



**Performing Identity: Art and Artifice** is an exhibition curated by the History of Art BA undergraduate students. It explores the complex theme of identity in works of art at the Theatre Collection.

The exhibition revolves around oppositions within the theatre: actor versus character, illusion versus reality, factual place and fictional setting. From preliminary costume and set designs to completed character portraits, the exhibition explores the construction of identity, both in front of and behind the theatre curtain. The show begins with an evocative painted portrait of the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, in which the artist simultaneously presents his public and personal personae. This concept of dual identity is central to the exhibition, and is similarly manifested in Sir Joshua Reynolds' portrait of the actress Mrs Abington, and in Charles Green's *Her First Bouquet*.

Alongside construction of the character, this exhibition also considers the identity of place. Here, the concept of identity is broadened to encompass a storm-lashed heath as a metaphor for anguish and insanity in Edward Gordon Craig's scene from *King Lear*; a picturesque countryside scene which is soon to take on a new identity as a battlefield in Lila De Nobili's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and the illusion-breaking reveal of the stage as a site of construction in Rachel Hemming Bray's *The Paint Shop*, where a scene-painter creates the sets that will convince a future audience of a staged reality. Moreover, this exhibition demonstrates that identity can be fashioned through the harmonious relationship between both costume and setting. The concept is evident in De Nobili's experimental composition, in which she uses a watercolour landscape to explore various fabric combinations.

## Reading Room:

### 1) Hugh Durrant, *Nijinsky*, 1971, oil on paper. (2004/0033).

Vaslav Nijinsky, the most famous male ballet dancer of the early 20th century, is presented both in and out of character in Hugh Durrant's painting. Nijinsky's personality is split into two aspects. The opaque, stoic, monochrome figure contained within a three-dimensional rectangle represents the dancer's reserved public persona. The semi-transparent, coloured, leaping figure that reaches towards the top of the composition shows his inner character and stage persona. This theme of fragmented identity emphasises Nijinsky's split personality, and also parallels his eventual schizophrenia. With multiple angular divisions and an array of shapes, it can be said that Durrant's painting reveals the strong aesthetic influence of ideas of theatrical framing and staging.

### 2) Top: J. K. Sherwin (print) after Sir Joshua Reynolds (painting), *Mrs Abington in the character of Roxalana in The Sultan*, 1791, stipple engraving. (RS/A32/0003).

'Don't you know 'tis death for any to enter there but the Sultan, without being conducted?' -*The Sultan*, Act I, Scene I

This print captures the pivotal scene from Isaac Bickerstaffe's play *The Sultan* (1775) in which the protagonist, Roxalana, daringly crosses the forbidden threshold into the Sultan's chambers. The role was performed by one of the first and most successful comic actresses of the 18th century, Mrs. Frances Abington. The English composer Charles Dibdin described Abington as 'a species of excellence which the stage seems never before to have boasted in the same perfection'. This conception of her vivacious and charismatic

individuality is encapsulated in the print as the actress emerges as a luminous beacon of light from the surrounding darkness, captivating both the audience of the play and the viewer of the print.

**3) Bottom: Charles Green R.I., *Her First Bouquet*, 1869, colour reproduction print. (TCP/S/000066).**

*'If I were asked to name the audience that expressed beyond any other the spirit of London I would say the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, at a pantomime.'* - Compton Mackenzie, OBE.

Commissioned for the 1869 Christmas edition of *The Graphic*, a popular illustrated newspaper of the time, Charles Green's painting offers us a unique view of life backstage in the wings of the theatre during a pantomime performance. Set in the Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, London, the array of costumed figures rests between performances, and a young girl in a dancer's costume is handed her first post-performance bouquet. The work has a twofold significance. Firstly, as a comment on multiple identities: the oppositions of character versus actor; onstage versus offstage, and reality versus illusion. Secondly, as a beacon of patriotic pride: during the Victorian period, the pantomime, particularly at Christmas time, became a symbol of English identity, bringing people of all ages together.

**4) Edward Gordon Craig, *King Lear - Storm Scene*, 1923, woodcut. (EGC/000007).**

*'No, I will weep no more. In such a night  
To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure.'* - Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act III, Scene IV, lines 1819 - 1820.

This evocative woodcut represents the beginning of Act III, Scene IV of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is an impression of the stage effects, lighting, sound, and emotion that the artist, Edward Gordon Craig, wished to convey, rather than a set design in the conventional sense. The attempt to capture the 'feel' of the theatre mirrors that in Hugh Durrant's *Nijnsky*, while the glimpse of an aspect of the theatre hidden from the public, that of the physical creation of scenic identity, is similar to that in Rachel Hemming Bray's *The Paintshop*. The medium of the woodcut demonstrates Craig's own identity as a meticulous artist and designer, asserting his view of art as the product of conscious, thoughtful labour.

