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Costume Dramaturgies – the dramaturgy of things in performance (April 2025 – April 2026)

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Costume Thing Dramaturgy – and it's what, why, how, who, where

Christina Lindgren

Our tendency to see the world—and the non-human—through a lens of hierarchy and utility shapes not just our daily lives, but also our approach to things in the performing arts. What if we opened our eyes, hands, and minds to perceive both human and non-human as intricately woven together, each dependent on the other, both on stage and beyond? Could this shift in perspective help us move away from patterns of exploitation and destruction, and instead nurture the very foundation of life?

Introduction

In this article, I introduce and clarify the concept of costume thing dramaturgy, a perspective developed from my experiments and performances in which costume serves as the starting point or center of gravitation. While my research focuses on things like costumes, this dramaturgical principle can apply across various performance contexts. Costume thing dramaturgy is thus presented as a flexible framework—something practitioners and audiences can intentionally adopt when creating or experiencing performances.

COSTUME THING DRAMATURGY: WHAT?

I am a costume designer, scenographer, director, teacher, and researcher. As an artist (costume designer, scenographer, director), I work in independent performance constellations, mostly in devising processes. As a teacher and practitioner of artistic research, I explore the agency of costume and how it can form a starting point for performance, as seen in the research project Costume Agency (2018–2023). Most of the performance productions I have worked on were not based on a predetermined script or concept, but rather on a process-oriented creation in which nonhuman things have played an essential role. Findings from my research and artistic practice have fostered an interest in dramaturgy in me; from the conclusion that things *can do things*, I now would like to explore *how things do things*.

In January 2025, I visited a conference on dramaturgy held in Prague, titled "Between Presence and Meaning: Strategies of teaching practical dramaturgy of contemporary performance".

Hosted by The Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre (KALD) at the Theatre Faculty (DAMU), the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. [\[1\]](#). Before going to the conference, I was hoping for some clarity on the term 'dramaturgy,' including its perspectives, methods, and tools. But I was quickly surprised. Among more than 40 presenters, there were more than 40 distinct approaches; some had developed their own operational systems of tools and methods, while others had developed theoretical approaches and concepts. In other words, my impression was that almost everything can be called dramaturgy, and dramaturgy can be everywhere and anything. The term *dramaturgy* is up for grabs. Travelling back from the conference, I was filled with conviction and trust that I had to let the inspirational days shape my own definition of dramaturgy, based on my experience and research in costume. This has led me to develop a dramaturgy of costume things and thing dramaturgy.

There are multiple researchers and artists who have explored post-humanist perspectives on dramaturgy, the dramaturgy of human and non-human things, and the dramaturgy of the more-than-humans. [\[2\]](#) These are important contributions to expanding our view of dramaturgy, but unfortunately, the frame of this article does not allow us to go deeper into these concepts.

I define Thing Dramaturgy as a composition/assemblage of human and non-human elements in events unfolding in a performance setting. This means that humans and non-humans are on the same footing in the creational process, as well as in the performance that unfolds for the audience.

I relate to the term unfolding. Synne Behrndt describes dramaturgy this way: *Dramaturgy, as I understand it, is engineering or constructing the unfolding of a performance for the audience.* (Behrndt 2023, p. 33).

Dramaturgy is a composition, meaning it is the organisation of several parts into a unity. Another term I use is Assemblage of human and non-human things, which I borrowed from Jane Bennett, who relates to Deleuze/ Guattari:

Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations (...). Assemblages are not governed by any central head. (...) The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (...) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage. (Bennett, 2010, pp. 43-44)

Using the term *assemblage* covers the seamless interaction between humans, like the performers and audience, and the things, like, for example, the costumes.

My research has mostly focused on costumes, which are a special category of things, as they are worn on the body and are perceived together with the body. A mere costume garment on stage often carries traces of a human body, and the absent human body is often perceptible.

