

Handmaidens of the Glamour Culture: Costumers in the Hollywood Studio System

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The role call of great designers in this book should not obscure the fact that thousands of expert seamstresses, cutters and fitters, milliners and wardrobe men and women, working long hours with little reward, made the brilliant concepts reality. The giants of Hollywood stand on their shoulders and, although they are not named here, their contributions should not pass unnoticed.—David Chierichetti, *Hollywood Costume Design*.¹

Introduction

In *Women's Oppression Today*, Michèle Barrett notes that economic discrimination against women is rooted in the structure of the family and the contrasting roles ascribed to men ("breadwinners") and women ("pin money").² The discriminatory division of labor in the home has historically been reinforced by the unions that controlled access to jobs.³ The motion picture industry, for most of its history, essentially borrowed this division of labor in its determination of women's place in the work process. Women were, for the most part, restricted to a very few jobs, in fact, they held the lowest paid jobs in the industry. In addition to secretarial jobs, women's work included gluing films together in poorly ventilated film labs and sewing and handling costumes for actors. The exceptions to the rule of low pay and low status for women were those very few women who became motion picture stars, character actors, film editors, publicists, and costume designers.

In order to keep men's salaries relatively high, most Hollywood locals, like other unions throughout the country, simply refused to admit women members into their ranks until well into the 1970s when pressure from the U.S. Justice Department forced them to do so. Today, there are women in nearly all the Hollywood locals. For women who worked during the "Golden Era" (1920–1960) of the Hollywood studio system, however, horizons were very limited. In this period, the majority of women working in non-performance technical jobs were clustered in two local unions—the film lab workers and the costumers union.

The work of the costumers was indispensable to the industry as a whole since their contributions are visible to the audience, comprising as they

do a key element of mise-en-scene. The following will shed some light on the work of costumers and costume manufacturing workers and on the way their work and creativity was integral to the production of Hollywood glamour culture.

It offers an internal view of the labor process—its organization and human consequences—in the Hollywood costume houses and the costume departments of the Hollywood studios.⁴ Finally it is concerned with the role of costumers, especially women costumers, in the Hollywood studio system—a system that died a slow death in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Work

In the very early days of Hollywood film production, most producers depended upon the centralized collection of costumes and costume props from rental companies such as Western Costume House, or upon actors wearing their own clothes on the set. Western Costume House started around 1910 by supplying costumes for westerns. The exponential growth of film production in the 1920s, however, led the major studios to develop their own costume departments. In the large studios—Fox, Warners, Paramount, MGM, and RKO—the costume department was broken down into two sub-departments: manufacturing and finished wardrobe.

What is loosely called *manufacturing* might more aptly be called *custom creating*. Expert artisans—people with job titles such as cutter, fitter, figure maker, table lady, draper, finisher, tailor, beader, milliner, and shoemaker—transform raw sketches and bolts of every conceivable kind of material into finished garments (Figures 9.1 and 9.2). To do this, these artisans must understand the designer's ideas, use dyes expertly and have an almost instinctive command of color values. They must be able to cut, pattern, and sew the raw materials with speed and dexterity and in addition to these skills they must develop an infinite amount of patience with live fittings (Figures 9.3 and 9.4). It takes years of refinement of their skills before costumers can transform a sketch into a living garment of color, shape, personality, and authenticity on the screen. And once it is made, it is used over and over again: an alteration here, a hem lowered, an ornament added until it begins to fall apart. Then the costume is intentionally aged a bit more until it becomes an authentic-looking tattered and worn garment.⁵

Artisans working in the Hollywood studio era not only created chic or glamorous, and old or tattered clothes but also trick costumes for such films as *Alice In Wonderland* (1933), *Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Green Pastures* (1936), and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). For example, the *Costumers News* reports that the costume for the Tin Man became a major studio concern during the making of *Wizard of Oz*. All of the experts—the

makers of metal armor, the tin workers, the metal experts, the studio property men—were unable to make the Tin Man function properly. Finally they took the problem to the studio tailor shop where Sam Winters used metallic cloth and buckram stiffening to quickly solve the problem.⁶

Manufacturing continued to take place not only in the studio workrooms but also at Western Costume, which was founded by L. L. Burns, an Indian trader, and which, during the studio era, became the world's largest costume manufacturer. In 1949 Western's costumes were conservatively valued at ten million dollars and were produced by some two hundred skilled craft workers and artists such as Bill Emerton, a hat expert who made hats in at least two thousand different shapes and forms.⁷ The Program from the Eighth Annual Costumers Ball described Western as a labyrinth of cultural artifacts:

