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# DRESSING FOR SUCCESS: THE SUIT ON STAGE AND OFF

BY HENRY SHAFFER

*"Fashion is gentility running away from vulgarity and afraid of being overtaken."* William Hazlitt

**W**hen we dress, we are transmitting signals about our state of mind: how we need to be perceived by others; how we express a personal desire, and if we are lucky, how we fulfill our most secret dreams. For better or for worse, it is this public display of the daily, private reckoning with our bodies, that is a source of intense anxiety. We never, ever want to look silly, stupid or foolish. With this in mind, it must be said that we generally dress to express affinity with a certain group. There is comfort in being accepted by others, and clothing is a tool of mutual positive reinforcement. Very few individuals have the ego necessary to flaunt all the accepted varieties of dress and fashion available to us today: what is perceived by the majority as rebelliousness in dress places the wearer in the ranks of an identifiable minority. This herd mentality is what gives any era its recognizable look.

During the past six months I costumed five different theatrical productions ranging in period from 1660 to the present. *The Scarlet Letter* takes place in the latter half of the seventeenth century, *The Magic Flute* was composed and first performed in 1791, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Voyage Inheritance* were written and produced in 1895 and 1905 respectively, and *Six Degrees of Separation* premiered in

1992. While the caprice of women's fashion over this time period proved to be a source of delight and wonder, and sometimes puzzling to re-create, the men's fashions followed a stately path of evolution in technique and tailoring. The present day culminates in the triumph of the tailor's art, the man's suit, and it is this evolution, based on my recent experience, that I intend to trace.

The first important change in men's garments occurred around 1200 AD. Men shifted away from the traditional draped and semi-fitted garments worn by both sexes in favor of more fitted clothing which revealed the leg. The length of men's gowns underwent an evolution similar to what occurred with women's hemlines in the 20th century: once the ankle was revealed, it was only a matter of time before the entire leg became fair game for display. Men began to experiment with cutting and shaping fabrics, designing garments that conformed to the body. Women's fashions concentrated on what became three traditional feminine garments: a skirt which covered the legs, some sort of bodice, and veils or hats. The mini-skirt revolution in women's fashion of the 1960's occurred in men's fashions approximately 700 years earlier. Knit hose did not appear until the time of Elizabeth I. Prior to that time, hose or stockings were cut in a number of different pieces contoured to the leg. A symbiotic relationship between technology and fashion came into existence. As tailors developed new ways of cutting, the fashions of the times reflected these advances. In retrospect, developments in men's clothing at the end of the 17th century were crucial to the origin of the suit, and what came to be the "modern" look in men's clothing.

By 1675, Paris had become the fashion capital of the European world and the year is significant in the development of Western fashion. Until that time, men were responsible for the design and construction of both men's and women's clothes. The measuring, cutting, sewing and fitting of garments were dominated by the tailor's guilds, which had as much importance as other artisan and professional guilds, and were as male-dominated. Although professional seamstresses were hired to do the necessary handwork on seams, trims and finishing, and women were responsible primarily for shirts, underwear, household linens and children's clothes, they were never permitted, much less trained, to participate in the more complex technology of patterning, cutting and fitting garments. In 1675, a group of French seamstresses successfully petitioned Louis XIV for permission to form a guild of female tailors for the making of women's clothes, thus becoming the first professional dressmakers. This split was to have profound consequences as women dressed women and men dressed men.

There is continual debate about an individual's impact on fashion and the development of a definite style over a period of time. Some scholars are loathe to attribute any serious trends in style to one person. Others contend that these trends can be attributed to a specific person precisely because fashion depends so much on individual taste. At the center of this debate, not surprisingly, stands Louis XIV (in red high heels, I might add).

The design for *The Scarlet Letter* illustrated the debate. Both Dimmesdale and Bellingham wore similarly tailored garments. The costume consists of a shirt, breeches, waistcoat and frock coat and represents approximately fifty years of evolution and experimentation in men's tailored garments. However, the frock coat itself was a fairly recent innovation for the period and is based on the kaftan. The West's fascination for Eastern art and culture, or Orientalism, has a long history, and as colonial expansion by the European powers extended into Africa and the Near East, this fascination found expression in modes of dress. European men during the 17th century adopted the kaftan as a domestic garment, much like the modern bathrobe, but, for whatever reason, the cut and style of the garment found its way into formal, public dress. What differentiates Dimmesdale and Bellingham is the fabric, and this is where Louis XIV, Charles II, the French silk



