

The Invisible Work of the Costume Performer

Lorraine Smith

ABSTRACT

In the field of costume performance, the power of costume to create and communicate meaning and metaphor and enhance performer embodiment and audience connection has been evidenced and commended. There has been an abundance of research from both designer and performer perspectives, with a focus on the evolving relationship between the body and the costume. However, does 21st-century progressive experimental costume performance, which may include the use of unconventional materials, have the potential to impact the labour of the performer?

Costume can both reveal and hide the body, arguably making the work of the body visible and invisible. This research article builds on the paper presentation “The Invisible Work of the Costume Performer”, delivered at the NOFOD Conference 2024. It examines the potential for costume to conceal the cognitive, physical, and emotional labour of the performing body and the resulting impact this may have on the performer.

Building on the understanding of Western traditional approaches and hierarchies in performance making and the complex relationship between dancer/performer and pain, the performance projects *PING* (2014), *PANG* (2021), and *You Can Take Me Home Toni* (2023) are interrogated. From the perspective of the performer, and informed by discussions with designer Daphne Karstens, Lorraine Smith analyses and contextualises these projects through the lens of feminist concepts relating to invisible work and emotional management. The article concludes by identifying possible solutions for making visible the invisible labour of the performer in costume performance and for the management of this workload on the performer’s body.

SAMMENDRAG

Kostymers evne til å skape og kommunisere mening, og til å styrke utøverens kroppslige uttrykk og kontakt med publikum er godt dokumentert. Det finnes mye forskning fra både designer- og utøverperspektivet, med fokus på utviklingen av forholdet mellom kropp og kostyme. Men hvilket potensial har progressive eksperimentelle kostymeforestillinger i det 21. århundre, som kan inkludere bruk av ukonvensjonelle materialer, til å påvirke utøverens arbeid? Kostyme kan både avsløre og skjule kroppen, og dermed gjøre kroppens arbeid synlig og usynlig. Denne forskningsartikkelen undersøker kostymets potensiale til å skjule utøverkroppens kognitive, fysiske og emosjonelle arbeide og den resulterende innvirkningen dette kan ha på utøveren. Artikkelen undersøker forestillingsprosjektene *PING* (2014), *PANG* (2021) og *You Can Take Me Home Toni* (2023). Basert i utøverens perspektiv, samt diskusjoner med designeren Daphne Karstens, analyserer og kontekstualiserer Lorraine Smith disse prosjektene med en feministisk linse, gjennom konseptene usynlig arbeid og emosjonell håndtering. Artikkelen avsluttes med å identifisere mulige måter å synliggjøre og håndtere det usynlige arbeidet til utøveren i kostymbaserte forestillinger.

The Invisible Work of the Costume Performer

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Introduction

I am a performance maker and researcher with a background in dance. After a transformative period performing and choreographing for the MA in Costume Design for Performance at the London College of Fashion (2008–2014), I began to regularly collaborate with costume designers to devise and perform in costume-led works. When I refer to costume, I mean costume that has been designed and incorporated into the performance, with equal importance to the moving body and other creative elements. As a result, if you were to remove the costume, the performance would probably not work.

My work at the London College of Fashion enlightened me regarding the haptic nature of costume (Driscoll 2011; Dean 2015) and its potential impact on the performing body and the audience (Smith 2018). As a performance maker, costume has become a vital creative vehicle for exploring and communicating meaning and metaphor to the audience, as well as a tool for performer embodiment. My research, informed by my artistic practice, is from the perspective of the experiential performer-maker and focuses on the impact of costume on the performing body and the devising process. Much of my previous research has explored the positive impacts of costume, with only one publication (Smith 2021) examining the risks of costume through its potential impact on performer behaviour and embodiment as well as the impact it can have on the audience.

Daphne Karstens is a costume designer, wearable sculpture artist, and performance maker based in the Netherlands and an alumnus of the MA in Costume Design for Performance at the London College of Fashion. She has collaborated on a wealth of projects, including traditional stage performance, experimental performance, costume performance, installations, cabaret, and festival events. Karstens' designs, considered to be wearable art rather than traditional garments or stage costumes, are experimental and

innovative, utilising unconventional materials that push the boundaries of material in relation to body, shape, and structure (Karstens 2024).