Aoife Monks states, "When a costumed actor appears onstage, it is often very difficult to tell where the costume leaves off, and the actor begins." When we speak of costume, we are often actually talking about actors; and when we speak of actors, we are often actually talking about costume. (Monks, 2010, p. 11).

As I perceive it, the unity of a costume is a complex and dynamic entity of the garment, the body connected to it, what is being said and done with it, and the context in which it happens. I use the following term: Costume = dynamic entity of four elements: garment + body + action + context. (Lindgren, 2021) The fact that costume garments and the body (the human and the non-human) are perceived so closely interlinked makes the task of exploring and describing the dramaturgy emerging most challenging and thrilling.

WHY?

Contemporary theatre and new forms of dramaturgy. Traditional theatre focuses on text, but contemporary theatre fosters a wide range of new performing arts. This results in a need for new models of dramaturgy, such as device theatre dramaturgy (Zupanc Lotker 2024), physical dramaturgy (Bowditch, Casazza, Thornton and others, 2018), dance dramaturgy, queer dramaturgy (Mackrill), landscape dramaturgy (Vujanovic, 2018), eco dramaturgy (Idaszak 2024) and much more.

Jane Bennett and Thing Power. I believe that research and theory within New Materialism are particularly valuable for understanding dramaturgy, where scenography and costume design are involved. In the book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett uses the term "thing power". If we understand how objects influence us, we understand, and we discover that we are part of a larger whole. We discover the thing power. In her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), she describes the inherent agency, vitality, and capacity of inanimate materials to act, resist, and produce effects in the world, challenging the human-centred view that only humans possess true agency, suggesting all matter is active and interconnected. She argues that non-human things have a power, and their influence can be felt in everyday experiences, highlighting our shared materiality.

My encounter with Thing power in performing arts. The first time I experienced the thing power was by a performance almost two decades ago. The stage floor was overall covered with a 20-centimetre layer of couscous. The performance lasted close to two hours, and I sat comfortably in an auditorium seat at the magnificent opera house, enjoying the beautiful music. But my mind centred on the couscous covering the stage, and images from the news of people starving popped into my head. My thoughts also wandered to the materiality, and I started thinking about how they had shuffled the tons of couscous during the rehearsal period and what the plans were for what they would do with it after the final performance. Suddenly, I got fantasies about bugs or beetles thriving in the couscous heaven – how did the opera house handle that? With freezers? Of what size? I recoiled in disgust and discomfort. I started to

wonder how the singers felt. Was there maybe a singer who did not want to perform in food but felt forced to do so to avoid turning down a job offer and future career opportunities? The couscous was very dominant. I cannot recall which performance it was, the year, or who performed in it. To me, I experienced the thing power of couscous on a stage. This was the live performance of the power of things.

And things – such as couscous or costumes – have the potential to do things in the mind of the audience, for the performers, for the opera house, for bugs and beetles and for the economy. Understanding what human and non-human things really do demands a process of opening up perspectives and doing physical material try-outs. By doing so, the chance heightens that we will see the human and non-human power in a different way.

HOW?

How do things do things? How do things work? How did costume create a performance?

The dramaturgy of things in performance is closely connected to the performance that is being created. In a text-based performance, the words are the starting point and main elements. Likewise, in dance performance, it is the movements; in opera and music-based performances, the music serves as the starting point and main element. The performances where the non-human things are the starting point and main elements are not so common, but they can be found. I will here focus on some knowledge gained from working and researching performances generated by costumes. This does not mean that the dramaturgy of things cannot be found in other performances. I believe that it can be regarded as a pair of glasses; one can put on the “thing-dramaturgy-glasses” and experience a theatre, dance, or opera performance.

The artistic research Costume Agency (2018 – 2023) included the creation of twenty performances emerging from costume (Lindgren and Lotker (eds) 2023). The creation process for most of these costume-generated performances was as follows: improvising with the costumes, exploring their potential, selecting actions, deciding on the order of the actions, and refining and developing each action into scenes. This way, the dramaturgy emerged in the process through the interaction between the human and non-human.

