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“Rag pickers”, “Ladies maids” and “Stitch dames”: The Value of Women’s Labour in Hollywood and Early Television Costuming

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ABSTRACT

Using previously unavailable material from the archives of the Motion Picture Costumers union (IATSE Local 705), this article reconstructs the emergence of television from the perspective of those working in Hollywood’s wardrobe department. Focussing on an area of screen production typically overlooked within media histories, it provides a corrective to the narratives of ‘great men’ in television and argues that the work of these (largely female) practitioners contributed enormously to the aesthetics of early television and ultimately secured its success in both the US and on the international stage. The article reexamines a period in which Hollywood’s supposed antipathy towards television was at its peak in the 1940s and 1950s, challenging the view that television was perceived as film’s subordinate ‘other’. It argues that this sentiment was not felt equally by all working in the ‘great industry’ of cinema. Rather, news of a potential ‘television boom’ was well received by Local 705’s members, and the union moved quickly to capitalise on this potential new influx of costuming work. Television promised not only stable employment for members, but also required a broadening of creative and technical skill, which many hoped would translate into a newfound professional respect.

The Motion Picture Costumers Union (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 705) is one of the most diverse communities of practitioners in the screen industries. One of the largest IATSE Locals, the Motion Picture Costumers Union represents the entire wardrobe department (i.e. cleaners, dyers, beaders, seamstresses/tailors and so on), among them some of the lowest paid crew members in Hollywood. Writing in 1946, then President Ted Ellsworth claimed, ‘We feel that the Costumers Local holds a unique position in the I.A. family in that its members represent nearly every race, religion or creed in the world’.¹ This area of media production is known for having a high proportion of women, LGBTQ+ and migrant workers.

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Indeed, this is often considered a contributing factor to the enduring lack of value and respect afforded the profession.²

In the years following the Second World War, the future was uncertain for Local 705. In 1948 it reported record levels of unemployment among its members, 'possibly the worst in the history of the industry'.³ With production in Hollywood significantly slowed, the return of war veterans to the workforce, and a significant rise in the cost of living, the union looked to new opportunities to secure employment for its members. Despite the recession (which lasted from 1948–1949), television sets were being sold 'as fast as they could be made'.⁴ As prices dropped to under \$200 per set, middle income and working-class families embraced the new technology as a primary means of entertainment, thereby providing a potential solution to Local 705's problems.

During a time in which costumers felt significantly undervalued, with their livelihood under threat, television held the promise of stable employment and newfound professional respect. However, there was work to be done by the union to ensure that their members could meet the needs of television, and that television could meet the needs of its members. This article examines how the emergence of television impacted the Motion Picture Costumers Union. In particular, it explores how the nature of work changed in the wardrobe department and argues that this new technology required a broadening of technical and creative skills. It then explores the consequences of this change with respect to the value of labour within costume departments, or rather, practitioners' self-perception. In doing so, it seeks to make the following interventions in the existing scholarship. First, it examines a period in which Hollywood's antipathy towards television was at its peak in the 1940s and 1950s and argues that this was certainly not the case for those working in costume. Second, it provides a corrective to the narratives of 'great men' of television and argues that the work of these (largely female) practitioners contributed enormously to the aesthetics of television and ultimately secured its success in both the US and on the international stage. Finally, it argues that the contributions of these practitioners have typically been overlooked due to gendered assumptions about their profession and the attendant lack of respect. In doing so, it provides nuance to claims that television has historically been positioned as film's low 'other' by suggesting that this is not felt equally by all those working in the 'great industry' of cinema.⁵

Literature review

Costume departments and hollywood unions

Despite their significant contribution to the screen industries, those working in costume rarely receive the same scholarly attention as 'above-the-line' personnel.⁶ While costume designers enjoy some visibility both in mainstream press and academic literature, there are, as David Chierchetti acknowledges in *Hollywood Costume*, 'thousands of expert seamstresses, cutters and fitters, milliners and wardrobe men and women, working long hours with little reward, [who make] the brilliant concepts reality'.⁷ To date, two articles exist that examine wardrobe departments. Elizabeth Nielsen's chapter 'Handmaidens of Glamour Culture' and my own contribution to the recent edited collection, *Hollywood Unions*.⁸ Both provide insight into the structure and culture of wardrobe

departments, and the idiosyncrasies of Hollywood labour unions. In their introduction to *Hollywood Unions*, Luci Marzola and Kate Fortmueller write that:

[d]espite their centrality to the function of Hollywood there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the roles and histories of the industry's unions and guild. The Hollywood unions are not homogenous institutions, rather they have long histories of jurisdictional battles, competitions with rival unions, and members that have occasionally had heated exchanges about bargaining priorities.⁹