Working with unconventional materials is challenging compared to traditional textile-based design, which tends to allow complete body movement for the performer. By contrast, nonconventional material designs can be awkward, uncomfortable, and risky to work with. However, it is this very nature of the materials that is exciting to work with and that enables higher levels of experimentation, allowing for fascinating body-costume dialogue and relationships to form. This is why Karstens and I have chosen to collaborate on such innovative wearable art costumes.

In 2019, I attended and performed at the Innovative Costume of the 21st Century Conference, Moscow. Sadly, all the exhibition photography of the costumed performers included the names of the designers and photographers, but not of the performers. This absence of the performer is not the norm in the performance sector or the world of Critical Costume.¹ In fact, it is usually the costume designer who is missing from the acknowledgements, reviews, etc. However, this did highlight concerns regarding a wider blind spot concerning the important contributions and labour of the performer. Since 2019, I have been engaging with more unconventional, larger-scale, and heavier costumes, which has raised interesting questions regarding the labour of the costumed performer. Rachel Hann and Sidsel Bech state that "costume is both an act of revelation and concealment, as it shapes action while simultaneously disguising the body's form and texture" (2014, 4). I would add that it hides the performer's labour.

Building on the understanding of Western traditional approaches and hierarchies in performance making and the complex relationship between dancer/performer and pain, the performance projects *PING* (2014), *PANG* (2021), and *You Can Take Me Home Toni* (2023) are explored. The costumes for all these works



Figure 1: PING costume. MA15 Costume Design for Performance final showcase, Lillian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells (2014). Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.



Figure 2: PING costume. MA15 Costume Design for Performance final showcase, Lillian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells (2014). Photograph courtesy of Alex Traylen.

were created by Karstens and are a continuation of the collaborative relationship we have had since her time studying for the MA in Costume Design for Performance in 2013–2014.

From the perspective of an experiential performer-maker, and based on discussions with Karstens, I analyse and contextualise our experiences of working with these costumes through the lens of feminist concepts relating to invisible work and emotional management. In turn, I answer the following question: Does 21st-century progressive experimental costume performance have the potential to impact the labour of the performer?

Finally, it is important to recognise that my engagement with the projects identified in this article were fully consensual and that the working approaches were ethically sound. Karstens always had my safety and

welfare at the forefront of the process and constantly checked in with me to make sure I was happy with the wearable art costumes and my engagement with these items. Any labour, discomfort, and risks taken were of my own choosing.

PING & PANG

PING (2014) and *PANG* (2021) are performances conceived and designed by Dutch designer Daphne Karstens, with Angela Woodhouse as choreographer for *PING* and Karstens as director for *PANG*. These two pieces can be performed separately or together, and they aspire to become the future triptych *PANG PING PONG*.² The works were performed as a diptych at the Amsterdam Fringe Festival in 2021.

PING is a wearable sculpture performance that was originally created in 2014 as Karstens' final master's project. I was the original performer, and I have performed the piece several times over the years. Inspired by Samuel Beckett's prose work "Ping" (1966), the performance explores the relationship between the physical body and the *out-of-body or spiritual body* through the struggles of a person submerged in an unknown and ephemeral world (Karstens 2024).

PANG is a body installation in which scenography and costume become performance design. Research experiments and residencies began in 2020, with the final form developing over a five-week period leading up to the festival premiere. The performance was inspired by the process of the Big Bang theory and the creation of dimension and shape, which were interpreted as a live visual slow-motion process (Karstens 2024).



Figure 3: PANG rehearsal discussion in full body costume. PANG & PING, Bau Studios, Netherlands (2021). Photograph courtesy of Mikki de Gier.



Figure 5: PANG & PING, Plein Theater; Amsterdam Fringe Festival (2021). Photograph courtesy of Frank Wiersema.



Figure 6: Detachable full body costume. PANG & PING, Plein Theater; Amsterdam Fringe Festival (2021). Photograph courtesy of Frank Wiersema.

