

21M.710 F'11  
Third Paper

For my final project, I decided to work on a costume design, in conjunction with a fellow student, for Jean Genet's *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. Before deciding on a final project, I knew that I wanted to work on a costume design for one of the plays we read in class, and *The Blacks* was the play that drew me in. To split the design, the fellow student and I decided to break the characters up into the two natural groups, the Blacks and the Court, and each design costumes for one of the groups.

My interest in designing the Court lay in two features of the Court that are laid out through the script. The first of these was the nature and usage of the Court in the context of the play. In the play, Genet uses the Court as fixtures to represent the idea of white power and the figures of white supremacy. Instead of being the type of solid, personalized characters that are seen in many realistic plays, the Court is a set of personas that act their parts as necessary. As a result, their costumes do not need to conform to their positions, but rather can both mock and comment on them.

The other point of interest I had in designing the Court's costumes was having to design their masks. For me, the masks were the biggest part of their representation as it is what Genet uses to suggest that the actors are playing white people. Also, since the only specifications Genet gives about the masks (with the exception of the one for the Queen) is their color and the need to be able to see a portion of the face behind them, it leaves a lot of room for customization and innovation with the design of the masks. These two factors combined led to the chance to design a set of costumes that were not bound to the normal conventions of many designs, which was something that I wanted to do and found very interesting.

However, while my interest in the design lay with the Court's costumes and not the Blacks', completely unbridled freedom in creativity is often detrimental to the quality of the final design, so, in order to limit myself, I needed to make sure that, no matter how the designs for the Court came out, they still formed a cohesive group with my fellow student's designs for the Blacks. It did not matter how unique or interesting the Court looked if they did not look like they belonged in a show with the Blacks.

In order to create an effective costume design for *The Blacks*, it was important that I analyzed the script to see what was not only necessary from a functional point of view for each character (such as pockets, etc.), but also what was necessary from a thematic point of view, that is, how each character related to the larger ideas within the play. Because no good playwright puts a major character into a play without purpose, each character must, in some way or another, connect to the bigger ideas that the playwright is attempting to play. In addition to each individual character's relevance, since the characters are all a part of a bigger group, which has its own significance to the play, the costumes needed to have themes contained within them that not only gives the group unity, but also helps to exemplify the importance of that group as a whole.

As such, to start my design process, I built up from the givens to the themes. In this case, I started with the descriptions given in the script of the Court by Genet as well as any instances where a character might fuss or use an item of clothing that they were wearing. From there, I worked with my fellow student, deciding what ideas contained within the play felt most relevant to us and what to incorporate within the costume designs.

In the script, Genet gives a very minimal description of what each character is wearing. For the Court, he only specifies colors for two of the characters, the Judge and the Missionary. In

this case, Genet specifies that the Judge should be in black and red while the Missionary is in white. Since these three colors were already put forth by Genet himself, I decided that incorporating only these colors into the designs for the Court would be a good way to unify them as a group. These colors also seemed to lend themselves well to the Court for two alternate reasons. First, they are very stark, unnatural colors, which contrast well with the notion Genet puts forth of the earthliness and wildness of the Blacks. Second, the bright red on the colorless background gives a sense of bleeding and blood, which felt fitting given the future deaths of the characters.

Within the Court, there is the natural division between the Queen with her Valet and the rest of the characters. So, while deciding how to incorporate the colors into each character's design, it came down to trying to tie these two subgroups to each other. With the Judge's colors being given as black and red, it seemed natural to therefore dress the Missionary in white and red. Then, in order to complete the set, the Governor was placed in black and white (a strange happenstance as his costume lacks the bright red, yet he is the one who is practicing his death speech). To contrast this, the Queen and the Valet, therefore, needed to incorporate all three colors into their designs. To differentiate them more, I decided to include a small amount of a distinct color for both of them: gold for the Queen and grey for the Valet.

With the palette chosen, I then had to decide on the actual clothing that each character would wear. Since my fellow student and I had decided to try and stick to the period in which the play was written (the 1960's) for the general cuts of the clothing, it changed the overall aesthetic of the designs. While the Blacks' outfits were meant to be tacky, I felt that, as a lot of the play focuses on the idea that everything in it is a gesture and everyone is simply a representation of something else, it was important that each of the Court member's outfits resembled their

position. However, as these representations were still false and, as becomes more obvious later in the play, there is something malicious and distorted about them, I felt it necessary that parts of the outfits were off-putting or incorrect in one way or another. These details were often easiest to do by altering the size of parts of the outfit, which helped give the looks more of a clownish feel.

It also seemed necessary that the relative power between the groups be reflected in their clothing. Although in the end it is the Blacks that have the power, Genet attempts to give the impression that the Court (and therefore white society) is in control. Therefore, it became necessary for the materials used in the Court's outfits be of high quality, like velvets and silks.