At first glance, as one walks through [Western's] cavernous depths, the impression is staggering. Thousands upon thousands of costumes. How many? Even Western doesn't know. Perhaps a million. And it's all there—the shoes, the hats, the accessories, the beads, bangles and baubles. If Western hasn't got it in stock, it will either make it or get it somehow. Need help on a period design? There are trained researchers constantly available to look up the most minute detail. Is it a question about the ornamentation on a Greek warrior's shield? The buttons on the waistcoat of an English dandy of the early 19th century? The frilly garters of a French can-can dancer? Name it and you'll find—as everyone does sooner or later—that the history of mankind is grist to the daily mill at Western.⁸

Much of that esoteric history can be found in Western's library which consists of thousands of rare manuscripts and books for costume researchers such as the legendary Bert Offord, an expert in police uniforms and ancient and modern weapons;⁹ or Larry Purdin, who received one of the first Masters degrees in costuming and who was awarded a fellowship from the government of Haiti;¹⁰ or Baston Duval, the Director of Research at Western in 1953 who was decorated by the Counsel General of France for his "true representation and accurate research on the national costumes of the Republic of France."¹¹

But, of course, for most women and men working at Western, there were no special decorations and recognitions; there were mostly long, back-breaking working days. Agnes Henry went to work as a wardrobe "girl" for Western Costume in 1942 during her high-school summer vacation. She claims that she succeeded because she was blessed with strength and good taste: strength to work from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. with a half hour for lunch; strength to lift heavy production dresses, which were often made out of yards and yards of velvet with huge skirts and petticoats with

hoop skirts constructed out of whalebone or steel; strength to keep going when her arms and back ached from lifting these heavy dresses and carrying them to and from their racks. Agnes recalls:

My job was to make sure the clothes fit the person. There would be racks and racks of clothes and you would have to figure out what looked best on a particular person and what would fit them best. At that time, the costumes weren't sized. You just had to look at it and guess, and then call someone in from the workroom to come in and do the actual fitting for the scene.

Someone from the studio, usually a costume supervisor, would call and tell Agnes how many people they would be working with the next day. The hours were long, the work demanding, and the pace was overwhelming:

We came in around 8:00 a.m. and began matching up people to clothes—as many as three every fifteen minutes or five or six people per hour, depending on how complicated the clothes were. We would outfit people until 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. Then the fitter would come in and we would write up the changes that needed to be made. After that we would accessorize the costumes until ten o'clock at night.¹²

Good taste was essential since costumers had to match costumes to actors and extras. Agnes selected costumes from hundreds of racks to be certain that these clothes not only fit more properly but were appropriate to the scene. Since there were no sizes on the costumes, the job required a sense of good fit and style. It was a perfect apprenticeship for a person who would become a key costumer and the motivation to get out of the costume room was great since the strain of lifting heavy costumes twelve hours a day, six days a week was so incredible.

Gender and Ethnicity in Manufacturing

The work process in the manufacture of costumes for principal actors today has changed little from the studio era. The costume designer makes a sketch, takes it either to Western Costume or to a studio workroom, talks to the supervisor and helps to select the material. The key costumer then makes arrangements for the actor or actress to come in for extensive measurements. After the specifications and measurements, the key costumer coordinates a meeting with the actor, the designer, the head woman in the workroom, the fitter, the woman who has made the costume and her assistant(s), as well as the producer and the director. Although each of these persons may use a different standard of judgment, in fact, every



Figure 9.1 Famous-Players Lasky/Paramount Pictures, 1919. Courtesy of Marc Wanamaker Bison Archive, CA.



Figure 9.2 Paramount Pictures, 1922. Courtesy of Marc Wanamaker Bison Archive, CA.



Figure 9.3 Paramount Pictures Costume Department, 1930. Courtesy of Marc Wanamaker Bison Archive, CA.



