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## Religious and Political Influence of 1960s Bronx, New York on Costume Design for *Doubt: a Parable*

Rheid Heska-McJannet  
*Portland State University*

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**Religious and Political Influence of 1960s Bronx, New York on Costume Design for  
*Doubt: A Parable***

by

Rheid Heska-McJannet

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

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Alison Heryer

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## ***Abstract***

Costume design is one of the many creative aspects that brings a theater production together. To become informed on a play's purpose there is much research to be done. In Fall 2016, I designed costumes for Portland State University's production of *Doubt: A Parable* written by John Patrick Shanley. By researching the religious and political climate of 1960s New York, I created an appropriate costume design for the production. An explanation of my process, how my research was incorporated, and how it influenced my work, will be addressed within this paper. It will then conclude with a reflection of the obstacles overcome and the final product.

## ***Introduction***

Clothing is a huge part of everyone's lives. No matter who you are, attire affects you in some way. The motivation for dress over the years includes protection, modesty, expression, and has been heavily influenced by society (Tortora). Clothing can tell you about someone's social status, age, gender, occupation, and it can even divide people up into social groups. The way clothing has been utilized has changed constantly throughout history. During the 20th century fashion changed every decade, which had something to do with the rapid progress of society at this time. Through the 1900s, politics, economics, and many other factors naturally would shaped the way people dressed. All of the details surrounding fashion in the real world are used to improve the overall outcome of theatrical costume design.

Costume design is incredibly important in the success and authenticity of a production. Theatre is a method of storytelling, and it is from the stories and characters that costumes get their life. "The costumes must support the dramatic premise of the piece in terms of their realism, integrity, and artfulness -- and aid the actors by supporting and distinguishing their characters through their look." (*Motte*, pg 70).

This quote puts into words what costumes mean to the actors wearing them. Costumes help provide context in a play and are important physical representations of a character.

*Doubt: A Parable* is set in 1964 at a Catholic school in the Bronx. The characters consist of the principal, Sister Aloysius, who is an older nun keen to uphold a strict school, a younger nun with little experience in the habit, whose name is Sister James. Father Flynn is the priest at this school and is not trusted by Sister Aloysius. The final main character is Mrs. Muller, who is the mother of one of the children attending the school. The main conflict in the play is that Sister Aloysius suspects that Father Flynn has had an inappropriate sexual relationship with Mrs. Muller's son (Donald Muller). Racism, sexism, morality, religious hierarchy, and doubt are some of the main themes dealt with in the play. The characters and the dress decisions they make are integral to communicating these themes.

### ***Script Analysis***

Script analysis requires multiple reads of the script. In my analysis, I discovered that the dialogue and stage directions (notes/thoughts from the playwright) provided particulars into what characters are wearing. These pieces of information can be very obvious or can be subtle things about the characters habits. For instance, a stage direction could tell me that the scene is set indoors, in the middle of summer, or even that a character is wearing a blue shirt. These examples are being provided for specific reasons, so I would take note of them. A character's dialogue can also share a lot about their personality. For example, a character could have dialogue that makes them come off as modest, which would influence the way I would dress them. Now that I have explained the importance and function of script analysis, I can explain how it was used in my design specifically.

For this particular play, the stage directions were most helpful. They told me things about the kind of garments being worn at specific times, colors of pieces, and the religious order the nuns are a part of. For instance, some stage directions directly from the text said, "*A priest, Father Flynn, in his late thirties, in green and gold vestments, gives a sermon*" (Shanley). This was incredibly helpful because it

told me the color and specific kind of clothing that was being worn. Another example of a stage direction that was helpful, but in a less direct way, was one about the character Mrs. Muller. Before her entrance into her scene the stage directions said, “*There stands Mrs. Muller, a black woman of about thirty-eight, in her Sunday best, dressed for church.*” (Shanley). This stage direction, although not quite as specific as the last, told me the age of the character, her race, and that she was wearing her church clothes. From this I can assume that she is dressed nicely, modestly, and that she is most likely lower middle class. She makes enough money to have nice clothing, but only for church, so we know that she must wear her Sunday best for any formal occasion. One other example of how script analysis helped realize my design was through the stage directions given about Sister Aloysius. The first time the character appears in the play, the stage directions explained that, “*She is of the Sisters of Charity*” (Shanley). Information as simple as that explained a great deal about what this character would wear. This was important because religious uniform is very specific. The stage directions gave me a base for how each character would dress, and from this point, I started to do some in-depth research into many different themes of the play.

