



VICTORIAN THEME

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Diary of a **Special Uniform Project**

This refreshingly honest blog captures the highs and lows involved in the design of the **Royal Shakespeare Company's** distinctive new uniform

In October 2009, The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford upon Avon embarked on a uniform redesign for its 175 staff as part of a £112.8 million 'transformation' project to build a new theatre. The RSC was looking for a more polished style that would suit its new building, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, which was to supersede the contemporary and less formal Courtyard Theatre.

Liz Wainwright, head of theatre operations at the RSC said at the time: "An investment in the clothes they wear will demonstrate an investment in the staff themselves, a belief in their abilities and what we want them to deliver. If we wish staff to give world-class, professional service that underpins the RSC's purpose and values, we need to indicate to them and others that this is the standard expected from the start.

"In the same way a costume changes the way an actor feels and interprets his/her role on stage, I believe a uniform fundamentally influences how staff behave and presents the values we want them to deliver."

The following January, Fashionizer was chosen as the preferred supplier to kit out the RSC's box office, front of house, management, catering, tour guide and retail employees in bespoke uniforms.

Trying to capture the RSC's Shakespearean history and reflect the nature of its old and the new buildings in the designs has been a unique experience for the company.

"This isn't just about well dressed staff embodying a particular brand - it's also more a question of reflecting an enormous part of the English culture and heritage," Fashionizer managing director Debbie Leon says. "Quite a task..."

With the RSC leaving plenty of time for uniform development, Fashionizer was able to come up with a rich variety of fabrics and designs and also provide an accurate budget early on.

This whole process has been faithfully documented from start to finish by Liz Wainwright and Debbie Leon through a joint blog. The result provides a fascinating insight into the intricacies of

this unusual uniform project and its numerous ups and downs, from design inception to the various manufacturing and sizing challenges. Here, we publish an abridged version of the blogs as part of a two-part series, picking it up in March 2010 as Fashionizer and the RSC get ready to develop the uniform.

March 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

A Uniform for All...

The RSC have looked at other venues' staff uniforms and carefully considered how they'd like their new uniform to look. Those places getting the thumbs up include the National Portrait Gallery, La Scala in Milan, and the V&A as well as various London theatres and shops. They present us with research and mood boards of uniform 'likes and dislikes,' put together by staff and management.

It seemed that the Victorian mood board was the RSC's preferred option; it included many elements that would work well with a modern uniform concept, such as collarless shirts, pin tucks and puffed sleeves for the ladies

We need the clothes to work equally well for staff who are running around in a restaurant, or sitting behind a box office desk, for those who need to be visible in a crowded foyer, but discreet in a semi-dark auditorium

- Victorian: this is evident in the Swan theatre
- Art Deco: from the old theatre
- Cutting edge modern: moving forward

Our design team will now put together a mood board for each of these themes to present at our next meeting.

April 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

Narrowing our choices

We have been selective in our choices, but still have too many diverse options; we present our mood boards to the team at the RSC and ask them to eliminate anything that does not meet with their full approval. They now need to confine their choices to those elements that all agree should go into the final uniform designs.

Victorian Theme

A consensus for the key fabrics and colours was quickly reached: They chose a dark charcoal-grey polywool for all tailored garments, and a 100% cotton shirting, in a fine stripe grey on white, for the shirts and blouses. They also liked our shirt and apron trims, though have yet to make a decision on which ones to go for.

It seemed that the Victorian mood board was the RSCs preferred option; it included many elements that would work well with a modern uniform concept, such as collarless shirts, pin tucks and puffed sleeves for the ladies. We left all the mood boards, fabric and trims with the RSC team, for further deliberation and received these back a week later with plenty of comments.

May 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

The Design Work Continues

We spend a whole day with our design and production team. We try and translate the comments on the mood boards into three clearly defined design concepts; each of these design concepts now needs to be translated into a design for each of the 12 garments the RSC have asked us to produce for both male and female staff.

In keeping with the original budget, and to achieve the agreed economies of scale; some garments are to be worn by all the staff, and some just in one department.

New Technical Challenges

We need to devise some solutions to accommodate a clip-on radio (walkie-talkie) worn by the managers and front of house staff. These heavy radios have always ruined their clothes and we need to ensure that in future, the radios don't drag or pull on the fabric, or otherwise affect the look of the garments.

In addition, front of house staff need to carry around some seven specific items including

torches, programmes and tickets, and they'd like us to produce a concept for a bag to neatly accommodate all of them - and that fits with the look of the garments.

May 2010 - Liz Wainwright, head of theatre operations, RSC

We start to further discuss the practicalities of the uniforms. We need the clothes to work equally well for staff who are running around in a restaurant, or sitting behind a box office desk, for those who need to be visible in a crowded foyer, but discreet in a semi-dark auditorium.

Our staff ages range between 19 and 70, their sizes are equally varied. We are realistic that Debbie and Lauren at Fashionizer cannot please everyone, but we are confident that they will find good compromises where they can, and will help us translate the reasoning for these compromises back to the staff.

