



**National  
Theatre  
Costume**



## The National Theatre

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The National Theatre stages more than 20 new productions each year in three auditoriums – the Olivier, Lyttelton and Cottesloe – in a mix of new plays and classics, with up to six productions in repertory at any one time. The National's first performance – with Peter O'Toole as Hamlet – was given in 1963, under Laurence Olivier's Directorship.

For its first 13 years, the Company worked at the Old Vic Theatre, while waiting for its new home to be completed. In 1976, under Peter Hall, the new building on the South Bank was opened by the Queen. Since its inception, the National has presented over 700 plays. Successors to Peter Hall as Director of the National Theatre have been Richard Eyre from 1988 to 1997, Trevor Nunn from 1997 to 2003 and Nicholas Hytner, who took over in April 2003.

# Designing / Supervising & Buying / Costume Workshop Dye Shop / Costume-props Wigs, Hair & Make-Up / Dressing / Hire

## Introduction

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Costume has the largest number of employees within the National Theatre's technical department. It comprises 54 permanent members of staff who work in the four main areas: costume production; running wardrobe; wigs, hair, and make-up; and hire, all managed by the Head of Costume. Pivotal to the running of the department is the Costume Administrator who deals with all aspects of information and budgeting, and ensures they are properly communicated.

Not only are these departments responsible for servicing the 20 – 26 shows staged at the NT each year, but also provide support to all productions which go on to have a further life beyond the walls of the National Theatre – in the West End, or on tour both in the UK and internationally. Creating a new production requires an enormous amount of preparation. The process begins with the Director of a show, who is responsible for selecting the Lighting, Sound, Set and Costume Designers (often the latter two are one person). The Costume Designer will translate their creative ideas onto paper through sketches, reference and photographs, and present them to the Head of Costume. The time between the start of rehearsals, until a production is ready to go on stage for technical and dress rehearsals is usually just six weeks. During this busy period, the costume designs have to be finalised and all the necessary costume elements made or purchased.

For period productions, large quantities of fabrics and trims often need to be sourced, and samples dyed to find perfect colour matches. Every detail of each costume will be discussed in meetings, right down to the very last button. For more contemporary productions, the buyers, costume supervisors and designers tend to purchase garments and accessories rather than having them made from scratch, but any alterations and design changes that are needed will be dealt with by the in-house team.

As early into the rehearsal process as possible, the designer will present their vision of the character to each performer during what is known as a 'costume chat'. This offers the performer the opportunity to put forward any concerns he or she may have about the suitability of the design for the character before the construction process can begin.

The first rehearsal on stage will usually take place a week before opening night. All performers must be dressed in full costume, wigs and any accessories to not only assess the aesthetics of the production, but also make sure that the artists are able to move freely on stage and achieve any 'quick changes' that may be necessary.

After a production has finished its run at the National, its costumes and wigs can be hired out to other theatrical companies. Whilst wigs are stored in-house, all costumes are transported off-site to the National's Hire Department.

We produce or source over 1,000 costumes a year

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# Costume Supervisors & Buyers

The Buyers work closely with the designers and costume supervisors on productions. The process involves fabric sampling, sourcing vintage garments and shopping on the high street, at flea markets and on the internet. A large proportion of their time can be spent on the hunt, outside the office. They have collated a room full of trade catalogues and pattern books from fabric suppliers across the world. The database of where goods can be purchased, and for what price, requires constant updating. As one new supplier might be unveiling his stock, another may cease to trade, so a buyer must always keep an eye on the market.

For a contemporary production, buyers tend to purchase multiple garments for each costume in preparation for the fitting, so as to give the designer plenty of options from which to select the perfect match to the original design. Any surplus items can subsequently be refunded or exchanged. If a production has a long run, costumes can become tired and worn, so the buyers have to liaise closely with the running wardrobes in order to help source suitable replacements at short notice. Here at the National, the buyers are not only responsible for purchasing items specific to an individual production, but also all the raw materials needed by the department as a whole. This could encompass anything from washing powder for the Dye Room, to a kettle for that all-important tea break.

The National Theatre employs a large number of freelance costume supervisors. The Costume Supervisor is responsible for realising the designer's creative dream within the constraints of the show budget.

They co-ordinate everything from design chats with the actors to sampling fabrics, organising freelance makers, and arranging fittings. They also liaise closely with the Running Wardrobe Manager and the wardrobe teams, providing dressing and running information and ensuring that the costumes will meet any technical requirements. Once in technical rehearsal, the costume supervisor will oversee any changes that might be required through Preview performances and right up to Press Night.