Figure 9.4 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Costume Department, 1933. Courtesy of Marc Wanamaker Bison Archive, CA.

one of them has to pass on a costume. As Agnes Henry recalls this practice, sometimes it takes "a room full of people to get one outfit."¹³

Manufacturing involves research, design, production, cleaning, and even the aging of costumes. When Georgina Grant started work in the manufacturing department at MGM in 1935 where she would work for thirty years, the studio had seamstresses, beaders, milliners, shoemakers, and both male and female tailors who made all the suits and uniforms. With a recommendation for the job from a neighbor in Los Angeles, a Mexican-American woman who did beading work in her home for MGM, Grant was given a tryout by a designer working on *Broadway Melody* of 1936. She describes the intimidation she felt at her initial interview:

He lined about seven or eight of us up in a row, and he handed us each an applique—white satin with braid on it—and told us to sew it to a backing. He'd pick them up and say, "You go; you stay." And when he came to me, he said, "Is that the best you can do?" I said, "No, but I thought you wanted it in a hurry." He handed me another one and said, "Do this one and give me your best work." So I did and he said, "You stay."¹⁴

Grant went on to perform nearly every task in the department at some point in her thirty-year career. She describes the MGM costuming process from top to bottom:

There would be at least ten people to a cutter and fitter. In those days we had eight cutters and fitters. We had a beading department and a tailor shop. The cutters and fitters made the pattern from designs ordered by the designer. We made the pattern in cotton to show Adrian, and then he and the star would "O.K." it. Then the fitter would fit it on the person. Then you would take the cotton apart, cut the finished costume. Then a fitting again—this time with the actual costume to be used in the film. It was a long process.¹⁵

Although the cutters and fitters were involved in a long and often tedious process, the beaders had an even more difficult job. MGM employed at least twenty expert women beaders. They were Mexican-Americans who had carried their craft with them from Mexico. Sometimes the studio contracted the work out to a factory, and the factory hired women to work in their homes, as was the case with Georgina's neighbor. Grant recalls that the beaders had the hardest work of all in the manufacturing department:

On a long dress like the kind Kathryn Grayson wore, the beading would go to the floor. It took a long time—months to make a single dress. It was all hand work done on a frame, with two or three women working

on a frame—all beading, beading, beading—enormously hard work. Beaders worked up to twelve hours a day. Their backs hurt at the end of a day. At least we could move around. Men did not do this kind of work. They made the suits and the dress coats.¹⁶

Regardless of the physical strain or the tedium of the work in these years, Georgina recalled that since it was the Depression, people felt that any employment was good to have.

David Chierichetti, in his *Hollywood Costume Design*, confirms this picture of the 1930s which he has from Shelia O'Brien, a pioneer union organizer who worked in Paramount's costume department during these hard times. Costumers worked three full-time shifts—eight to four, four to midnight, and midnight to eight; the workrooms were so jammed with people that one could just barely walk through the rooms filled with enormous skirts. Paramount would get so backed up that they had to farm out the costuming on several of their pictures to Western, which was just a few blocks away. The first time the work slowed down, Chierichetti notes, was during the Second World War because all of the studios were trying so hard to conserve materials. Studios would produce less lavish pictures than they had made in the 1930s, and the films they did produce played longer and drew larger audiences so that, for instance, a film that would have run a week or two in 1939 was running for sixteen weeks in 1943.¹⁷

As with many other departments in the studios, the costume departments worked long hours to meet production schedules—twelve hour days were routine. If a dress was to be worn in the next day's shooting, the costumer responsible stayed into the night until it was finished. Multiple identical copies of dresses were often required to prevent production delays. An entire crew might be kept waiting if a single copy dress was damaged during filming or rehearsal. Redundancy was essential. Chierichetti explains this:

If the costume is used in a very long sequence in a film, you need many copies of it. I think the record is held by Scarlett O'Hara in *GONE WITH THE WIND*, the dress she wears all through the burning of Atlanta up to the point that she gets back home and discovers her mother is dead. There were actually twenty-seven copies of that dress in various stages of deterioration.¹⁸

Many of the women and men who labored to produce so many and such elaborate costumes were immigrant laborers from such diverse countries as, in addition to Mexico, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Japan, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Russia. A large number of German Jews

came to work as tailors and seamstresses in the costume manufacturing departments in the 1930s. The various ethnic or national groups often specialized in the manufacture of the clothing of their native lands: beaders from Mexico; crochet workers from Armenia; turban wrappers from the Middle East; embroiderers from Japan and China. In the shops, then, English was often a second language.

