“Nothing but a string of beads”: Maud Allan’s Salomé Costume as a “choreographic thing”

Marlis Schweitzer

In February 2013, Toronto-based archive and publisher Dance Collection Danse (DCD) announced that it would be sending “Maud Allan’s historic Salomé costume to the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in Ottawa” (“Winter News”). The costume, one of the most shocking and frequently cited of the early twentieth century, came to the archive in 1995 as a donation from Allan biographer Felix Cherniavsky, and has been one of its most beloved treasures since then.¹ Several years ago, the archivists noticed that the costume’s century-old fabric and beadwork were deteriorating and applied to the government-funded CCI for support.² The CCI’s willingness to accept the Salomé costume for conservation work and thereby acknowledge its place within Canada’s cultural heritage is politically important in light of the Conservative government’s massive cuts to Library and Archives Canada (LAC) (Hall, “Historical Letters”; Cobb).³ As numerous archival projects across the country collapse from the withdrawal of funding, Maud Allan’s Salomé costume has gained another lease on life. In the wake of the distressing LAC cuts, this essay explores what we might learn from theatrical costumes about absent bodies, past performances, and the pressing need today to preserve historical objects for an imagined future.

The Salomé costume debuted in Vienna alongside its Canadian creator/collaborator in December 1906. Maud Allan designed the costume to complement her expressive choreography in “The Vision of Salome,” [sic] a 15-minute piece inspired by Oscar Wilde’s Symbolist play Salomé. In keeping with the repertoire of Orientalist dancing,⁴ the costume consisted of a brassiere-like top, with two prominently placed, suggestive red jewels surrounded by imitation pearls, and a sheer, ankle-length brown or purple skirt, adorned with a beaded pearl belt and a flower-like design over the pubic region. After attending one of the first Viennese
performances, a writer for the *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt* described the costume as “nothing but a string of beads, a spider’s web of veils draped around her [Allan’s] perfectly shaped legs” (qtd in Cherniavsky 39). The critic for the Budapest *Uj Idők* referred to it as “extremely scanty; either a yard of transparent veil or some jewelry” (“Miss Allan’s Dance”), and the Paris paper *Le Temps* declared it “so light that it is barely composed of nothing more than well-placed lacery” (qtd in Cherniavsky 45). Though the costume involved more than strings, webs, and lacery, these statements indicate how European audiences first perceived the traveling ensemble and its wearer. It was the “no-thing-ness” of the costume, the absence of fleshlings, tights, and shoes, combined with the erotic semiology of the beaded top and skirt, that made it so alluring and dangerous. Out of this nothing arose a most spectacular thing.

My interest in the Salomé costume arises from my visit to the DCD archives in spring 2012, where I was permitted to photograph, touch, and hold the lively garments. They appeared from within two large, oxygen-free boxes, specially designed for preservation purposes. I was surprised to discover that DCD had not one, but two of Allan’s Salomé costumes, similar in construction and overall design but made of differently colored fabric and beads. Allan’s widely circulated photographs and postcards had led me to assume that she had only ever worn one. But of course, she must have had several costumes in case one was soiled or damaged or lost. Standing in the archive, I became sheepishly aware of how my expectations had been scripted by promotional photography.

In examining the first costume—the one I recognized—I was struck by the boldness of the skirt’s color (purple!), the intricacy of the beadwork, and the weight of the bra-top. Touching and holding the costume gave me insight into how it might have moved in performance ... and Allan with/in it. Recalling accounts of the dancer’s frenetic, impassioned choreography, most notably her snake-like movements across the stage floor and her sensuous embrace of the head of John the Baptist, I realized that Allan must have continually teetered on the edge of a “wardrobe malfunction.” This discovery offered a new perspective on critics’ misogynistic descriptions of her “sagging layers of fat, the jumping, sweating, and softly, jellied complex of the female form” (“The Theatre Week”). I now understood the delicious danger of “The Vision of Salome.”

How does a study of performance costuming encourage a different perspective on what Rebecca Schneider describes as the inter(in)-animation of performing objects and humans (7)? Costumes contain knowledge; they enact it and they pass it on to other bodies. A costume