**5) Rachel Hemming Bray, *The Paintshop: Jane Cooke Making the Tree for Uncle Vanya, Bristol Old Vic, 1990, watercolour with pen and ink. (TCP/S/000091/2).***

Of the six figures in this watercolour, five of them are Jane Cooke. The five Cookes all wear the same white overalls and have the same distinctive red hair; the man pictured to the left was the former Property Master at the Bristol Old Vic, Chris Gunning. The multiple Cookes show the passage of time, demonstrate her extensive range of skills as a scenic painter, and pay homage to the many laborious hours that go into the set-making process. What the painting represents, Hemming Bray explains, is the 'truth of the theatre'; the time and skill that goes into creating a convincing experience for the audience.

**6) Cecil Beaton, costume design for the character of the Pearly King, *My Fair Lady, 1956, paint (ink or acrylic) on paper. (TCD/C/000044).***

This dynamic costume design of the Pearly King served as

one of many that Cecil Beaton produced for the first production of the Tony Award-winning Broadway show, *My Fair Lady*, in 1956. Beaton's design indicates the evolution of a play, representing the early stages of theatrical costume design, with the costumiers M. Bermans Ltd producing the final garments. The Pearly King's costume was designed for a male chorus member from the opening scene set in Covent Garden. Pearly Kings are synonymous with Cockney culture, around which the musical revolves.

**7) Alan Tagg, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, 1961, watercolour and pen on paper. (TCD/S/000339/1).**

Bessie Smith is considered to have been one of the greatest jazz and blues singers of her era but tragically died in 1937 after a car crash. Edward Albee wrote his play *The Death of Bessie Smith* in 1959, basing it on the widely accepted but false premise that she died after being refused admittance to a whites-only hospital. This image is one of four of Alan Tagg's initial set designs for *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959) at the Royal Court Theatre (1961) directed by Peter Yates. This design engages with themes of identity through its clear artistic expression, evident of the artist's distinctive process. It occupies themes which function centrally within the play, such as absence and anonymity, communicated through its stark and empty appearance. Similarly to other set designs in the exhibition this image explores the relationship between place and persona, exploiting the symbolic power of props, furniture and spaces.

**8) Lila de Nobili, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1967, fabric and watercolour. (DW/LDN/000001).**

Lila de Nobili, famous for her extensive knowledge of

European costume and astonishing levels of accuracy, worked as the Period and Colour Advisor for the 1968 film production of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The mixed-media work depicts the infamous event from the Crimean War (1853-1856) during which the British Light Brigade charged down the wrong valley into a well-prepared Russian artillery resulting in colossal casualties and no decisive gains. De Nobili has recreated her imagined design in a realist key through the picturesque and representational landscape, contrasting this with the abstract presence of the fabrics, which may represent soldiers. An interesting point of consideration is the close connection between what de Nobili has given in visual form and what Alfred Lord Tennyson conveyed in his poem.

### **Cabinet: 2 designs with fabric:**

Examples of preliminary designs by Lila de Nobili, comparing fabrics to materialise her vision of place.

Tennyson, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1854:

‘Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said.  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

[...]

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them

Volleyed and thundered;  
Stormed at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of hell  
Rode the six hundred.'

**9) On wall: Julia Trevelyan Oman, costume design for the characters Lorenzo and Portia, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1970, pen on paper with fabric swatches attached. (JTO/016/001).**

**In cabinet: Julia Trevelyan Oman, one of three general colour schemes, *The Merchant of Venice*, 1970, fabric swatches sewn onto felt. (JTO/016/027 & 028).**

The objects are designs by Julia Trevelyan Oman for Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* performed in 1970 at the National Theatre, London. The tactile objects vividly display how the identity of the play was conceived in terms of colour, material and form. Trevelyan Oman believed the art of theatre design consisted in 'discovering about human beings and finding out how they relate to their environment'. The objects provide an intriguing and intimate insight into how Trevelyan Oman envisaged the costumes for the characters interacting with the colours on stage, thus creating the mise-en-scene.



J. K. Sherwin (print) after Sir Joshua Reynolds (painting), *Mrs Abington in the character of Roxalana in The Sultan*, 1791 and  
Hugh Durrant, *Nijinsky*, 1971.

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