Although Local 705 of the Motion Picture Costumers Union always had women and many ethnic groups represented in the costume manufacturing departments, Black Americans were not among these workers. Ted Ellsworth, business agent of the costumers union in the 1940s, was determined to place Grace January, a very skilled Black seamstress, at Paramount, but the attempt was, by his account, "a disaster." He recalls that both the studio and some union members protested his placement of Grace even though she was an attractive, well-qualified person and the studio needed help. Ellsworth recalls that she quit after a week because they would either not give her any work at all or just give her dirty work to do. She then found a job with one of the affiliated companies, the non-union shops that produce specialty work such as crocheting for studios. In Ellsworth's analysis, Blacks could find employment in the specialty shops because these affiliated companies were almost one hundred percent minorities from the owners on down. Most of the extremely fine crochet workers were from Europe, and they were minorities themselves. At that time, however, Ellsworth was less concerned about the studio reaction to a Black worker than he was about the union's acceptance of her.¹⁹

Blacks still have a difficult time gaining admittance to the unions that control film production jobs, although some progress has been made. Local 705 was one of the few union locals that was not targeted when the Justice Department investigated minority hiring in the 1970s. Local 705 actually had Black members before the other Hollywood locals, since the first Black wardrobe men and women had been hired in the early 1960s. At the time of the Justice Department's study, Local 705 had "every race you could think of," Ellsworth recalls, in addition to Chicanos and Blacks.²⁰

The Finished Wardrobe Department

Although in contrast to the manufacturing department, the finished department comprises a much smaller group, the rule still holds: for every costumer working on the set and dressing a star, there are many people behind the scenes making the clothes. Like the manufacturing department, the finished department has a sexual division of labor: women costumers work with female actors; men costumers work with male actors. In finished wardrobe, costumers analyze scripts for costume requirements and select

the clothing from the manufacturing department of Western Costume or purchase clothing from a retail outlet. These costumers are responsible for insuring that the correct clothing is on the correct person at the correct time, and for maintaining accurate records as to which actor wore which costume in which scene.

For some fortunate women, working at Western Costume was a stepping stone up to working on the set as a key costumer—as we have seen was the case with Agnes Henry who moved from Western to the RKO stock room where she classified garments and returned them to the rack. Shortly thereafter she began working on what the finished costumers call "the firing line," or daily work on the set. In the 1940s, the "set girl," as Henry was called, and costumer supervisor, were often one and the same person. In fact, in these years the distinction between designers and costumers was often blurred, although later contract agreements prohibited crossing over from one job classification to another without the appropriate union card. The fluidity of job categories at the time Henry began working at RKO meant that she could more easily rise to the position of key costumer—the primary supervisor for all costume work on the set.

Agnes Henry describes the work by key costumer as overseeing the others who actually handle the costumes on the set, but it also involves reading the script, making a chronological wardrobe plot breakdown (actresses only), and noting the names of the characters and the scenes in which they appear. She then meets with twenty or thirty department heads to coordinate hair dressers, make-up artists, and cinematographers.²¹ Chierichetti contends that the technological complexity of the old feature films made such extensive pre-production meetings necessary. These consultations no longer take place in regular television series or smaller budget features.²² Key costumers, however, do consult with the costume designers and make suggestions that are often incorporated into a scene. For example, Henry told the designer of the costumes for the *Enterprise* crew in the *STAR TREK* films that George Takei's uniform should not be yellow, since it would not offer enough contrast with his skin color. The designer agreed and made the change.²³

The main assistant to the women's key costumer is the "set girl," a position more important than it sounds since on big productions the set girl has assistants under her. As a means of making sure the right costumes are in the right scenes she keeps books with polaroid snapshots and descriptions of the jewelry worn and the color of the costume matched to the correct scene. Finally, the set girl checks the call sheet before she leaves at night in preparation for any unexpected changes in the next day's shooting schedule.²⁴ This is crucial since at the end of every day it is the costumer's job to see that every costume to be worn in the next day of shooting is cleaned, pressed, the dress shields changed, and the costume

even repaired if necessary. Frequently costumers are called upon to do emergency cleaning jobs on costumes, especially if make-up has to be removed from collars and sleeves. Such maintenance work is usually done by costumers in the manufacturing department, except when the film is being shot on location at some distance from Los Angeles.

Shooting on location, a more common practice today than in the studio era, places special demands on costumers because of the need to use every hour of daylight. If the motion picture or television program is shot on location in the Los Angeles area, for example, costumers leave home before the sun comes up, driving first to the studio to pick up costumes and then traveling from forty-five minutes to an hour to the location where they must see that the actors have their costumes in order and are ready to perform when the first light comes through. The crew shoots until it is dark. After checking the call sheet for possible changes for the next day, the costumers then return the costumes to the studio for cleaning and pressing. Only then can they drive home and get their short night's sleep—usually six hours or less.