Sevante Martin as Gwendolen and Ian Merrill Peakes as Jack in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Peterborough Players*, August 1999.

and the English woolen industries come into play. Charles spent his exile during the Commonwealth as the guest of Louis XIV (Charles' mother, Henrietta Maria, was Louis' aunt.) After the Restoration, Charles returned to London, having adopted the French mode of dress known as petticoat-breeches, which ranks high in the more outlandish developments of men's fashion. The chroniclers of that era, Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, recorded the dress and manners of the Stuart court in great detail and were particularly fascinated by the rivalry between Charles and Louis in styles of clothing. Daily reports from the ambassadors in London and Versailles included among other things, precisely how the monarchs dressed throughout the day (this was a period when every moment had its function and every function required the appropriate attire). At one point, Charles appeared at court attired in an ensemble radically different from anything seen until then, essentially a three piece suit. The sensation was chronicled by both Pepys and Evelyn. From Pepys we have "This day the King begins to put on his vest ... being a long cassocke close to the body of black cloth ... and a coat over it, and the legs ruffled with black ribband ... and, upon the whole, I wish the King may keep it, for it is a very fine and handsome garment." Evelyn remarks, "To Court, it being the first time his Majesty put himself solemnly into the eastern fashion of vest ... resolving never to alter it, and to leave the French mode, which had hitherto obtained to our great expense and reproach. Upon which divers courtiers and gentlemen gave his majesty gold by way of wager that he would not persist in this resolution." Charles, obviously one not to pass on a bet and to make good on a dare, did persist. Louis was outraged at this *lese majeste* and retaliated (Pepys again) "... in defiance to the King of England caused all his footmen to be put into vests, and the the noblemen of France will do the like: which, if true, is the greatest indignity ever done by one prince to another." Upon such slights do empires rise and fall.

For the next hundred years, the French and English battled it out. British colonial expansion into the Near and Far East was to have profound effects on the world's textile industries. Closer to home, while the Bourbons patronized the silk and lace industries in France, the English aristocracy promoted the wool industry and, by wearing wool, elevated it to the status it holds even today as the preferred fabric for men's suits. One designer put it best: "Wool is so forgiving." Wool is flexible and elastic. With the proper pattern, good cutting and stitching, wool can be steamed and carefully manipulated to fit the shape and movements of the wearer's body without permanently buckling and rippling. Silk, on the other hand, has little or no elasticity and will wrinkle with every movement. The French styles, made in silk, dominated the fashion of court attire throughout Europe. The silk frock coats, waistcoats and breeches, with rows of buttons and buttonholes and applied embroideries created a lustrous, rippling surface



Karen Krastel as Cecily and Kraig Swartz as Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. *The Peterborough Players*, August 1999.

with each movement of the wearer. But English aristocracy spent little time at court, preferring to reside at their country estates, where more utilitarian clothing was de rigueur. Coats, vests and breeches made of wool or leather were better suited to country life. The more subdued matte surface of wool stood in contrast to the shimmer of silk. Where silk began to be associated with intrigue and artificiality, wool was valued for its connotations of sobriety and righteousness. By the time of the *philosophe*, the emphasis in men's fashion reflected the respect and admiration for the natural man. The simple brown wool ensemble of Benjamin Franklin elicited the admiration of the entire French court. With the Neo-classical revival in the late 18th century, the emphasis on basic form rather than on surface illusion and the "rediscovery" of the male body, men's fashion adopted as its model the simple clothes of English country life. However, the French, even in the bloodiest days of the Terror, were still able to profoundly influence men's attire. For approximately four centuries, men wore hose and breeches, effectively wearing two different, form-fitting nether garments. The dreaded *sans culottes* liberated men from tight, constrictive hose and the accompanying breeches. Any woman can tell you about the discomfort associated with panythose, and while hose and breeches continued to be worn into the second decade of the nineteenth century, they were effectively killed off as an integral

part of a man's wardrobe during the French Revolution. The *sans culottes*, or literally "without underwear," represented by the laboring classes of French society, wore long, loose-fitting trousers facilitating ease of movement. A recognizable, and vocal, segment of society can influence fashion despite its status, and the fusion of the comfortable *pantalon* (which is basically what the *sans culottes* wore) with the frock coat and waistcoat of the English gentry became the model for men's fashion to the present day.