Due to the progressive nature of *PING* and *PANG*, whereby the designs also act as scenography and props, some may question whether the work can be considered costume, particularly as I do not wear all the design elements in the conventional sense. Jane Bennett's concept of "human-nonhuman assemblages" (2010, xvii) can be attributed to Karstens' designs and, as such, verifies that these creations do act as costume. When I am in contact with the wearable sculpture, we become an assemblage of living, vibrant materials in a dynamic interplay (Bennett 2010) – a "symbiosis between material(s)/costume and the moving body" (Smith 2022, 105).

The *PING* costume involved a white morph suit, a removable white netted tubular layer, an integrated smoke system, and tubing attached to the suit (see Figures 1 & 2). The performance involved sustained slow fluid movements, the removal of the restrictive outer layer, slowly carrying and hanging the heavy outer layer on a hook, and finally delivering graceful limb-extending choreography to enhance the smoke trails emitting from the costume tubing. Core strength and physical endurance were needed to hide any exertion and maintain the otherworldly sense of the piece. For example, I had to engage in very slow sustained movement to appear effortless and ephemeral while wriggling out of the tight tubular structure and always became stuck on the smoke pack strapped to my back.

PANG consisted of a large triangular wooden structure with three separate areas at each point, which I had to crawl between via the half metre or so of space under the platform (see Figure 3). Each platform was comprised of a sheet of triangles made from hard plastic

that could be moved from underneath via the hands or by pushing with the head, back, and other bodily surfaces (see Figures 4 & 5). The first platform had large triangles in bronze, the second medium triangles in mirror gold, and the third small silver triangles. This final platform had a detachable full-body costume, which allowed me to stand on the platform and then manoeuvre to the stage floor (see Figures 3 & 6).

Each section of *PANG* started with minimal movements that grew larger over time, with the aim that my body would not be seen at all. Each triangular layer was very heavy and hard to manoeuvre, and all had sharp edges that scratched my body. I was unable to see the physical effects of the dynamic interplay when engaged as part of the costume-body assemblage. There was also a lot of time during the devising and performance of *PANG* in which I had to lie and crawl under the structure, which was somewhat uncomfortable.



Figure 4: PANG rehearsal discussion under the bronze layer. PANG & PING, Bau Studios, Netherlands (2021). Photograph courtesy of Mikki de Gier.



Figure 7: Straw pompom costume. YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.

The detachable silver layer was particularly physically restrictive and risky. The sculptural form tightly encased my body, with my arms enfolded to my chest. I had poor vision and no way to catch myself if I fell. The triangles were also joined tightly with elastic, meaning that when I moved in this assemblage, sections would erratically pop inwards towards my body and specifically towards my face. This was the costume that had Karstens most on edge when I was interacting and performing with it, and she regularly discussed potential adaptations to reduce potential risks.



Figure 8: Straw costume (2nd layer). YCTMHT work in progress. Dance Edits, Dance City (2021). Photograph courtesy of David Griffith.



Figure 9: Straw costume (base layer). YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.

You Can Take Me Home Toni

You Can Take Me Home Toni (YCTMHT)³ is an autobiographical live multiform performance, which is led by personal stories that connect to my secret fandom of 1980s pop icon Toni Basil and her *Word of Mouth* video album.⁴ At the heart of the work is the concept of shame and how those we idolise can empower us to embrace our past transgressions, explore our identities, and achieve self-acceptance. This production was completed in 2023 and is currently touring different festivals and venues.

The work uses performance techniques from theatre, dance, cabaret, and costume performance, including poetry, wearable art costumes, projected visuals, and ethical audience participation.⁵ The 55-minute production aims to entertain and challenge audiences through honest and taboo-breaking stories relating to vaginas, sexual assault and harassment, queer experiences, and identity. Overall, the show is a celebratory and visually dynamic performance that reflects the audience's own bodies and experiences through a shared identification and empathy with my own/ the character's journey to self-acceptance.