For the Queen's design, I wanted it to be very similar in ways to the Blacks' costumes as she is the character closest to them. So, I decided to give her a very typical silhouette in terms of her evening gown, but then to make the decorations and embellishments very elegant as she is not meant to look tacky like the Blacks. The major detail that Genet calls for in the Queens outfit is the abundance of ermine fur. So, in order to give the typical symbol of royalty, I decided to have her wearing a long, elegant, fur-lined cape (as opposed to the robe that Genet calls for so that she could show more skin). Rather than give her a crown (which, to me, seemed borderline tacky, especially with the rest of her outfit) I decided to go with a fur hat, typical to what you might see an older, rich, white woman of the time wearing. For me, it felt important to copy a typical powerful white woman's style of the time in her character, as that is what the Queen represents. In contrast to the symbols of power she wears, I wanted her staff to seem strange. As such, going along with the image of the woman knitting that Genet uses later, I felt it appropriate that the top of her staff resembled a ball of yarn. The gold on the staff helps to not only make her pop out from the rest of the Court but also establish her as the most powerful figure among them.

The Valet, in contrast, is the least powerful of all the figures of the Court. As Genet describes him, he is a “puny and mincing fellow,” therefore, his costume needed to somehow feel out of place in the Court. Therefore, instead of the oversized embellishments that don the other costumes, the overall fit of his clothes needed to be off. Going with the idea of him being puny and his lack of power, it was appropriate to make his clothing seem oversized. So, his vest, while a period style, is cut to be too big for him, and his bowtie is absurdly large. In the same way that Genet uses the Blacks’ tackiness to make a statement, I wanted to make part of the Valet’s outfit look like an attempt at mimicking the rest of the Court. The best way to do this, since Genet’s call for a waist coat limits what he wears on his torso, was to mess with the Valet’s pants. Just as the Blacks ruin the formality of their suits by wearing brown shoes, the Valet breaks the standards of the court by having to wear grey, not black, pants.

The Governor is the most aggressive of the Court members and, as such, it felt appropriate to place him in a military uniform (in his description, Genet only calls for a nice uniform without specifying the type). The stark uniform worked best with a black base and white embellishments, but then, to make it inappropriate, I increased the overall size of the embellishments relative to the outfit, especially with the shoulders and medals. The medals were especially important as they are a representation of esteem and, therefore, power. To add to the absurdity and over-aggressiveness, I decide to add obviously fake musculature to the uniform, giving the Governor an overly big body. As the Governor is Genet’s representation of physical and martial power in the Court, he needed to be physically overwhelming, which also gives a greater impact at the end to watch such a large man begging for his life.

For the Missionary, I wanted to take his religiousness over the top. In order to do so, I decided to not make the number and size of the crosses on his outfit completely disproportionate

and incorrect. The main cross, which is the pectoral cross that Genet's description calls for, needed to be so large and bright that it seemed to dwarf the actual Missionary himself. As he is also the most obvious in his actual position in the play, it felt important to make sure that the costume immediately gave away what the Missionary was.

The Judge, on the other hand, is never quite introduced to the audience as a Judge until very late in the play. Adding to the confusion is the fact that a judge's robe is not very elegant or obvious attire. With this in mind, I felt that putting the Judge in an elegant black and red, heavy robe that had a silhouette reminiscent of a judge's robe would be enough to get the point across.

The other important piece of every design, which Genet places a great emphasis on, is the masks that the Court wears. These masks are entirely white, aiding in the Court's representation of the white power in the play, but beyond the color and the need for them to not entirely cover the face, Genet gives no details, leaving plenty of room for interpretation. As *The Blacks* is a clown show, it seemed appropriate for these masks to resemble clown masks; that is to say, the masks have extremely over-emphasized features.

Out of the five, the Queen is the only mask that Genet provides any specifications for. Since he calls for a droopy mask, it seemed fitting to put the Queen in a version of the typical tragedy mask associated with the theater. Because there is a sense of the long time that this power structure has been in place, and since part of the Queen and Felicity's confrontation revolves around the idea of beauty, it seemed necessary to make the Queen's mask seem old. It also made sense to give it a much sharper chin than would be pleasing on a person's face. The final detailing lay in the points on the top of the mask, a shape meant to resemble that of the crown which I had removed. As the Queen's counterpart, it therefore made sense to give the Valet an aged version of the comedy mask as well.

For the other three masks, I wanted to play more with the idea of the institutions that each of the characters represents (government, religion, and law). Since, in a way, Genet is both tearing down and mocking these institutions at the same time, I wanted these three masks to be very clown-like and odd. Each of the Governor, Missionary, and Judge's masks, therefore, has a shape that resembles something that they would typically wear, but deforms it. As a result, each mask is a misrepresentation of something, going along with Genet's idea of constant gestures in the play.

The Governor's mask is, therefore, designed to look like a captain's hat in silhouette, complete with oversized feather. The eyes are enlarged to match the field glasses he often uses throughout the play, and the features are overly masculine. The Judge's mask is shaped to look like it is wearing a judge's wig, yet end up resembling dog ears instead. This plays with the idea that the Blacks, in the Courts view, are almost like wild beasts that lack law and order. Finally, the Missionary wears a mask resembling the Pope's hat. In order to make it more absurd and emphasize the religious aspect even more, the Missionary's eyes have been replaced by crosses. On all three masks, the noses are colored and shaped to resemble clown noses.

The overall effect that these designs are meant to get across was the idea of symbols of power. All the designs represent the power that goes along with each of the Court member's positions, yet all of them are distorted in some way or another. This both heightens and debases the characters at the same time, making it unclear as to who, the Blacks or the Court, should really be above the other.

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