### ***Research***

The topics I researched for this project included the Catholic religion, religious garments and how they were worn, the styles of the 60’s, and politics at this time. Through script analysis, I was able to discover that the nuns in the play belong to a specific order, the Sisters of Charity. The order was founded in 1809 by Elizabeth Ann Seton. The Sisters of Charity adopted their way of dressing from their founder and continued to dress this way until the 70’s (*Founders - Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill*). The Sisters would wear long black habits (dresses) with a capelet over the shoulders and a bonnet as a veil (*St. Elizabeth Ann Seton*). To add context to these costumes, I also researched what was happening at this time in history and what kind of outside events could be affecting the characters. This play is based in the Bronx, and deals with many different themes including race, gender, hierarchy of the church, child abuse, tradition vs. progression, and revolution. These themes were dealt within the 1960s society. In the Bronx

itself, the racial demographic was changing and the neighborhood was falling into disrepair. It is thought by historians and social scientists that urban sprawl had something to do with this. People were focused on moving up and moving out and leaving no time or money for the old city neighborhoods (*The Bronx*). Politically in 1960, President John F. Kennedy was elected, which impacted the country and the church. JFK was from a Catholic family, and was the first Catholic presidential candidate to run since 1928. Then in 1963 he was assassinated, which shook the country and sent many into turmoil (*Byrne*). The church itself was changing in the 60's, in the sense that there was a need to make the church more relatable and the main way to achieve this seemed to be to disregard tradition. Mass transitioned into english and was going through new changes, people of the church found themselves disagreeing with the pope on things such as birth control , and the Vietnam War was also affecting the church (*Chiles*). All of these historical events, although not necessarily outwardly said in dialogue, have an underlying presence in the play. This information is the world these characters are living in and what would be happening in their lives. It is through the events of the play that we understand what people must have been feeling during this turbulent decade.



### ***Image Analysis***

The image to the right of Sister Dorothy Metz helped me realize design through a historical analysis. By looking at this image, and the timeline it was a part of, there were important details I was able to discern. Since the photograph was taken in 1962, I knew that the Sisters of Charity were still wearing the bonnet and black habit at this time. It was also helpful to see the style of glasses because there was character that needed to be wearing glasses. Since nuns are not big on decoration, I knew that the glasses should

Sister

not be in any way flashy, and this style fits that idea. This is only one of the many images that I used as research for my design for this particular costume.

Sister Dorothy Metz. Only For Your Love. N.p.:

Dorothy Metz,n.d. Sisters of Charity of New York. Web

## ***Renderings***

Some of the research that I have discussed thus far may seem un-relatable to the costume design of the show, but it all added authentic layers to my design. I took all of the research I had done both informational and visual and used it to come up with designs in my head. That being said a central part of my job was finding a way to communicate my designs visually. Renderings are a physical representation of a designer's unique depiction of a costume. I did a rendering for each character in the play, this was where I made decisions about the types of garments and also about color. Father Flynn had multiple renderings because he has a few costume changes throughout the play. Coming up with multiple outfits for Father Flynn was interesting because it was important that I keep his personality throughout each piece.

One obstacle I had to work around for this production was designing costumes that were uniforms (religious garments), but that also portrayed the characters personality. I was able to add little things into my designs that allowed the individuality of the character to shine through, even with the directive nature of the period and the religious aspect. There is an obvious distinction between the two Sisters, in age, experience, and the way they deal with their given circumstances. Knowing this, I made small variations between the two costumes. I was able to look through historical images of nun habits and pick out the areas of dress that I could use to make the Sisters have their differences in costume. I knew that I could not add something to their habits so I built off of what the habit had as its framework, and found areas that to vary among nuns.

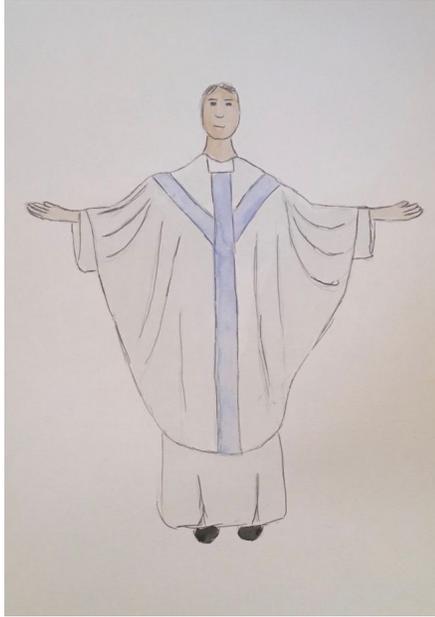


**Sister James**



**Sister Aloysius**

The two images above are the renderings for both Sister James and Sister Aloysius. These two costumes were very similar because the characters are part of the same order of nuns and would wear habits that derived from that specific group. Sister James is new to being a nun; she is young and very impressionable. Whereas, Sister Aloysius is experienced and she comes off stern and set in her ways. The white peter pan collar gives a more innocent, youthful feel to Sister James in comparison to Sister Aloysius' collar, which goes further up her neck and blends into the rest of her costume. This was one of the moments where I was able to analyze a character's personality through dialogue and actions to inspire the way they would present themselves through dress.