Creativity

What costumers call "creativity" is synonymous with resourcefulness. It is a kind of spontaneous adaptability found in individuals who because of necessity have to do something with very limited resources. And among costumers some of the challenges to this resourcefulness are legendary. For example, the program from the Eighth Annual Costumers Ball tells the story of a Cecil B. DeMille costuming unit arriving in Egypt for the filming of *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and discovering that instead of the costumes for three thousand extras which they had brought with them from the studio, director DeMille wanted them to both find and make clothes for fifteen thousand extras.²⁵

Contracts with actors and extras today specify that they receive bonuses for wearing their own clothing and accessories which are appropriate to the scene. This encourages on-camera performers to maintain their own wardrobes, which means a savings for the producers, but a limitation which taxes the resourcefulness of the costumer. Chierichetti describes the way he had to transform extras into bathing beauties to save time and money on a film.

I was working on a film that took place on a ship. There were all these extras who had been told to show up in formal evening clothes, which they did. We did the scene in the ballroom and then, on the spot, they rewrote the script to include a daytime scene. So suddenly we were doing a scene out on the deck and the extras were sitting around on the

deck playing cards and so forth. The director said there should be some of them sunbathing. Well, this was the middle of winter, and it was fairly cold out. Very few of the extras had brought their bathing suits along. The director asked me if I thought I could get more bathing suits, and I said, "I doubt it. It's the middle of January." He told me to do the best I could do in two hours. We were in the middle of Long Beach, and they got me a limousine. I went into downtown Long Beach, but there were no bathing suits in any of the department stores. I went into a sporting goods store, and there were tennis suits on sale. I bought as many as I could get and took them back to the set. If I couldn't get a good fit, I pinned them up in the back. One extra was wearing a pink bra under her blouse—that became a swimsuit top. You just have to think very fast on the job.²⁶

Resourcefulness, or what one costumer calls "creativity," then, translates into substantial savings for the producer. Agnes Henry confirms this correlation between the tightness of the budget and the resourcefulness of the costumer in her description of the transition between work on feature films and telefilms:

I was in TV in the very beginning. I worked at Four-Star Television in the 1950s. I had more responsibility because I was on my own. I talked with the producer, did the script breakdown for costumes, rented or bought clothing at retail stores, brought the clothes back to the set and arranged fittings for the actors. There was no big head of the department, and the atmosphere was much friendlier. The pace of the work was incredibly fast. TV shows were made in a week, whereas you had months to do feature film. Because of the low budgets, TV was harder but also required you to be more creative.²⁷

Of course this is not the flamboyant sense of creativity that is flaunted at the Academy Awards ceremony. It is rather the *spontaneous* productive sense of creativity—the ability to find cheap and fast solutions to production problems, such as knowing how to "cheat" a bit on period costumes by altering contemporary clothes bought in retail stores to look like period costumers as Chierichetti describes:

With men's suits, for instance, if you're doing a 1930s or 1940s show, you can find in the stores today a pin-stripe suit that looks just right except that the lapels are a little off. You can have the changes made and that is a lot cheaper than having something made from scratch.²⁸

In the manufacturing departments, costumers also develop this spontaneous ability to make do in a hurry with very few resources. Georgina Grant recalls that in manufacturing the costumers had to make everything

themselves and sometimes the entire project depended on their own use of imagination and ingenuity. She recalls that one time she created long stoles out of nothing more than string. She was more surprised than anyone when they were used on the women in the chorus line. For Georgina Grant, and others like her, the work in the manufacturing department was tiresome and demanding, but it also had its special rewards. Grant still has souvenirs of photos and swatches of cloth that she worked with at MGM. She recalls:

I did mostly hand work. If there was anything rather fussy to be done, I got it. On the big screen, every stitch could be seen. The clothes were so beautiful in these days. You would work weeks and weeks and weeks on a period dress. You would have rows and rows of petticoats underneath before you ever got to the top. You had to make everything yourself.²⁹

Costumers prided themselves on creating fabulous costumes seen on the "most beautiful women in the world" on giant screens. The studios could then count on the loyalty of these workers because of the degree of personal satisfaction they found in their jobs which became the "intrinsic reward" for thirty-five years of low pay, low status, and backbreaking work.