I will here mention some observations I have of costume thing dramaturgy works:

The importance of the first encounter between the garment and the performer lies in the special moment when the human is curious, and all senses are open. This is a precious moment that deserves special attention and focus. It includes a first encounter with the garment, in which its physical and non-physical properties are recognised, as well as the first interaction between the garment and the human, in which they respond to each other's movements.

The term “listen to” the costume is often used to describe the performer's attentiveness and openness as they approach the garment. I find inspiration in Lisbeth Lipari and her term interlistening, as she suggests three forms of interlistening:

Polymodal interlistening: simultaneous combination of two or more sensory modes, “Occurring across multiple sensory modalities such as seeing, tasting, speaking, listening, and so forth. Polymodality pertains to the embodied dimension of interlistening. (...) It involves all senses, interacting and mutually influencing each other.”

Polyphonic interlistening: the simultaneous combination of two or more tones or melodic lines, occurring through the voices of different characters. Polyphony refers to (...) notions of voice and point of view as well as to the musical and punctuated rhythmic dimension of interlistening –all of the auditory and nonverbal qualities of the communicative interaction –that characterise the “confused multiplicity” of interlistening.”

Polychronic interlistening: the simultaneous combination of two or more times

Occurring in a confused multiplicity of temporal modalities such as past, present, future, duration, and so forth. Polycronicity involves the rhythmic aspects of interlistening, such as timing, order, sequence, coordination, syncopation, repetition, and punctuation, as well as the tensed aspect of interlistening, and disrupts linear conceptions of time expressed by grammatical notions of past, present, and future.” (Lipari 2020, p. 37).

Unfolding of the thing power

In order to find the thing power, and thereby the embedded possible costume thing dramaturgy, it is important to be open to the multiple potential of the costume. By researching with costumes, methods of improvisation have proven useful. Through improvisation between the human and the non-human, things emerge – as images, sculptures, abstract shapes, characters, pop figures, and creatures. Especially in the first phase of creating a performance, it is extremely useful to play with the garment. Following the response to the sensations in the body, trust the intuition and impulses, and go with the flow. From what emerges, the most interesting parts are collected, refined and further explored, and this forms the foundation for the dramaturgy.

An important method for improvising with costumes has been the costume jam sessions, which derive from Costume Agency Workshop #2 Devising Garment (DAMU, March 2019), led by Sodja Zupanc Lotker.

Potentials of the costume things

Dramaturge and researcher Sodja Zupanc Lotker has described what she calls levels of potential of material. These are embedded aspects of the garment that might be at play in the dramaturgical equation, and can be developed into performative material. Examples of levels of potential are, for example, basic levels of what we call it, the functional potential, sensory potential, symbolic potential, potential to look like something else, potential to move or reflect, potential to look familiar or strange, and more (Lotker 2023, p.162)

In this current research catalogue exposition, Zupanc Lotker offers insight into her method. In the text *Devising from costume tasks*, she writes:

What this method has to do with dramaturgy is that dramaturgy is based on looking for potential. (...) You always base dramaturgy on a specific story, or an inclination or an irritation. And following the story, inclination, irritation or whatever is guiding you, is following the potential at the core of the work. The same way you can follow the physical material, its logic, its dynamics, the way it performs, moves, speaks, rolls, eats... (...) In order to see what is in the material, one has to play with it. (Lotker 2026)

By considering these potentials during the creative process, they can influence and shape the dramaturgy. From my experience, a dramaturgy that builds on improvisations with things like costumes, does very seldom form a narrative or a linear story. Rather, it is a circular dramaturgy where the potential of the costume is revealed – as onion scales – and we get to know the costume garment and its thing power.

