the Dutch Opera in 2023, the costumes are completely modern, with more humorous elements. The costumes of the actors are more simple and more minimalistic. In a black one-piece swimsuit, Cleopatra danced a lapis blue scarf and wore gold bracelets. The combination of gold and blue colors reminds people of the Nemes crown of the Egyptian pharaoh. The choice of props is also ingenious, replacing the throne on the coronation of Cesare and Cleopatra with a golden toilet, which is also a kind of symbolism, a mockery, and a ridicule of imperial power.

5 Conclusion

In today's music entertainment culture, opera directors have more creative freedom than they had in the early days of opera in the 16th century. Art does not come from a single doctrine and concept, but a complex social phenomenon. David McVicar brought his unique ideas and insights to the stage design of *Giulio Cesare*. He abstractly extended the conflict between ancient Rome and ancient Egypt in Handel's original work to the conflict

between Britain and British Indian colonies and applied this symbolic technique to costume design, which itself is a subjective re-creation. Regardless of praise or criticism, there is no denying that his challenging attempt has been a great success in terms of artistic attainments.

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