Transitional Period: The Changing Image of Women

For the costumers working in the transitional period between the studio and television eras, patterns of employment changed drastically. The most significant change was that the studios no longer kept production staff on the payroll full-time. People who had worked at the same studios for more than thirty years found themselves adrift as freelance workers. The exceptions to this rule were those people who were fortunate enough to secure a job on a long-running television series, or those who worked at specialized facilities, such as the film labs or the costume houses.³⁰

Film producers are free to hire any member of Local 705 as a costumer as long as they are of the proper classification—finished wardrobe or manufacturing. When producers run short of help, they can either call costumers directly or call the union hall to contact additional help. Such calls to Local 705 are filled by the members of the local who have been out of work the longest. The union calls the people starting at the top of the unemployed list until all the available jobs have been filled. Unemployed costumers thus stay close to their phones in the afternoon to get possible calls from the union or from key costumers who may have already been hired by the assistant director or producer. Getting a call from a key costumer is largely a matter of personal contacts in the industry. Although

there is a base line of skill that all finished costumers must have in order to secure employment, finding work on a regular basis requires contacts in the industry, or ideally star actors will request specific people to handle their wardrobe. In other instances, costumers or key costumers are hired on the basis of their specialized knowledge; Bert Offord, for example, always found work because his knowledge of historical military uniforms was encyclopedic.³¹

Agnes Henry was part of the "new breed of women" who were hired in the finished departments during World War II. As Ted Ellsworth explains, before the war the wardrobe women's duties corresponded to what people in the theater call "dressers." Everything was prepared for them, and they just took the clothes from the racks to the set and helped dress the women actors when necessary. None had university degrees. Few had high school educations. People had no respect for them and they functioned more or less like servants. These women costumers often came from the theatrical industry themselves or were married to men who worked in the theater. At that time the motion picture industry was operating in the same way that the theater operated: that is, if they needed wardrobe women, stagehands brought in their wives to do the work. Ellsworth describes the situation before and during the war:

All wardrobe department heads were men. With one exception, men ran both the men's and women's wardrobe. Any decisions affecting the mix of employees were made by a man, and usually it was men who received the benefits. Universal was the exception. Vera West, a costumer and designer, ran both the men's and the women's department. Technically there was a man in charge of the men's wardrobe, but for twenty years Vera called all the shots. She was the first woman who didn't take orders from anyone but production people. She never had the title of department head, but she had all the responsibility.³²

Although Vera West may have "called all the shots" and had all the responsibility, she never officially headed the department. The head still had to be a man. During the Second World War, however, such sex discrimination practices began to change. The union began hiring articulate, educated, career-oriented women who ultimately changed the status of women working on the set. This change coincided with the rebound of the industry during the war. The studios were turning record box office receipts back into the studios to avoid paying excess profit taxes levied during the war, and the wardrobe departments could hire new people. When Ellsworth became business agent for the costumers' local union in 1942, he was in a good position to push for improved status for both men and women costumers working in the studios and in the shops.

Today the new women on the set, as Ellsworth describes them, are bright, creative, and innovative. Many have taken courses in film in colleges and art schools from which they now have degrees. Women are now in supervisory positions and have the same status as men, that is, if they are young or "well-preserved" in their maturity. Ellsworth notes, however, that there is still residual discrimination in the industry's preference for younger women:

They don't like old women around. They want younger girls. The average in the union now is ten years younger than in the 1930s. The average is thirty-five or forty, but that average is brought up by some women in their fifties or sixties. If women work themselves up as one of the people producers and directors have confidence in, there is no problem. In new people, they want younger women; but they have some very experienced women in their late fifties who are in demand all the time because they are good. . . .³³

In order to break into the industry today, a woman must not only be knowledgeable but she must be young and attractive. Unfortunately there are very different expectations for women and men in this job, as it doesn't seem to matter to anyone how the male costumers dress for work.

The Union

Although Clara Kimball Young, a dramatic and glamorous silent-film star, established the importance of costumes for a leading lady as early as 1914, studio executives were generally indifferent to the clothing worn by actors. "So isolated and unorganized was the very concept of costume that it was not until approximately the mid-1920s that Famous Players-Lasky, forerunner of today's Paramount, felt impelled to establish its own costuming department."³⁴ But still, costuming was not respected and costumers were only called on the set now and then when an emergency arose.

In the union today, there are more than 60 classifications and more than forty-five rates of pay.³⁵ For over half a century, costumers have created garments that have exerted enormous influence throughout the world. In order to understand how the costumers' position in the Hollywood industry has changed over the past fifty years, we must look at the motivation of the first unionized costumers, the role the union has played in the development of the art of costuming, and the costumer's sense of professionalism.

