

Lights! Costumes! Stage Designs! “Women’s Work” Dazzles at LPA

The afternoon I went to LPA to see “Curtain Call: Celebrating a Century of Women Designing for Live Performance,” a fellow visitor to the exhibition remarked “I’ll have to come again. It’s just too much to absorb in one go!” He is not alone. This exhibition is dazzling.

Three years in the making, the show packs the space with breathtaking achievements of more than 140 designers. Costumes, photographs, sketches, set models, performance videos, and more, document the innovative role women have played in all aspects of theater, opera, and dance.

Among the treasures unearthed from LPA’s own archives are the enchanting sketches of such long-forgotten pioneers as Caroline F. Siedle (1867-1907), who developed the art of characterization through costume. Designing for musical comedy and its forerunners—operettas, revues, and spectacles—Siedle was the first woman in the U.S. consistently to receive professional billing.

The central costume display illustrates the designers’ wide-ranging mastery of style and period. Visitors of all ages will find vivid reminders of live performances, like Glinda’s Dior-inspired dress from *Wicked*. A meticulous replica of the jewel-encrusted gown worn by Queen Elizabeth I in Nicholas Hilliard’s famous portrait is so elaborate that it required a multi-page instruction guide.

Dance costumes must allow freedom of movement and are often described as being made of “net and air.” Ann Hould-Ward used soft leather skins and trapunto padding to create lightweight, flexible body armor for the ballet *Othello*.

If you usually experience live performance from the far reaches of the balcony, this up-close view of exquisite stitchery and adornment will be a revelation. The delicate lingerie flowers, French knots, and tiny sequins of one ballet tutu are typical of Barbara Matera designs for New York City Ballet. Her skill is seen again in the hundreds of seed pearls and silver beads adorning the wedding dress designed by Theoni V. Aldredge for *Teddy and Alice*.

But for sheer enchantment, can anything match the endearing animal costumes? The lizards in *Seascape*, wearing velvety leotards painted with scales, and prosthetics; the woolly sheep in *Candide*; and Milky White, the cow in *Into the Woods*, must have elicited delighted gasps from their audiences.

Women’s set models, drawings, and storyboards are shown. Tanya Moiseiwitsch (1914-2003), who designed sets and costumes for theater, opera, and film, revolutionized theater in 1953 by designing a thrust stage for the Stratford (Canada) Shakespeare Festival. She seated the audience on three sides of the stage just as it had been at Shakespeare’s Globe Theater in London.

Lighting designers are both artists and technicians, and women led the way in this theatrical discipline from turn-of-the-19th-century experiments to the computerization of lighting cues in the 20th century. A video demonstrating lighting’s mood-altering impact is magical.

This extraordinary exhibition runs until May 2, 2009. Don’t miss it.

—Mary Ratcliffe