As stated previously, the project involves unique wearable art costumes created by designer Daphne Karstens. Karstens' designs were used to inform the dramaturgical development of the work, and her avant-garde approach was utilised to reflect Basil's 1980s style and palette. The production structure has eight sections, with seven reflecting the music videos of the *Word of Mouth* video album: "Mickey," "Nobody," "Little Red Book," "Time After Time," "Be Stiff," "Space Girls," and "You Gotta Problem." Each music video has a unique visual quality that is reflected in the aesthetic of the



Figure 10: Boxing tutu costume. YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.

relevant section and links to key themes/memories in the work. My fandom of Toni Basil acts as a dramaturgical device to thread the sections and themes together into a cohesive narrative.

Five of the production sections involve wearable art costumes. There are also costume elements that are used to interact with the audience, but as these items are not worn by myself, they are not explored in this analysis. My longstanding collaboration with Karstens means I have complete trust in her to utilise my initial ideas to produce costumes that are visually impactful and can influence the dramaturgy of the work. I now endeavour to describe these designs and my experience of working with them.

The first section (“Mickey”) starts with an entertaining opening dance number, followed by dialogue and accompanying movement based on childhood memories of vagina incidents and sexual assault. The costume consists of three layers. The top layer includes a pompom cloak of around 1,000 blue and white striped paper straws and a red and white striped paper straw headpiece covering the whole head (see Figure 7). The middle layer comprises a red and white paper straw skirt, red leotard, red and white ankle warmers, and black cap with black plastic straw hair (see Figure 8). The base layer consists of a red leotard with a nude latex pubic front piece (see Figure 9). The top and middle layers are removed on stage during this section. The pompom layer is made up of two segments connected at the front and back with Velcro. The front Velcro is ripped open to remove this layer, while the straw skirt layer is removed via a zip at the back. Performing in these multiple layers makes the body heat up quickly, and the pompom layer is also very heavy and bulky.

Certain aspects of these straw costume layers have to be worked with in specific ways. The voluminous pompom straw layer needs/encourages larger movements, including spinning, whirling, bouncing, and shimmying. Both the pompom and skirt costumes create distinct sounds, such as hollow rattling, when moved in. This means that when delivering dialogue dressed in the middle layer, the choreography can only include stillness and upper body movements.

The costume for the third section (“Nobody”) explores memories of sibling bullying and homophobia. The costume includes red satin boxer shorts and a white cropped vest, a red boxing glove tutu, and red boxing gloves worn on the hands (see Figure 10). The tutu, consisting of 16 boxing gloves, is worn via a red nylon harness worn over the shoulders and waist. Like the straw costume, the boxing glove tutu is heavy and somewhat cumbersome to move in, and the boxing gloves make the hands very sweaty. The choreography for this section includes boxing moves, ballet positions, authentic gestures, and moments of abstract slow flowing movement. The choreography also features a moment in which I roll on my back and lift my legs in a sustained position. This causes the boxing gloves to fall and hit me in the face.

The sixth section (“Little Red Book”) plays with representations of the (un)feminine body via the embodiment of the imaginary cockney character the *Marchioness of Merkin*,⁶ aka Meryl. The costume is made up of a triangular brown hair costume of shoulder-to-floor length, with elasticated wrist straps on the underside and a satin headband with a hair broach attached (see Figure 5). The section includes a monologue and a short dance sequence.



Figure 11: Hair costume. YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.

This costume is very weighty and sweat inducing, and, like the straw pompom costume, it choreographically encourages spinning, bouncing (vertically and horizontally), skipping, swooshing, shimmying, and shaking. As the costume is floor-length, the movements must be very considered to avoid stepping on the hair, which is extremely slippery underfoot.

Similar to the sixth section, the seventh (“You Gotta Problem”) involves the embodiment of a phantastic character – a giant vagina as a form of bodily celebration and female sexual energy. The costume design includes a fluorescent pink leotard base and a large vagina made from different shades of red and pink padding and netting, worn via a nylon harness (see Figure 12). Hidden inside the netting are two small pockets for storing pink confetti. The section is a four-minute dance involving cavorting and cheeky and vulgar choreography, including aggressive hip thrusting and other sexually connotated moves. The dance also includes the throwing of the pink confetti over the stage and audience. This costume is quite light and unrestrictive, allowing for the liberation of movement and personality.