**White Vestments**



**Cassock**

The decisions made for Father Flynn's designs were made purely off of religious research, and what was accurate to the time and place. The script also helped with this by providing the colors of the vestments. Father Flynn wears a cassock for most of his scenes, which I drew as a traditional garment including the long robe, a large number of buttons and priest collar. There were not too many things that I could change on the cassock costume, but I was able to choose the design on the vestments. I also got to have a little fun with Father Flynn's shoes, since this was something the priests of the time were allowed to choose for themselves. I decided on a pair of loafers with tassels on them as an added decoration that you would not find on the Sisters. Father Flynn is a conceited man, who would take pride in his appearance. This gave basis for nicer looking loafers that had some adornments on them to showcase Father Flynn's vanity. These shoes were also a product of the time, so in the end they communicated a lot about the character to the audience.



### **Mrs. Muller**

Above is an image of my rendering for Mrs. Muller that I was able to put together from the research I did on the time period. I researched styles of the 1960s and what women would wear to church. I knew that I wanted her to look like a member of the lower middle class, which meant her clothes could not be too fancy. In my research, I found the skirt suit that was popular around the time period. The longer skirt reflected a 50's style which worked for the character. Since someone of the middle class would not have the money to buy new formal clothes every year, they would likely wear styles that may be slightly outdated. Women attending church in the 60s would wear hats to complete their outfits, therefore it was important to me to incorporate a hat. In the script it is said that Mrs. Muller carries a pocketbook, which made this both important for my design and for the actress. Having something physical to work with that is sentimental to the character could potentially add to an actor's performance and create a more complete and interesting costume.

## *Construction*

After finishing the renderings, I worked on actually creating the costumes. In order to make sure the costumes fit the actors correctly, I had to get measurements of each person in the cast. I knew that I wanted to construct the two nun habits and the alb (which is a garment worn under vestments) going into the rendering process. In order to construct these items, I had to find the patterns and proper fabric for the garments to pass on to the costume shop. When searching for fabric, I had to consider how it would drape on the body and also how the color would look under stage lights. Drape was most important for the habits because I did not want the fabric to cling to the body, and it needed to have enough volume to give a more authentic feel. The color aspect was important for both the habits and alb, because the alb is white I had to make sure I chose the right shade, so that the lights would not reflect too much off of the garment. I was able to find the fabric and patterns that I thought worked best and communicated my design well. The pattern finding was like a puzzle; since there was no specific pattern to exactly match my needs, I was forced to find different patterns that could come together to create my desired design. The patterns for the habits consisted of a dress pattern for a 19th century maid's costume, a capelet pattern for over the shoulders, and a bonnet from one other pattern. For the peter pan collar a pattern was made by matching the measurements of one of the dress/habits to the collar. I then passed all this information over to the costume shop, and had them construct the garments. For Mrs. Muller and Father Flynn, I looked through the stock of costumes at Portland State University and I was able to find pieces that could work. I was able to pull Father Flynn's cassock out of stock and Mrs. Muller's whole costume. The rest of the costumes were purchased from multiple locations. That left me to sourcing shoes, vestments, and other adornments from thrift shops and other stores. This part of the designing process was really rewarding because it was when I started to see my once non-dimensional ideas take a three dimensional form.

## *Alterations*

Whole new hurdles begin to appear when you are working with fabric on a human form. Fitting these constructed garments on actors lead to doing a lot of problem solving. Not only that, but it is also the time to take a look at how it is all coming together as a whole. The costumes for *Doubt: A Parable* had to look like they all came from the same play, otherwise it could pull the audience out of the story and they would be focused on how things were not fitting within the world. One of my biggest challenges was with Mrs. Muller's costume. I had pulled a number of pieces from storage, but they either were not fitting the actress, or they just were not what I was looking for. We tried on around 10-15 different combinations and outfits. I had a good idea of the color I wanted the costume to be as well as the style. None of the pieces in this color range were working, so I had to make a compromise. I had to ask myself whether the style of the costume or the color was more important, and in the end it was the style. The piece I ended up using was a blue version of my renderings. Mrs. Mullers character was a crucial tool in helping to underline the period in which the play takes place, so it was important to find the perfect costume for her. Since she wears clothing that would reflect the fashion in the early 1960s, it made it easier for the audience to understand the world she lives in.

