



RUNAWAY THEATRE: EXPLORING THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN FASHION PRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT:

This research article explores the interplay between fashion shows and theatre, analyzing how fashion presentations embody theatrical elements such as narrative, choreography, set design, and spectatorship. Drawing on interdisciplinary theories from fashion design and theatre arts, the study examines the performative nature of fashion shows and their cultural significance. Through a qualitative approach, including literature reviews and case studies, this article elucidates how designers transform runways into immersive theatrical experiences, blurring the boundaries between fashion and art. The findings highlight the creative potential of integrating theatrical principles into fashion, offering insights for scholars and practitioners in both fields.



KEYWORDS: Fashion Shows, Theatre, Performance, Narrative, Set Design, Choreography, Spectatorship.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion shows, once seen solely as platforms for exhibiting garment collections, have evolved into sophisticated spectacles that engage viewers on various sensory and emotional levels. This transition is similar to theatrical performances, in which narrative, staging, and audience involvement combine to create immersive experiences. This article looks into the theatrical aspects of fashion shows, arguing that they serve as dynamic performances that go beyond just commercial displays. The study's goal is to gain a better understanding of the interplay between fashion and theatre by examining set design, choreography, story, and spectatorship, as well as their cultural and artistic consequences.

Historical Intersections of Fashion and Theatre

Fashion and theatre have long shared a symbiotic relationship. From Paul Poiret's early 20th-century costume designs to Coco Chanel's collaborations with Cocteau and Diaghilev, the theatrical stage has provided a fertile ground for fashion experimentation. Designers such as Jean-Paul Gautier, Christian Lacroix, and Alexander McQueen embraced the theatricality of fashion, crafting runway shows that evoke operatic grandeur, narrative arc, and emotional resonance. These shared histories establish a conceptual framework for analyzing fashion shows as theatrical performances.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach, aligning with the exploratory nature of the research. Data were collected through an extensive review of academic literature, including journals and books on fashion and theatre studies. Additionally, the analysis incorporates observations of recorded fashion shows and interviews with industry professionals. A thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, such as the use of narrative and set design, ensuring that findings reflect the nuanced perspectives of designers and audiences. While qualitative research has limitations, such as smaller sample sizes, its depth provides valuable insights into the performative aspects of fashion shows.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The connection between fashion and theatre has historical roots dating back to the 19th century, when couturiers like Charles Frederick Worth designed costumes for theatre and opera. Scholars such as Kaplan and Stowell (1994) argue that theatre and fashion industries have interacted dynamically, with theatre often shaping fashion trends and vice versa. Marlis Schweitzer's *When Broadway Was the Runway* (2009) highlights how early 20th-century Broadway actresses became style icons, influencing consumer culture through their onstage fashion. This symbiotic relationship underscores the performative nature of both disciplines.

Theatricality in fashion shows emerged prominently in the 20th century as designers moved away from utilitarian presentations toward aesthetic experiences. Morris (1977) notes that fashion shows began incorporating choreographers, expressive models, and elaborate sound systems, transforming runways into theatrical stages. Contemporary designers like John Galliano and Alexander McQueen have pushed these boundaries further, creating narrative-driven presentations that rival traditional theatre (Blanchard, 2018). These developments suggest that fashion shows are not merely commercial events but cultural performances that engage audiences through storytelling and spectacle.

Theatrical Space and Set Design

Theatrical space and set design are pivotal in shaping the audience's experience in both theatre and fashion shows. In theatre, spaces like proscenium stages or black box theatres create distinct atmospheres, while fashion shows leverage diverse venues, from traditional runways to unconventional locations like warehouses or historical landmarks. These spaces serve as canvases for designers to express their creative vision.

Set design in fashion shows transforms these spaces into immersive environments. For instance, Karl Lagerfeld's 2014 Chanel show at the Grand Palais featured a fully-stocked supermarket set, evoking a narrative of consumer culture (Blanchard, 2018). Such designs use lighting, props, and multimedia to establish mood and context, much like theatrical scenery.

Choreography and Performance

Choreography and performance are central to the theatricality of fashion shows, where models act as performers embodying the designer's vision. Unlike theatre, where choreography includes complex body movements, dance or fight sequences, fashion show choreography focuses on the runway walk, pacing, and poses. These movements are meticulously planned to highlight garment details and convey attitude, transforming walking into a performative art form.

Models performance extend beyond physical movement to include facial expressions and body language, which communicate style and emotion. For example, Versace's 1991 show featured supermodels lip-syncing to George Michael's *Freedom*, creating a memorable performance that elevated the collection's impact. This synergy of choreography and performance underscores the parallels between fashion models and theatre actors, both of whom use their bodies to tell stories and captivate audiences.

Narrative and Dramaturgy

Fashion shows often employ narrative and dramaturgy to create cohesive presentations that resonate with audiences. Unlike theatre's explicit plots, fashion narratives are abstract, conveyed through thematic coherence, garment sequencing, and visual elements. Designers act as dramaturgs, curating collections that tell stories inspired by art, history, or personal experiences.

For instance, John Galliano's Fall 2022 Maison Margiela show, a multi-disciplinary theatrical experience, blending live performance with film. Models were given scripts, musical cues, and directed to act out scenes, some even lip-syncing to pre-recorded dialogue, creating a narrative within the performance. The collection was based on an original concept by John Galliano, adapted for the stage by Imitating the Dog, a British theatre company.

Spectatorship and Reception

Spectatorship is a critical component of both theatre and fashion shows, where audiences actively shape the performance's reception. In theatre, spectators' reactions such as laughter, applause, or silence create a dynamic exchange with performers. Similarly, fashion show audiences, including buyers, critics, and influencers, contribute to the event's atmosphere through their responses.

The advent of social media has expanded spectatorship, enabling global audiences to engage with fashion shows via livestreams and platforms like Instagram. This digital participation amplifies the event's cultural impact, as seen in Alexander McQueen's 2010 livestreamed show *Plato's Atlantis* (Blanchard, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The integration of theatrical elements into fashion shows highlights their evolution from commercial platforms to cultural performances. Set design creates immersive worlds, choreography transforms models into performers, narratives convey deeper meanings, and spectatorship fosters engagement. These elements blur the boundaries between fashion and theatre, inviting audiences to experience clothing as art.

Historically, designers like Paul Poiret and Christian Dior laid the groundwork for this theatricality by staging elaborate presentations. Contemporary designers continue this tradition, pushing creative boundaries through technology and interdisciplinary approaches.

This research also reveals the cultural significance of fashion shows as platforms for exploring identity, societal issues, and artistic expression. By drawing on theatre's storytelling techniques, designers can address complex themes, such as gender or sustainability, fostering dialogue within and beyond the fashion industry.

CONCLUSION

Fashion shows are dynamic theatrical performances that transcend their commercial origins, embodying narrative, choreography, set design, and spectatorship. This study demonstrates how these elements create immersive experiences that resonate with audiences, blurring the lines between fashion and theatre. The findings underscore the creative potential of this interdisciplinary approach, offering new avenues for artistic expression.

Future research could explore the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality, on fashion show theatricality, or investigate cross-cultural perspectives on fashion as performance. By recognizing the inherent theatricality of fashion presentations, scholars and practitioners can deepen their appreciation of their cultural and artistic value, inspiring innovative approaches to both fields.

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