The eighth and final section (“Space Girls”) explores stories of sexuality and queer awakening. The section contains a mix of short monologues, posing, expressive gestures, and abstract movement. The costume consists of a bright yellow unisex jumpsuit and a tabard top layer covered with multiple bright yellow spherical boobs with orange nipples (see Figure 13). The boob forms are created via inflated beach balls inserted into each globular material pocket. Although this costume is light to wear, the mass of boobs can be difficult to manage due to the positioning of the upper spheres, which can force the head back into a somewhat jarring position.

Most of these costumes are heavy, hot (causing extensive perspiration), and at times awkward to work with. Overall, the costumes need a lot of extra physicality, energy, and attention to perform in. Nonetheless, these bespoke costume designs are visually impactful and hyper-visible, creating a spectacle that demands the audience’s attention. The costumes, combined with the dialogue, strongly communicate the themes, meanings, and metaphors of the work. Therefore, only essential movement/choreography is required for the piece. The costumes allow me to fully embody all the characters in the work, be it past versions of myself, a giant merkin, or a vagina.

Devising

There is a spectrum of hierarchies when creating performance (Butterworth 2009; Pollatsek and Wilson 2021), ranging from traditional didactic forms, in which the choreographer/director makes all the decisions and the performers are viewed as voiceless tools, to more collaborative devising methods, in which a non-hierarchical approach and shared authorship usually occur (Crickmay 2015). However, Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling challenge the assumption that collaborative devising is fully democratic and non-hierarchical, particularly if there is an artistic director or choreographer operating as the main decision-maker and/or dictating the final vision of the production (2006).

Creating live performance is predominantly an interdisciplinary process that typically involves numerous collaborators, including the director, choreographer, performer(s), costume designer, sound artist, and lighting designer. My own artistic practice is multiform and has included traditional performance, costume performance, cabaret, and live art. *YCTMHT* is a great example of this, amalgamating a myriad of art forms that necessitate collaboration to devise the work.

My devising approach for *YCTMHT* was to foster a respectful and non-hierarchical environment with an openness to play, sharing, observing/listening, and discussing (Smith 2022). Although I gave each collaborator much creative freedom, as the director-performer of an autobiographical work, it was somewhat unachievable to fully implement democratic decisions. However, I was open to what the final vision of the production would be. This was particularly evidenced by the impact that the costumes had on the dramaturgy of the work. Karstens was very much an “authorizing agent” (Sajjani 2016, 88) or “active co-creator” (Radosavljević 2013, 180) during the devising process, with her *signature style* (Helve 2022) being a prominent feature of the production. Although the costumes were at times physically challenging to work with, each aided the devising process and enhanced the final creative outcome. In fact, the discomfort added to the embodied journey of my character, reflecting visually and performatively painful and difficult emotional and physical moments in the narrative.

Equally, in the devising of *PING* and *PANG*, there

was collaboration in which I had a confident voice as an experienced performer-maker alongside Karstens as the lead artist. Karstens' role was a designer-director dyad, with an understandable focus on the wearable sculptures. Although it should be noted that this was Karstens' first professional role as a director, she had a very clear vision for the final performance.

What was particularly impactful for all three projects was Karstens' approach to working with the materials that place the moving body at the centre of her creations. Every design would be tried and tested on her own body. For example, she would always send me videos and images of herself wearing and moving in each developing costume for *YCTMHT*. This experimentation with the materials on her own body meant that Karstens had a physically intuitive understanding of the materials to inform the costume design, which she could also share in support of my own explorations with the individual items.

Another important element to Karstens' collaborative approach was her openness and directness (a great Dutch quality). We engaged in discussions relating to my experience of the costumes, finding solutions to any issues. Such discussion is vital when working with progressive designs. Costume is like a dance partner, and it can take time to build a relationship and synchronicity with it. This was particularly evident with the elements of *PANG*, which were hard to crack due to the unyielding and unforgiving nature of the wearable sculpture materials and structures. Even when choreography was set, you could not trust that the triangle sheets would behave the same way each time.