Nineteen finished wardrobe women and men formed the first motion picture costumers union in 1929, organized as a federally chartered union

of the American Federation of Labor. Until the late 1930s, the manufacturing and finished departments of the studios and costume houses continued to operate as open shops, that is, an individual could work in the studios without belonging to a union. In the early days of the Hollywood studio system, the costume department was a favorite place for studio bosses to place "girlfriends" and inept relatives for whom they could find no other job in the studios. This practice undermined serious union organization and also contributed to the generally low regard in which the costumers were held by their co-workers in other departments. Conditions and wages for the costumers were among the worst in the motion picture industry. As was the case with most unions in Hollywood before the New Deal legislation supporting union organization and collective bargaining, members of the costumers union caught soliciting other workers for union membership were often fired from their jobs. The early members of the motion picture unions had to be particularly dedicated and militant in their efforts to secure bargaining rights for better wages and working conditions.³⁶

Georgina Grant, the daughter of a Scottish union organizer, was one of those early militant workers in the manufacturing branch of the industry. She has vivid memories of those aspects of her own job that led her to become a union member and organizer:

Before unionization, I would go in at 7:00 a.m., get no break, and not get lunch at one o'clock. We worked Saturday and Sunday for the same wages we got during the week—18 dollars a week for six days a week for as many hours as they told you to stay. There was no vacation pay, holiday pay, or overtime—only straight salary. Sometimes, they would work you four hours and send you home and dock your weekly pay. You would get a day off during the week if they weren't busy. When I first went there, they could call me to work at four in the afternoon, just when you were sitting down to eat, and they would tell you, "Come in right now. And work these hours and find your way home any way you like." Women were afraid to walk home at night. There was always the pressure, and you didn't want to lose your job, so you kept your mouth shut lots of times. In 1935, any work was good work.³⁷

This was during a period in which there was no social security, no unemployment compensation, and no pension plan. The union wanted to obtain several rights for its members, including protection from harassment for union activities, higher salaries, a guaranteed eight-hour work day, time and one half for any hours more than eight worked in a single day, specified lunch and break periods, and eight hours turnaround time between shifts worked by individual employees.

The studio manufacturing department employees were organized in the mid-1930s and joined Local 705 in 1941. Grant, who was instrumental in

organizing the women in the MGM shop, recalls that she helped organize the union which she joined before 1937 at a great personal risk. The cutters and the fitters she worked with at that time were interested in the union so they had meetings in their homes. The "table ladies" (shop supervisors in women's manufacturing), didn't like union organizing because at that time they were in command, and such union activity threatened their power. Grant recalls:

As in most places, the head of the workroom was quite powerful. They domineered us and this hurt us—hurt our feelings. I organized the whole work room, and all the girls joined. When the union finally began to get involved, the table ladies had to kowtow a bit and observe the rules.³⁸

The costume house employees were the last to be organized and finally joined the union in 1944.³⁹

Women costumers in both the manufacturing and finished departments were especially interested in getting equal pay for comparable work. In 1945, the costumers in manufacturing became the first group of craft workers in the studios to successfully negotiate a contract with the producers that afforded equal pay for male and female costumers in equivalent classifications. Although the tailors strenuously objected, the union equalized wages for seamstresses and tailors, largely because the women, according to Ted Ellsworth, "raised so much hell."⁴⁰

Male costumers, doing the same work as female costumers on the set, were paid more on the basis of their "head of household" status, but this reasoning was galling to many of the women. Agnes Henry describes how her vote for the union was inspired by a different reasoning—that women's wardrobe is at least equal to and perhaps more important than men's because of the very nature of the industry:

Personally, I felt that ladies' wardrobe was just as important as men's. With ladies, there is more required in putting everything together than there is with men—especially when you consider how Hollywood focuses on women and their role in being beautiful. When I could vote for equal pay, I put my hand up.⁴¹

Regardless of the focus of the industry and the complexity of their jobs, however, women in the finished department did not receive equal wages for comparable work until the 1970s.

