



Circus Costumes Across the Decades: A Visual Thematic Analysis of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus Show Programs from 1950-2017

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Introduction/Background

The Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus (RBBB) was an American institution for 146 years, criss-crossing the country to bring performances to audiences nationwide (Albrecht, 2014). As part of the culture of live entertainment, souvenir show programs were produced to accompany each performance for the attendees to read and enjoy. These programs provided information about the history of the company, the sequence and location of events and performers' acts, advertisements, tour routes, and illustrated or photographic images related to the shows. Viewed chronologically, these RBBB show programs provide a rich informational resource for the study of circus costume history over time. The researcher traveled to the John and Mable Ringling Museum Archives in Sarasota, FL in January 2020 to study RBBB circus artefacts such as show programs and performer photographs. Digital copies of the RBBB show programs were reviewed for visual and textual information about the evolution of circus costumes over an extended period of time. Out of the preliminary show program review, the following research questions were developed: What kinds of costume-related information can be gleaned from an analysis of RBBB show programs? How did RBBB circus costumes evolve over time?

Analysis of circus show programs as archival research tools is not a new phenomenon, though Vareschi and Burkert mention that the use of show programs or playbills as objects of research by theatre historians typically precludes their "agency in the process of producing critical, aesthetic...categories within cultural awareness" (2016, p. 602). Although circus historians regularly access archival show programs in the course of their work, such as Albrecht's (2014) history of "The Greatest Show on Earth," there has not been a comprehensive review of circus costume history through analysis of show programs. Vareschi and Burkert (2016) describe the value of reviewing large numbers of playbills so as to explore the resultant categories found. In this project, therefore, it was decided to utilize decades' worth of RBBB show programs to better explore the changes in circus costume over extended amounts of time. The show programs for years 1950 through 2017 were selected for analysis, as preliminary review of the show programs from before the 1950s yielded fewer performer photos and costume-specific information than the following decades. RBBB's final tour ran from 2016 to 2017, hence, analysis of the identified time period's materials resulted in 67 individual show programs. This number excludes special performances, exhibitions, and out-of-country appearances.

Process

Visual thematic analysis of the contents of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus show programs yielded valuable snapshots of not only performers in resplendent costumed regalia, but also a timeline of trends in circus performance across decades. The following parameters were used in the first round of sorting through the show program pages to help in organizing the content data: costume designer interviews/features and biographies; photographs of artists in costume engaged in their act; informational written textual content. The designer interviews/features and biographies were then plumbed for statements related to the process and development of the garments, as well as specifics related to performers' act needs. The photographs of artists in costume were first divided by decade for ease of categorization, then transferred in .jpg format into the software Tropy, enabling the researcher to enter metadata and tags, which were then be used to search by topic. The tags were added to the photographs as a way to help categorize the images, so that individual and cross-category themes could be viewed. For example, a search of the tag "trapeze" would result in photographs of trapeze performers in costume across decades. The tags entered were based on the researcher's knowledge of circus arts and costume history. Additionally, the written textual content from the programs was entered into a spreadsheet and divided into categories such as: discipline (e.g. aerial, acrobatics, equilibratics), apparatus (e.g. trapeze, tightwire), with the possibility to sort by year. The categories were then compared across both Tropy and spreadsheet to draw visual and textual conclusions about the evolution of circus costume design.

In narrowing down the categories for analysis, it was decided to exclude the following: clowns, animal acts, and spectacle or "spec" costumes. The reasoning behind these choices was due to the need to restrict the amount of visual data for analysis and the decision to focus on the costumes related to the human body's interaction with an apparatus, other human being, or extreme range of movement in space (such as contortion). Further, the excluded categories listed above are each worthy of their own historical costume research beyond the scope of the present work.

Due to the large amount of costumed artist photographs, it was necessary to divide by decade, which helped to provide an interesting timeline of trends in costume silhouettes, materials, and aesthetic influences. For example, there was a considerable difference between the costumes of the 1970's as compared to the final years in the late 2010's – not only did materials technology develop over the years, but trends evolved from sequined and feathered opulence to printed spandex and hot-fix rhinestones. Additionally, while some acts' garment silhouettes remain similar over time, others reflect changes in body coverage and shape. With the larger context of show theme, the artistic team including producers, directors, and designers have each their own influence on the look and feel of the show (Albrecht, 2014) which is evident in certain years' programs, e.g., the shows of costume designer Don Foote (1970s & 1980s) have a different aesthetic signature than those of Max Weldy (1960s). Altogether, the textual content coupled with the visual content provides rich and valuable information about the context of the shows, the costumes worn, and reveals clues into the reasoning behind some of the aesthetic and functional choices in the costume development process.

Conclusions

Visual thematic analysis of show programs can yield valuable information about the context and evolution of circus costumes over an extended period of time. Of particular value due to the longevity of the company's history, the show programs of RBBB are especially important to this field of study because they not only track one circus over time, they also provide an unparalleled visual history of circus costume in America. The use of these types of archival materials enable study of apparel silhouettes and materials trends as well as insights into the designers' processes and aesthetics related to the show themes. Further context is provided through written features, interviews, and the copy that accompanies the performers' photographs. Altogether, this information combines to paint a clear picture of the designers' intentions, performance aesthetics, and functional needs of the costumes worn in the shows. Analytical viewing of the RBBB show programs thus enabled the researcher to draw conclusions about the evolution of circus costumes over a specific period of time in the United States. As such, it is possible to develop a visual and textual timeline of circus costume history, relevant to the field of costume design through archival study.

References

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