A perfect example of this working approach is illustrated by a particularly frustrating day of rehearsal with the *PANG* bronze triangles. Karstens wanted the triangle sheet to be moved in a certain way based on her external/audience perspective. However, as I was underneath the sheet, affecting it without any awareness of the visual outcomes, it felt almost impossible to meet this request. After some heated back and forth, I said, "OK, you try and do it then!" This was a fantastic moment – a chance for Karstens and I to swap our inside/outside perspectives. This shared experience of the physicality of working with the triangles and of the cognitive difficulties involved in manipulating the material for the desired outcome, together with Karstens' specialised knowledge of the material,



Figure 12: *Vagina* costume. YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.



Figure 13: *Boob* costume. YCTMHT, Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). Photograph courtesy of Rachel Deakins.

allowed us to resolve the issue. This mutual ground and exploration of possibilities was central to the rehearsal process and led to improved ways of working with the wearable sculptures (see Figure 4).

Injury/Pain

Historically, there has been a harmful relationship between dance training/performance and pain. From the agony of pointe work to the *dance until you drop* of Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring*, whether through training or professional performance, there is still a culture

that normalises enduring discomfort and pain (Wright 2022; Lampe et al. 2019; Molnar and Karin 2017). In fact, this culture has permeated beyond the rehearsal room and stage, with society and the media venerating the performer who suffers for their art (Molnar and Karin 2017). This resignation to tolerating pain also pervades costume performance. I have witnessed performers pass out due to a heavy headpiece or constricting corset. My own body has been marked by tight, sharp, or rigid materials, and my muscles have been strained by heavy costumes.

When I joined the project to develop *PANG*, I was replacing a young graduate dancer who had helped with the initial experiments. On the first day of rehearsal, I managed to strain my shoulder while improvising and experimenting with one of the heavy triangle sheets. I believe this was partly due to my attempt to prove myself as the older non-technical dancer, perpetuating the unhealthy expectations of enduring pain that we usually learn through traditional training practices (Lampe et al. 2019). Even though Karstens checked in on my welfare, I kept quiet about the pain and discomfort I regularly felt devising and performing the work. This resonates with Marika Molnar and Janet Karin's assertion that managing and hiding pain can relate to "notions of vulnerability, weakness, fragility, and inadequacy" (2017, 4).

I also inadvertently perpetuated the *suffer for your art* ethos throughout the devising of *PANG*. Karstens offered alterations to manage the scratches from the sharp-edged triangles, including alternative base layers. But I chose to continue with a simple long sleeve top and leggings. Arguably, this reflected the British *stiff upper lip* and the expectation to endure, wearing my scratches as a *badge of honour*. I also consented to working with the risky silver detachable costume, including the decision to retain the dangerous manoeuvre from the platform to the stage floor. There was almost a thrill and sense of pride that I had delivered this challenging and risky feat – a feeling not uncommon to a performer accomplishing a difficult acrobatic move.

The costumes of *YCTMHT* also raise health and safety risks. Nearly all the costumes are heavy, and I have had to regularly manage overworked muscles post-rehearsal and post-performance. On one occasion, when rehearsing in the boxing glove tutu, I overestimated the impact of the costume's weight when rolling to the floor and lifting my legs in the air. The additional force caused

my legs to snap over my head, triggering a spasm in my neck and shoulders. I have also had a lot of near-miss accidents while slipping and tripping on elements of the wearable art, perhaps the most common risk of working with costumes.

However, I have chosen not to make changes to these costumes for dramaturgical and aesthetic reasons. For example, Karstens offered to trim the hair costume to minimise the tripping hazard, but I said no. The visual impact of a hair costume that flows from head to toe is worryingly more important to me than my own safety. I also originally chose to have pointe shoes as part of the boxing glove costume for the third section. As I had never worked in pointe shoes before, this was arguably a level of artistic masochism I was willing to endure for the work.

My Labour

Overall, my struggles and labour throughout the devising and performance stages of the three works were physical, cognitive, and emotional. My physical labour was high and unrelenting for all the projects due to the sheer weight and bulk of the *PANG* triangular sheets, the *PING* outer layer, and the cumbersome size and weight of the *YCTMHT* costumes. Trying to perform movement with this extra weight puts further strain on my muscles and joints, increasing physical risk to my body as an older performer.