Local 705 has had close to an equal number of men and women members for many years. Yet, unlike other Hollywood talent and craft unions with significant female membership, the members of Local 705 have never

elected women as business agent or president. Ted Ellsworth, who served as business agent of Local 705 from the early 1940s to the early 1950s, felt that it was not a question of discrimination: "Women never wanted those positions; I've never considered why. Women have played important roles on committees, thought."⁴² Agnes Henry, who did serve on committees and ran unsuccessfully for local vice-president in 1984, suggested that the union has never had a woman business agent because the small minority of members who actively participate in the union's internal affairs are afraid that a woman would not be as strong as a man at the bargaining table or in handling grievances. Henry notes a trend among younger women who tend to be less active in union affairs:

I think the young people in the union might make changes, but they don't seem to have the time to come to meetings. I talk to young girls on the set and try to get them involved. A lot of them get complacent once they get into the union and feel that someone else should do the work.⁴³

Henry's description of the younger women's attitudes might confirm Judith Stacey's analysis of the phenomenon of post-feminism—younger women who disassociate themselves from feminism as well as unionism and who take their current status for granted.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Henry tries to get the younger, newer union members to understand that they need to actively participate in the union and that it was the struggles of women and men in recent history that made their current working conditions possible.

One long-time member of Local 705 stands out as a prime mover in the women's struggle for equity in the film industry and exemplifies the changes in the last forty years. Sheila O'Brien started in the Paramount manufacturing work room, moved into finished wardrobe, onto the set at MGM, and eventually became a costumer designer. Ted Ellsworth feels that the equalization of salaries for seamstresses and tailors in 1945 was due entirely to the efforts of Sheila and outspoken others who "simply wouldn't stand for lower pay for women."⁴⁵ O'Brien had been part of the Local 705 negotiating committee since the 1930s, and by the mid-1940s she had the respect of the producers' negotiating them. Thus, although O'Brien never was elected to the key positions in Local 705, she actually was a powerful behind-the-scenes force in Hollywood labor circles and served for many years on the executive board of Local 705.

In the late 1940s, O'Brien became a costume designer for Joan Crawford and for a period of time she worked both as a costumer and a designer. The costumer designers had a guild in the 1950s, but this organization did not participate in collective bargaining with the producers. As the studio

system broke down, long-term contracts with designers were dissolved. It was Sheila O'Brien who once again rose to the task, turning the informal guild into Costume Designer Guild IATSE Local 892. She became its first business agent and negotiated the first collective bargaining agreement between the designers and the producers.⁴⁶

During the studio era, Local 705 was concerned with more than wages, benefits, grievances, and hiring practices. One special function that the union has undertaken since 1948 has been to sponsor the "Costumers' Ball," an annual event that serves the dual purpose of raising funds for the costumers' welfare fund and of recognizing the best costume work in the industry over the past year. The statuettes given out at the awards banquet, attended each year by the costumers as well as the stars they help to create, are appropriately called the "Adam and Eve" awards.

Conclusion

The union played a large part in developing a sense of professionalism among the costumers. It gave them better wages, conditions, and a sense of self-respect which costumers never had enjoyed in the pre-union days. It gave the costumers themselves, not the studio bosses, the chance to judge whether or not an individual was fit to be a co-worker.

On the one hand, to study the costumers' Local 705 is to study a microcosm of unions in general and sexism in the society at large. Women in Local 705 have never held the top positions of president or business agent, although they have typically agitated behind the scenes to alter the course of the union history. In the finished department, women have to be young, attractive, and knowledgeable to get the job, and personable, "well-kept," and proven excellent in the field in order to continue to be in demand.

On the other hand, the costumers have historically stood in a different relation to other unions and to U.S. society as a whole. In many respects, the costumers do *not* reflect the attitudes toward women of society at large in that they are one of the few unions in the U.S. that have had women members as founders and a nearly half-female membership. As early as 1945, the union successfully dealt with the issues of comparable worth in manufacturing, but it wasn't until the 1970s that the union resolved the comparable worth issues in the finished department.

During the studio era, skilled artisans were drawn to Hollywood to create clothing that was not only meant for actors to wear but for people to see. Since the wages of manufacturing employees were so low in the 1930s, one must assume that there was a special attraction in creating clothing that would become "bigger than life" on motion picture theater screens. For the manufacturing group, although the quality and manner

of work has changed very little through the years—they must still be the very best seamstresses and tailors available—there are far fewer opportunities for employment today than there were in the studio era. For the finished group, the work for women has changed from that of maids and dressers to that of genuine creative collaborators in motion picture production. The choices that key costumers exercise in selecting costumes affect the way in which audiences "read" characters in films and the nit-picking attention of the set costumers helps to avoid breaks in continuity, thus aiding in the all-important suspension of disbelief requisite to our enjoyment of the entertainment.