The Buyers travel over 1,000 miles across London in a year in search of costumes, fabric & haberdashery

# Costume Workshop

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The Costume Workshop Manager employs a team comprising seven permanent members of staff: Head Tailor, Head Ladies' Cutter, two Assistant Cutters, two Costume Makers and a Senior Alteration Hand. The Costume Workshop services all three theatres and therefore often works on a number of productions at any one time.

The costume makers at the National Theatre need to have a very wide variety of skills. They must be experienced in making and be knowledgeable about the techniques used to produce all periods of costume from early structured silhouettes to the more fluid, contemporary dress of the modern era. They also need to be able to develop new methods when asked to make anything from animal to fantastical costumes. They often liaise closely with other departments when fabrics are to be printed or dyed, if there is a costume prop element, or if the actor needs to wear a flying harness, protective padding or conceal a microphone or speaker.

Before a production gets underway, the Costume Workshop Manager will agree with each designer and supervisor on the costumes that are to be made in-house and will often employ

additional staff to ensure the work can be completed in the time allocated. They then monitor progress closely to ensure everything is ready on time for the technical rehearsals. Any additional costumes will be out-sourced to freelance costume makers.

Before the cutters begin to make the patterns, detailed measurements are taken of the artists. The cutters, and tailors then set to work on the garments and fittings are arranged for each performer to check the fit and allow the designer to give the final word on how the costume will appear on stage before the costumes are completed.

The ladies' costume team work with all kinds of fabrics, from the lightest silk chiffon and georgette to fur and heavy wool. They produce costumes from all periods: Tudor farthingales and bodices, flowing Regency gowns with Spencer jackets, corsets and bustles with bright characterised bodices, and polonaise skirts. They also have to be skilled in cutting and making modern clothing when what a designer requires is not available on the high street. Attention to the finish and detail of a garment is critical, especially as NT Live performances are filmed and broadcast to over 500 cinema screens worldwide.



## Costume Workshop continued

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The Men's Tailoring team are also required to make costume from every era: peasecod-belly doublets and plunder hose, Napoleonic military uniforms or Victorian tailcoats, through heavyweight wool suits of the early twentieth century, right up to the lightweight suits of today. They use bespoke hand-tailoring methods similar to those used on Savile Row and must select the internal canvases and interlinings very carefully to create the desired period effect.

Many costumes used in productions have had a previous life on stage at the National Theatre, or are brought in from the high street or other sources. All these garments must be fitted and are then altered or restyled in accordance with the designer's instructions. And of course every item has to be labelled with the show, actor's name and role, to prevent confusion.

During the technical rehearsal and preview period, changes are often made by the director and designer. These changes can have a big effect on the costume needs and so the teams are required to make very fast and often quite substantial alterations or additions to the costumes.



# Dye Shop



The Dye Room team work on productions in all three theatres, whilst also being very involved in external NT productions, and regularly teach in workshops co-ordinated by the Learning Department. The team consists of a Senior Costume Dyer and a Costume Dyer, a post shared by two people.

Before the printing or dyeing of a costume can begin, the dyers sample fabrics taken from the designer's selected colour palette in order to achieve the result that will perfectly reflect an era, character or event in a play's narrative. The team also treat fabrics using a variety of substances, including flock, foil and pigment, to create costume effects known as breaking-down.

Breaking-down is a broad term, covering a multitude of techniques used to help bring a character's journey to life: dusty and old, burnt or wet – you name it, it can be created in the Dye Room. All work produced in the Dye Room must be able to withstand further wear-and-tear and regular maintenance during a production's run, but must also be detailed and realistic enough for NT Live filming. There is no such thing as a typical day in the Dye Room. A dyer may be working on breaking-down a soldier's costume to create the effect of desert dust one minute, and hand-painting satin shoes the next.



## Costume-props



Costume-props are anything 'worn' by an actor which would fall outside the general remit of a sewer or tailor. The department are responsible for the production or adaptation of hats, jewellery and more regular accessories. They work closely with the Costume Workshop team, should a structure or body-padding be needed, and also with Wigs, Hair and Make-up for the fitting of hats and hair accessories, as well as body augmentation and prosthetics. At the extreme end of the spectrum, Costume-props are able to realise a designer or director's flight of fantasy. It is often necessary to supply supplementary research and advice on materials or technical detail to achieve the desired visual effect; but also to produce a durable and, as far as possible, comfortable prop for an actor to wear.

We must label in excess of 10,000 costume elements each year.