### ***Budget***

When working in the design realm of theatre there are some restraints and those include budget and time. I had a very solid deadline that these costumes need to be finished by and a lot of people that I would have effected if I had fallen behind schedule. Time management is definitely an important skill, and being able to stay within the budget is another. For each production there are budgets allocated to each design team. When given the final budget I had to divvy out the money in a practical way to make sure that I could afford everything needed. This involves compromising and deciding what is most important and imperative to the production. For this specific production, I first bought the fabric and patterns to make the pieces that I knew I needed. I next tried to find everything I could use in stock so that I would not buy things that I already had. When it came to buying items, I made sure to find deals and

buy them where I could find them cheapest. There was a wig needed for the character Mrs. Muller, so this was another point where I had to budget wisely and make sure I had enough money for the wig rental and maintenance.

### ***Actors***

Although a character's traits and how they are reflected through costumes are important, actors themselves also play a big role. Theatre is a highly collaborative art form and the costume designer collaborates with almost everyone involved in a production. The relationship between costume designer and actor is important, because these designs are the shells that incorporate the personalities the actors are portraying. Not only this, but costume designers are using actual human bodies as their canvas. I spoke with the actress who played Mrs. Muller about how the costume helped her in relating to her character. Her response was, *"For me I felt that the costume really put me into the time period of the play and it also helped me develop my character further. Even simple things like the wedding ring I wore really helped me get into the world of the play. The only thing I was a little concerned about was if the wig and suit would be too much. I thought maybe it would hide my character, but it did not hide my character at all; it heightened my character and it really showed her division from the rest of the cast and the kind of world she lived in compared to the other 3 characters"*. Knowing that costumes can aid in explaining a character can really help an actor/actress delve deeper into the world of that person.

### ***Conclusion***

By opening night, all of my notes had been taken care of and the costumes were what I imagined them to be. At this point it was time to take a step back and watch. My favorite part of being a costume designer is seeing my ideas come to life, and in turn, becoming part of a world. Of course in order to get here, there are compromises that need to be made and a lot of work involved. There are things that you have to learn to let go of for the greater good. If something you really liked about a design does not end

up working as a part of the whole, you may have to come up with something new or let that one thing go. Once it all works together you forget about that one thing and you are able to get lost in the world of a play. Theatre is an art form that allows its viewers to momentarily forget about their daily life. In my opinion, it is not my job to get people to notice how great the costumes are, but instead allow the costumes to blend with the rest of the play. This allows the audience to focus on the material and art instead of individual pieces of the whole. I have had time to reflect on my work, and I can say that I am proud of what I accomplished and think that being a part of something bigger than myself makes the job that much more rewarding.

Bibliography:

[Linner, Rachelle. "The Habit: A History of Clothing of Catholic Nuns." \*The Habit: A History of Clothing of Catholic Nuns\*. N.p., n.d. Web.](#)

This is just a small review of the book "The Habit: A History of Clothing of Catholic Nuns" it also includes a few quotations. The review explains the how many different things affect the dress of nuns and how it is not so straight forward. How nuns are humans who have pasts and interests but have chosen this way of life. It shows how we can definitely think that nuns are more of a symbol then a human and that the way the dress really actually tells us their values. This piece of writing is useful because it reminds us that even though these women are wearing religious garments or a type of uniform we can still see a difference in personality.

Online, Catholic. "St. Elizabeth Ann Seton - Saints & Angels - Catholic Online." *Catholic Online*. N.p., n.d. Web. This article is a history on the founder of the Sisters of Charity. First there is a background of where Elizabeth Ann Seton started. She was married and then her husband died which brought her to the United States of America. This is a look into the life before the nun and what lead her to start the Sisters of Charity. The article provides an fundamental understanding of who these characters I am costuming are devoting a lot of their life to.

"Vestments and Clericals." *Vestments Glossary*. N.p., n.d. Web.

This article explains what the different religious garments worn by the clergy. Each garment has an explanation of why it is worn and a description of what it looks like and how it is worn. This is important research because since this is a very specific way of dressing anyone who has some religious knowledge may see the show. I would not want the actor to be wearing the costume wrong and have that pull the audience out of the story.

["History - Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill." \*Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill\*. N.p., n.d. Web.](#)

This article is about the history of Sisters of Charity from 1869. It talks about the creation of the first motherhouse and the growth of the schools run by the order. It is a background of a lot of the work done by the Sisters of Charity and the ministry work as well. This is helpful because the article gives background to the order the characters belong to and even provides images of Sisters from the past.