Composing

In the search for words to describe the interaction of human and non-human things, compositional terms from the field of music and painting can be useful. The list below presents questions that can help generate and compose dramaturgy with humans and non-humans. The list is a non-exhaustive list:

Unity: is the human and non-human unity perceived as a merged unity or separate parts? Is there an indivisible fusion between humans and objects? Describe this fusion. Are there tensions between the parties?

Material and texture: are the materials and textures of the human and non-human corresponding and contrasting?

Form: do the human and non-human create a third shape? How?

Technique and media: what are the techniques and media of the human and non-human?

Power relation: how does the power relationship between people and objects change? If the garment had a voice, what would it be like and what would it say?

Balance: is the costume garment, or the body perceived as dominant, or balanced?

Contrast: are the human and non-human in contrast in terms of size, form, temperature, material qualities, visual intensity, strangeness and more?

Semiotics and beyond: how is the semiotics created by costumes and humans, appearing? Are they in continuous flux, meaning occurs, disappears and transforms? How does it alternate between 'openness' and 'concreteness'?

Origin: Does the origin of the human or non-human trigger actions and meaning?

Time: how to describe the rhythms, repetitions, patterns, life-time-perspective?

Actions: are there mirroring, contrasting or repeating preceding actions?

Emphasis: where does our attention go, and how does it move?

Emotions: what touched you by the interaction of the human and non-human? In what way were you touched?

Transformation: Is a transformation occurring?

Transformation “route”: Is there a transformation route through the performance of the human and non-human?

Proportions: Who, when and how is leading the action and/ or having the attention?

Relation to other elements of the experience: How does light, sound, space, words, audience, theatre space, the city/country/world the experience takes place, influence the experience? Where does the focus and attention go?

Organising of elements; are there sections of actions that are longer, more exciting, more emotional, to a larger extent fulfilling an idea? Where are they placed in the composition? What elements will be in the start and the end? How long will each part last?

Pattern: if you divide the performance into time-based sections and play with the order of them, do you see any patterns emerging, as a spiral, a rule of the thirds or the golden triangles?

The time aspect. I believe that human and non-human things in performance have different time parameters. Humans have time parameters as a second, a scene, an act, a performance, a performance production period, a year, a lifetime. Non-human things have temporal parameters, which are consciously and subconsciously perceived by both the audience and the performers during the performance. The time dimensions of the material include, for example, the crafting of scenic elements and costumes, the time of moulding/dismantling, the time of repair, and the time of recycling/returning/deconstruction. A costume made of a synthetic material can live for a hundred, if not thousands, of years. What we have in common is the cycles of nature that we are a part of – day, night, winter, summer.

WHO AND WHERE?

Thing dramaturgy emerges for everyone who creates, produces, and experiences the performance – both human and non-human. All involved in a performance experience the event from their unique point of view; therefore, multiple meanings and dramaturgies are perceived. Thing dramaturgy can be applied everywhere performing arts happen. It can be regarded as a lens or a pair of glasses to put on. My experience is that in performances generated by costumes or other non-human elements, I often encounter a rich and thorough dramaturgy.

CONCLUSION

I see costume thing dramaturgy as a composition/assemblage of human and non-human elements in events unfolding in a performance setting. This means that humans and non-

humans are on the same footing in the creational process, as well as in the result, which unfolds for the audience.

Thing dramaturgy emerges for everyone who creates, produces, and experiences the performance – both human and non-human. It can be applied everywhere where performing arts take place.

Our dominance over non-human things extends to how we approach the performing arts, especially in our interactions with costumes and materials. By reconsidering both human and non-human elements as interconnected components within performance, we can shift away from exploitative tendencies.

Costume Thing Dramaturgy can be a space for critical reflection. Reflection on the origin, process, use, maintenance, and recycling of the material, as well as the methods, tools, and craft behind the costumes. A place for reflection on how humans and non-humans interact. I therefore ask myself: What does the performance I am involved with seek to convey? What does it say about how I relate to the world, how human and non-human things perform together?

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