Where some might see a great levelling of society and men's fashion with the rise of the suit, others see an opportunity for greater variation and competition. Where some see the monotony of equality, others see the capacity for individual expression of taste and detail. The technological innovations of the textile industry included not only the cotton gin and the flying shuttle, but the development of the standard tape measure. Before 1820, tailors measured the various dimensions of their clients' bodies and marked them on a long tape for easy reference. Along the bottom of the pattern pages from Diderot's *Encyclopedia* is a key to matching up the crucial points of the garment for construction, similar to the distance scale on a map. All the consumer needed to do was match the individual's measurements to the key. One of the unsung heroes of consumerism is the anonymous tailor who realized that there was a striking similarity in some of his clients' measurements — and thus the ready-to-wear suit was born. It goes without saying that it was American tailors who seized on the capability for a mass market, and by the mid-nineteenth century it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the American gentleman from the American laborer. One element of fashion that has



Mary Beth Hurt as Ouisa and Richard Cox as Flan in *Six Degrees of Separation*. *The Peterborough Players*, July 1999.

not changed over the centuries is dressing for an event or a specific moment in the calendar — especially on a daily basis. The upper classes have always distinguished themselves not only in the quality of the fabrics or embellishments, but in their ability to change clothes throughout the day. What is worn in the morning at home is not appropriate for an afternoon social call which is definitely out of place at a formal dinner party. While the American shopkeeper may be able to emulate his betters in a ready-to-wear suit on a Sunday at church, that is the most he will be able to do. (It should be remarked that rented formal attire is a very recent phenomenon — and rented clothing is fraught with all sorts of perils.) The variety in men's attire in *The Voyage Inheritance* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* is indicative of dressing for the occasion. The banker and his clerk are dressed similarly for business — later in the play, the banker returns home to dress



Jane Houdyshell as Kitty and Buck Shirner as Larkin in *Six Degrees of Separation*.  
*The Peterborough Players*, July 1999.

for dinner in white tie and tails which, it is assumed, his clerk would never do. By contrast, Algernon and Jack are dressed for the same task — to make love to a beautiful woman. Jack, however, is dressed for town. Algernon is dressed for the country. All are wearing variations on a theme and have the ability to look amazingly alike (*Voysey*) or extremely different (*Earnest*) as the occasion, and personal taste, demands. One of my favorite lines from *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Algernon's retort to Jack when he, Jack, says that he has to change his clothes —

“Please don't be too long about it. I have never known a man who took so long to dress with such little result.” To which Jack replies that, unlike some people, he is never over-dressed. Algernon's response: “If I am occasionally over-dressed, I make up for it by being immensely overeducated.” All of this could be a designer's nightmare: is Jack poorly dressed? Doubtful. Is Algernon over-dressed? Possibly. Can lapses in judgement be attributed to a surfeit of knowledge, as Wilde would have us believe? It all depends on one's taste, which, of course, is always open to debate and illustrates an interesting phenomenon. Clothes or fashion rarely form the topic of male conversation. It is unusual to hear a man

comment on another man's attire. Men are able to assess other men by their attire through a variety of subtle signs and signifiers, an unspoken, but recognized, code.

Consider the fact that Flan and Larkin in *Six Degrees of Separation* are wearing the same suit. Two women wearing identical dresses is potentially disastrous. Two men wearing the same suit reinforce each other. The men are able to individualize their attire by the choice of shirt and tie, of which there is considerable variety: Will the shirt be a solid or stripe? French cuffs or plain? How wide a tie is fashionable? Paisley or stripe? What remains constant is the shared language, the supported vanity, the sense of relief. That Flan and Larkin wear identical suits occurred more by accident and was not a conscious choice, due to the exigencies of designing for summer stock. Despite having the cachet of recognizable stars and professional actors, most summer stock theatres operate under very tight budgets. Fortunately, *The Peterborough Players* has a large stock of donated contemporary clothes from which to pull a show. That the costume stock would have two grey double-breasted suits to fit two wildly different body types (Flan is a 41 Long, Larkin is a 46 Short) attests to the universality of the suit, and that grey suit in particular, as part of a man's wardrobe. Flan and Larkin happily occupy the same space wearing the garment. The unspoken agreement telegraphs shared taste, shared values while maintaining a respect for individual choice. What could be better?

The future? Some fashion critics say that we may be moving towards an era of “Informality” due to the influence of athletic and children's wear on adult fashion. I am more interested in what Ray Kurzweil, the chronicler of artificial intelligence, has to say. By 2030, computers will have matched all the functions of the human brain, and by 2060 computers will be endowed with the capacity to feel emotion. The question that presents itself is not how will men and women dress in the future, but how will all members of the brave new cyberworld dress?

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