Artistic Direction

Meanwhile Debbie and Lauren send us their mood boards to reflect the four different design directions we could choose. We have great fun marking these up with comments. We find that there are elements of each of the boards that we like, but that generally the board influenced by Victorian elements is our favourite.

We also get really useful input from our associate designer Tom Piper on these, who gives us a fantastic insight into how period dress influences modern design in his work.

What Colour?

One crucial decision we have yet to make is the colour of the fabric panel in the jacket and waistcoat and the complementary shirt sleeve trim. We have to choose between azure blue and deep red. The colours that the architects are intending to use in the building are not entirely confirmed - most crucially the colour of the auditorium seats!

We don't want to clash with items like these! It is hard to make this decision with the building not yet finished. We settle in the end for the azure blue. As the RSC logo is red and the current uniform is similar, we decide for a complete change.

June 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

The Crux of the Matter

Back in the Fashionizer studio, our pattern cutters and designers have cut all of the garments, and have reviewed the first and second toiles. (A toile is a version of a garment made to test and perfect a particular design). The panelling issue proved a challenge and our pattern cutter tries a variety of ways of introducing this.

We eventually found a solution for the waistcoats, ▶



The RSC uniform requirements are...

1. Reflect world class nature of RSC
2. Look smart
3. Is creative/artistic and unique to the environment
4. Comfortable to wear
5. Make staff feel part of a team
6. Look approachable
7. Relates to the interior of the new theatre

Uniformly Fashionable

It's important that the RSC's garments look contemporary, but they cannot appear to be too fashion-led or the uniforms will quickly date and not provide value for money.

The uniform criteria are certainly a challenge especially as they need to be delivered within the tight budget constraints that we've just agreed.

The Creative Process

At the next meeting we decided that we'd start the design process with no preconceptions as to how the end result should look. We began by exploring the history of the theatre, the shapes and colours of clothing and influences from each of the periods that are reflected in the RSC building.

- Elizabethan: from the Shakespearean period itself



▶ though we weren't happy with the solutions for panelling in the jackets, and so we tried a introducing a back panel in the contrast colour. We'll wait to see what the RSC feedback is on this.

Radioing for Help!

We struggled to adapt the garments to minimise the impact of wearing their heavy radios. Several experiments later, and we decided to add a leather panel to the waistband of the ladies skirt and to give the waistcoats splits in the backs.

August 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

We are waiting for final measurements for the wearer trial. Our factories have gone on holiday; we are taking the opportunity to put all the specification information together, work out the sizes required by all staff participating in the wearer trial and get everything to our manufacturers so that they can proceed with production when they return from their August break.

We thought everything was going to plan until the last Friday in the month, when our main fabric mill returned from holiday and called us to apologise for (uncharacteristically) letting us down. They had not managed to finish our sample fabric before they had closed in early August, so the sample fabric will now be delayed till mid September! This means we will have to postpone our sample presentation date to RSC, and they have to reschedule the wearer trial, which is an issue as the theatre is dark and some staff will be on leave during that time.

October 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

Sample Presentation

We present our final samples to a full room of managers at the RSC, many of whom we have never met before. In true RSC fashion, two members of their team volunteered to model the uniforms for everyone. Everyone's first impression is extremely positive in terms of style, shape and colour. We need to address however a few issues of fit and sizing, as for some reason, all the garments have come up slightly larger than anticipated.

We get some initial feedback from the assembled team. The F&B (Food & Beverage) team prefer the simpler of the two aprons that we have presented; the Ushers' bag as expected, needs re-thinking, following the comments on how the contents would be carried and used in reality. The solution for accommodating the radio was well received. We leave all the garments with the RSC team for the wearer trial (a key stage in implementing a new uniform) and await feedback from participating staff.

October 2010 - Liz Wainwright, head of theatre operations, RSC

Testing, Testing... 123...

A set of clothes for each person (taking part in the wearer trial) arrives and we go about testing these in the Courtyard Theatre. Staff wear the uniform samples whilst they are working and are given forms to fill in to let us know how they feel, how they wash and iron and what the public think

of them. There are a few observations about details on waistbands on trousers and skirts, which we feed back to Debbie and Lauren to look into. We decide on a slightly different neckline for the female waistcoat.

The staff tell us they like the feel of the 100% cotton shirts and do not feel too hot or too cold in the other items. The feedback is generally good. We wish we could have longer to test the items, but send Debbie the feedback that we have got.

November 2010 - Debbie Leon, managing director, Fashionizer

We've received some feedback from the wearer trial. We're pleased that generally all the staff liked the uniforms, and that the comments are specific and very small. For example, they'd like to change the logo'd buttons to plain ones as they look too busy; they want to cut the dress as not enough people will wear it and it is too problematic to fit; they want to remove the trim fabric in the back of the male jacket, and they'd like the sleeves to be a bit wider on the shirts to enable them to be easily rolled up.

Now we have all the necessary information, we can make the appropriate changes before we start actually manufacturing the new uniforms.

In the next instalment we follow the progress made in the six months leading up to and including the launch of the uniform.

You can read the entire RSC/Fashionizer blog at <http://fashionizer.com/press/category/rsc/>