Cognitively, costume performance is always challenging. Part of the fun is learning how to build an understanding of and relationship with the costume, and this has been the case for all the costumes in *YCTMHT*, which also includes numerous quick costume changes. This was minimised due to Karstens' design process of wearing/testing the costumes in development. She also worked with me to amend costume elements to improve the comfort and ease of removal for quick changes when requested.

For *PANG*, my cognitive labour was very demanding due to the complexity of understanding the nature of the unconventional materials and how to work with them in an impactful and safe way. *PANG* was troublesome, as I could not see how my interactions were impacting the material, nor could I conventionally wear all the elements. Regardless of what the audience were witnessing, from my performer perspective in *PANG*, it was hard to become an emergent form (Bennett 2010) whereby

my body and the costume merged into one embodied assemblage through performance (Smith 2022).

My emotional labour for *PANG* was also quite high, mostly due to my self-inflicted silence. During the devising period, I felt physically tired and irritable for most of the rehearsals, and I cannot say I enjoyed the challenge of engaging with the progressive designs. I reverted to traditional performer type, choosing to hide or to make jokes about my struggles and frustrations and pointlessly worrying that this was needed to maintain professionalism and a good working environment.

In her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Arlie Hochschild proposes the concept of *emotion management*, which requires us “to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983, 7) or to remain “in accordance with employer-defined rules and guidelines” (Kaplan 2022, 841). This articulates the emotional dissonance (of pain, frustration, and discomfort) that I engaged in (i.e., emotional labour) to maintain the traditional/social expectations and hierarchies of the rehearsal room and the occupation of a performer, even when this was not expected or part of the working environment Karstens was offering. My emotional labour was unrelenting because of my perceived need to hide my frustration and discomfort from the team when working with the wearable sculptures, as well as to manage my fears of injury and feelings of inadequacy. This was very much self-imposed and not something Karstens was creating or enforcing as part of the project.

I would also argue that I had to engage in emotional management in the making of *YCTMHT* in relation to my memories of trauma and the meanings connected to some of the costumes. For example, the base layer of the straw costume relates to a genital accident and helps to communicate the physical pain and psychological trauma of the event. The nude latex pubic front piece also echoes the Barbie doll vagina-less body to express the loss of innocence and the sexualisation of the female body. This is heightened by the red leotard, a clothing item I have worn in the past, which manifests feelings of vulnerability and sexual objectification (experienced by many females in dance and gymnastics). To reiterate, these are costume choices I have willingly accepted and want as part of the overall dramaturgy of the production.

The amalgamation of these three types of labour

– physical, cognitive, and emotional – in the devising and performance of work can be exhausting and is usually (perceived to be) unseen, leading to feelings of underappreciation. However, the addition of a wearable sculpture will not only increase this labour but also probably hide it. The concept of *invisible work*, coined by feminist writer and sociologist Arlene Daniels (1987), is used to describe the types of unpaid labour usually carried out by women.

Building on Daniels’s concept, Erin Hatton suggests three interconnecting sociological mechanisms through which work becomes invisible. The first is sociocultural, via restrictive frameworks of gender, race, class, and age; the second is sociolegal, whereby the labour is absent from legal definitions of employment; and the third is sociospacial, with the labour existing outside the socially constructed workplace (Hatton 2017). Applying these mechanisms to costume performance, it is possible to understand how the performer’s labour may be ignored or undervalued due to the hierarchies involved in creating performance (particularly if you are young and female); due to the enduring historical view that performance is a passion, hobby, or vocation and therefore not real work (evidenced further by the general low pay that performers receive); and due to the body and its labour being hidden (partially or fully) by the costume itself. In the case of a costume that reveals more of the body than the performer is comfortable with, this can significantly increase the hidden emotional labour of the performer.

Conclusion: Solutions

Returning to the question – does 21st-century progressive experimental costume performance have the potential to impact the labour of the performer? – I would answer yes. The performance projects analysed in this article are examples of unconventional costumes, with *PING* and *PANG* acting as costumes, props, and sets. However, the evaluation is still relevant to costumed performance in general, whether the body and its labour are partially or fully hidden. I would therefore like to share the following suggestions to make visible the labour of the costumed performer – and arguably performers in general.