# Footwear

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The Footwear and Stock Co-ordinator assesses all footwear needs and requirements at the beginning of each production's rehearsal period, liaising with the Costume Supervisor and agreeing deadlines and budgets. This includes taking foot measurements for any shoes to be made, sourcing, buying and attending fittings throughout rehearsals, both for in-house productions and those that have transferred to the West End and worldwide.

With a comprehensive knowledge of, and the responsibility for ordering, all the Costume Department's stock items – from fabrics and tailoring canvasses through to dye and print supplies, as well as laundry supplies for the running wardrobes – the Co-ordinator can locate any item at a moment's notice. Another part of the job is to maintain the fur room and shoe stockroom.



# Wigs, Hair & Make-up



The Wigs, Hair and Make-up Department are responsible for producing and maintaining all aspects of wig-making, hair and make-up for every show staged in the National's three theatres. National Theatre productions that transfer to the West End or go on tour are staffed and overseen by the department to ensure consistency and the highest standard of work.

The team is made up of nine full-time members of staff: four Supervisors and five Assistants who are overseen by the Head of Wigs, Hair and Make-up, plus a deputy. Freelancers and casuals are employed to assist during demanding periods.

At the National Theatre, all wigs are made from scratch using real human hair. In some cases it is possible to re-fashion used wigs from the existing stock, so it is extremely important to look after each and every creation, storing them carefully in labelled drawers. These stock wigs are also made available for hire to outside companies.

Wig-making is a particularly intricate and time-consuming process: a maker can typically expect to spend 40 hours working on one wig from start to finish. Using a wig, as opposed to styling a performer's hair, has the advantage of saving time if a 'quick change' is required during the performance; but if the actor's own hair is to be used, then the team are still responsible for maintaining the hair cut, colour and barbering.

Make-up styles vary widely from era to era and this needs to be taken into account when developing the make-up style for each character. The team use a wide range of professional make-up products to reach the required effect and need to be skilled in applying them for use under stage lighting conditions, for photo shoots and also for high definition filming during NT Live broadcasts.

The department are also responsible for creating special-effect prosthetic pieces such as scars and burns, tattoos and blood used in fight scenes.





## Running Wardrobe

As soon as the technical rehearsals for a production begin, the costumes become the responsibility of the Running Wardrobe team. The Wardrobe Manager is responsible for three Wardrobe Supervisors, three Wardrobe Assistants, and fourteen Dressers who work across the three theatres, though additional freelance dressers are often recruited to assist during large-scale productions, West End transfers and on tour.

The wardrobe supervisors and assistants maintain the costumes for each production throughout its run at the National, ensuring that they remain exactly as the designer intended for each and every performance. The condition of the costumes is carefully monitored for wear and damage sustained during performance, and, should they require major repairs, alterations, or need to be replaced completely, this is overseen by the Wardrobe Manager. The supervisors and assistants ensure that understudy costumes are in place for the run of a production and also supervise and work alongside the team of dressers.

The dressers help the actors before and during performance with every aspect of their costumes. Costume changes are usually rehearsed during the technical rehearsal period to ascertain whether costumes need to be adapted or 'quick changed' to ensure that the changes happen in time. 'Quick changes' are frequently completed in the wings close to the stage. Being able to master this process at speed is something of an art, especially considering the complexity of many costumes. A quick change often needs to be executed in just a few seconds; two minutes is the absolute maximum. At the end of a production's run, the Running Wardrobes organise and prepare costumes for return to the National's Hire Department.

The production of *The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* contained 470 costumes. During the 90-minute show a costume change was executed every 12 seconds

## Hire Department

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When a show reaches the end of its run at the National, most of the costumes and props are sent to the off-site Hire Department, which rents out costumes, furniture, props and swords to both amateur and professional companies, as well as to individuals, all over the world. This means that upwards of 20 new productions are added to the collection each year, ensuring that customers always have exciting new stock from which to choose.

Our collection includes more than 75,000 costumes and accessories, plus a wide variety of furniture and props. The costumes cover most historical eras, from Medieval through to Modern, and are categorised by period for easy retrieval. It is an ideal resource not only for the theatre world, but also for advertisements, television and film. We include many schools and colleges among our customers, and are committed to encouraging educational organisations to make use of the collection.

The other important role of the department is to provide a recycling facility for the National Theatre. Each year, a huge amount of stock is recycled back into new productions, helping to make significant savings on production budgets.



We have over 24,000 square feet of storage space at our Hire Department



photos: courtesy of the NT Costume Department,  
Lauren Crichton, Clare Nicholson, Fashion Salade  
[www.fashionsalade.com](http://www.fashionsalade.com), Johan Persson and Vikki Peter;  
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