"Founders - Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill." *Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill*. N.p., n.d.

This is a description of the three legacies of the Sisters of Charity written by the order. This website is for the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill. The three legacies talked about are the actual founder Elizabeth Ann Seton, Saint Vincent de Paul, and Saint Louise de Marillac. The last two Saints predate the Sisters of Charity and are where Elizabeth found her teachings. Again this is a good look into the history of the characters.

Chiles, Clay. "How The '60s Transformed The Catholic Church Forever: An Interview With Rev. Mark Massa." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, n.d. Web.

This is an interview with Rev. Mark Massa about how the 1960s changed the Catholic Church. In the interview it Massa talks about how of course society was changing at this time and how this affected the church but that there was still a change happening unrelated to culture. This interview is helpful because it underlines those themes in the play that reflect the changing of the 60s.

Byrne, Julie. "Roman Catholics and the American Mainstream in the Twentieth Century, The Twentieth Century, Divining America: Religion in American History, TeacherServe, National Humanities Center." *Roman Catholics and the American Mainstream in the Twentieth Century, The Twentieth Century, Divining America: Religion in American History, TeacherServe, National Humanities Center*. N.p., n.d. Web.

This article recounts social changes that were happening in the world that would in turn affect the catholic church. The era I was focusing on was of course the 1960s where the article talks about JFK and Vatican II. This is helpful to me because it shows the world these characters were living in and what social things would affect their lives.

"The Bronx." *Bronx, New York*. N.p., n.d.

This article talks about the state of the Bronx in different times in history. I was focusing on the information given about the Bronx in the 1960s and how there was major change happening and the Bronx was going downhill. Since this is the setting of the play it affects many different technical and character elements.

Sister Dorothy Metz. *Only For Your Love*. N.p.: Sister Dorothy Metz, n.d. Sisters of Charity of New York. Web.

This online brochure is written by Sister Dorothy Metz who at the time was the president of Sisters of Charity. The information she presents is a timeline of the accomplishments and major events that the Sisters of Charity have been through since they were founded in 1809 by Elizabeth Ann Seton. This reflects on my prospectus because to be able to costume the play I need to know about the order of the Sisters that are specified in the script, The Sisters of Charity. Learning about the history of the order is beneficial because I was able to understand how the dress of this order evolved over time. I also got some great research images from this brochure. The fact that this is written by an actual Sister of Charity of New York makes it a really good piece of research to refer to in deciding the kind of religious garment to build. The play is set in 1964 so going through the timeline till then shows me that there is not much change in the way they dress, that is until the 70s. This helped me to make the decision to build a nun dress with cape and bonnet opposed to the habit we generally think of when we think nun.

Rives, Danielle. "Taking the Veil: Clothing and the Transformation of Identity." N.p., n.d. Web.

This article Taking the Veil: Clothing and the Transformation of Identity is a review of the ceremony that comes with starting your life as a nun which includes taking on the religious garments worn by nuns. Although the specific order I am focusing on is not mentioned in this article it still provides a good insight. Knowing why women wear the certain pieces they do as nuns is important in understanding the importance and weight clothing carries. As a costume designer I need to keep this in mind and remember that a lot of what I do communicates things to the audience. This article focuses on that ceremony which a nun thereafter wears specific garments. Knowing that this is a life choice and labeling how these women will act, dress, and live for the rest of their life is a good thing to have sitting in the back of my mind as I move forward in design.

MOTTE, Richard LA. *Costume design 101: the business and art of creating costumes for film and television*. N.p.: Michael Wiese Productions, 2010. Print.

This book provides a step by step look into the work that goes into costume design. It stresses the importance of costumes in the entertainment business. Which of course is linked quite closely to the costume designer themselves. The book talks about the steps in the process including script analysis, sketching, budget, and how to break into the business.

John Patrick Shanley. *Doubt: A Parable*. Play.

*Doubt: A Parable* is the play that was used for my thesis in costume design. The play is set in the 1960s in a Catholic school that is dealing with the integration of their first African American student. Accusations of child molestation are soon made against the priest at the school, Father Flynn. The play deals with themes of doubt and also comments on the conflicting views of how education should be run.

Tortora, Phyllis G., and Sara B. Marcketti. *Survey of historic costume*. New York, NY: Fairchild, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2015. Print.

Survey of Historic Costume provides an overview of historical dress all the way back to the ancient world and ending in the 21st century. Each chapter deals with a different time and focuses on what women and men were wearing at this time. It explores different classes and what they wore. Also, looking at the events (art, politics, environment, etc.) of the time and how this impacted or influenced fashion.