Many performers, particularly those of us from a traditional dance background, are partly to blame. We perpetuate the practice of working through pain and remain silent throughout our experiences. Enduring

pain should not be viewed as an achievement, nor should voicing discomfort be seen as a sign of failure or weakness. We must stop doing this; instead, we should vocalise our experiences and discuss reasonable expectations for managing our labour. For example, most of my issues with *PING* and *PANG* were manifested by my own continuation of negative cultural working practices.

We must also challenge individuals and projects that propagate the view that performers are voiceless tools and celebrate those who give agency and empathy to performers. As Royona Mitra advocates, we are embodied subjects whose life experiences invigorate and contribute to the devising of performance work (Mitra 2015). Directors and choreographers must also foster an environment in which performers have agency and are treated as valued, respected collaborators who are offering their embodied selves (physically, cognitively, and emotionally) to the work. As Megan Wright states, “if dancers come to understand ourselves as workers and not ‘athletes of God’, we’ll value our work as [dignified] work” (2022, 30–31). Therefore, as members of the performance sector, we must push for these cultural changes to promote the best working practices as our art

forms become more innovative and experimental. One of the main reasons I continue to collaborate with Karstens is her body-centred and ethical devising approach.

From a specifically costume-based perspective, it is important that designers, directors, and choreographers experience the costumes themselves wherever possible to gain empathy and understanding of what is being asked of the costumed performer and how to best collaborate with and support them in the creation and performance of the work. This is evidenced by Karstens, who tries and tests designs on her own body, which improves the devising and performing process for both designer and performer.

We all contribute our valuable labour to the final creative outcome, be it the performer labouring in the heavy costume, the designer completing repetitive crafting processes, or the sound artist spending hours layering soundtracks on a computer screen. By openly voicing our visible and invisible physical, cognitive, and emotional labour of devising and performing work, ideally in action, we can collectively understand and value the labour of each collaborator and aim to ethically improve our working practices.

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Endnotes

- 1 Critical Costume is an international platform, including conferences, exhibitions, and events, that aims to promote research, practice, and debate regarding the historical, cultural, social, and artistic contexts of the interdisciplinary study of costume (<https://www.criticalcostume.com/>).
- 2 Please note, these costumes/names have no relation to the characters in Puccini's opera *Turandot*.
- 3 Development of the production began in July 2021 with an Early-Stage Commission from Dance City and funding from Arts Council England. Upon completion, with further support from Arts Council England, the show had premieres at the Stockholm Fringe Festival and the Creative Centre, York St John University (2023). In 2024, it was performed at the Durham Fringe Festival and the Voila! Theatre Festival.
- 4 Toni Basil is an American singer, actress, choreographer, dancer, and filmmaker. Basil received a Gold Album and Grammy nomination for her 1982 *Word of Mouth* long-form video album (VHS), which she conceptualised, produced, choreographed, and directed (Basil 2017). The album's hit single "Mickey" was a double platinum record, which was later installed in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as one of the ground-breaking singles of the 1980s. Basil is also the founding member and manager of The Lockers, credited with bringing street dance to prominence through numerous TV performances (Basil 2017).
- 5 The stage manager asks audience members before the show if they want to engage in audience interaction. This involves explaining what the options are, what their involvement will be, and how the stage manager will instigate and support audience members in taking part. This approach protects both performer and audience and allows for impactful ethical engagement in the show.
- 6 A merkin is a pubic wig commonly worn by women, dating back as early as the 1450s (Blakemore and Jennett 2001).

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BIOGRAPHY

Lorraine Smith is a performance maker and senior lecturer at Teesside University (UK). She has a first-class degree in dance studies (University College Chichester), an MA in choreography (Trinity Laban), and a PGCE (HEA Fellowship) from Teesside University. Lorraine was artistic director / choreographer at Silversmith Dance Theatre (2006–2014) and continues to devise live performance via Lorraine Smith Arts. Her passions include devising interdisciplinary performance, which informs her research on the impact of costume on the performing body, costume as a somatic tool, performance pedagogy, identity, and *otherness*.

lorraine.smith@tees.ac.uk