Indeed, the lack of knowledge regarding the formation and jurisdiction of specific Hollywood unions leads to a lack of nuance in our histories of the screen industries. For example, early histories of film and television tend to present the relationship as antagonistic. However, as Christopher Anderson observes in *Hollywood Television*, 'Hollywood did not view television from a single perspective, or a consistently antagonistic posture'.¹⁰ As Katie Bird and Luci Marzola make clear, labour unions across Hollywood had an uneven response to the burgeoning industry and often competed for jurisdiction.¹¹ Building on this work, I also argue that the structure and jurisdiction of Hollywood labour unions play a significant, and often overlooked, part in the story of television's early development, as do the interrelations between IATSE locals. For example, the Motion Picture Costumers union represents the wardrobe department, which was organised into two sectors: manufacturing/custom made, and finished wardrobe. Manufacturing includes anyone involved in the research, fitting, production, cleaning and ageing of costumes. Finished wardrobe includes anyone responsible for analysing scripts, selecting clothing from rental shops or retail outlets, and ensuring that all actors are dressed and ready for set at the appropriate time. It does not include the design team (represented by The Costume Designers Guild, IATSE Local 892), nor does it cover stage (The Theatrical Wardrobe Union, IATSE Local 786) or screen productions that took place outside of Los Angeles (United Scenic Artists Union).¹² Thus, in the mid-late 1940s, when television began to expand on the East Coast, Local 705 had to undertake a significant amount of work to ensure that television work could be made available to its members.

Histories of early television

As Douglas Gomery argues, most academic work on television's early years cites the 1950s as a key decade of activity. Yet, as he and others have noted, it was during the 1940s in which television became an increasing presence in the homes of middle-class Americans. As Richard Butsch notes, [t]elelevision broadcasting blossomed in 1948, much like radio in 1927.¹³ Experimentation with the technology began before this but efforts were redirected during the Second World War, and at its end, there were only seven stations, five of which were on the East Coast (WNBC, W2XAB, WABD, WRGB, WPTZ). Television at this point was a local medium, thus Hollywood's geographical distance was a barrier in these formative years. In 1948 it began to emerge as a larger regional network, before establishing a national audience in the 1950s.¹⁴ Formats previously popular on radio such as the broadcasting of sports, theatre productions and vaudeville style shows dominated early programming. However, once DuMont pictures, which was financed by Paramount, began filming shows and sending them to other stations, programming would shift towards edited television

film.¹⁵ Significantly, DuMont was the only broadcaster without an established radio company, and had a more direct link with cinema.

The nature of Hollywood's early relationship with television is disputed. Indeed, cinema is absent from a number of television histories, save for mentions of Hollywood studio executives' vocal disgust of television. Anderson's *Hollywood Television* seeks in part to address this omission by examining the period of transition for both Hollywood and television (i.e. the 1950s), in which he argues, 'the aversion to TV actually only lasted a few short years during the 1950s'.¹⁶ Similarly, in *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, Michele Hilmes seeks to revise and reimagine this history of film, television and indeed radio. Rather than three discrete industries in competition with one another, Hilmes aims to 'document the considerable, although neglected, influence that Hollywood exerted ... over the development of the broadcast medium'.¹⁷ In so doing, she argues that television and film's histories were interlinked from the former's inception. She details how Hollywood had a vested interest in television, particularly theatrical television, and radio before it.

Women's work in early television

In addition to Hollywood's notable absence in histories of television, so too are the experiences of the multiple women who were central in its development. Androcentric accounts of the 'boy genius', 'lone inventor', and 'talented engineer' dominate media histories.¹⁸ Figures such as the engineer Allen DuMont (of DuMont Television Network), or 'cultural elite' Gilbert Seldes (first director of programming for NBC) are positioned as the key architects of technology and programming.¹⁹ Women typically feature in discussions of television as consumers rather than producers. In most media histories, they are the assumed audience for whom television was designed *for* but not *by*. The figure of the housewife, who had previously used radio to structure the rhythms of her day, would be positioned as the target audience for daytime programming, launching a feminist inquiry of 'women's genres' (the soap opera, talk show, etc.).²⁰ When women do figure as workers within television it is typically their position as 'talent' in front of the camera in women-centric genres.²¹ The positioning of women as both the watcher and the watched of/on television contributed to its construction as a 'feminine' medium.

More recent feminist work has examined the experiences of women who held technical and creative roles, such as camera operators, engineers, writers and story editors in various national contexts.²² However, as Sarah Arnold notes in her recent monograph, *Gender and Early Television*, 'proportionately less attention has been paid to women's work in US television during the 1930s and 1940s'.²³ As Arnold writes, '[u]nlike the 'great men' of television, few women's stories – especially those working at the coalface – were deemed historically significant enough to draw attention to, exhibit and put at the centre of narrative production of history'.²⁴ This, as Arnold observes, includes a period in which women were incredibly active in the workforce as part of the war effort. Thus, they were not so much absent as rendered invisible.

In contrast to other areas of media production, women have been well represented (at least in numerical terms) in wardrobe departments.²⁵ Moreover, their employment was not affected by the return of men to the workforce following the end of the war, given the segregated nature of their labour. Since their inception, wardrobe departments have been

organised along gendered lines with female and male costumers responsible for the making and handling of female and male stars' costumes respectively. Women costumers were not expected to 'gracefully withdraw' their labour at the end of the war; rather, their employment remained as steady as any other sector within the screen industries.²⁶ In addition, while job segregation often assumes that women's work will be of lesser value than men's, this is not strictly the case within Local 705, which achieved equal pay for tailors and seamstresses in the mid 1940s.²⁷ Therefore, a key aim here is to contribute to the work of the feminist media historians above and provide a corrective to early histories of television by (re)considering the role of women practitioners. Moreover, this article does not focus on the work of extraordinary/exceptional women who made their name in male dominated fields, rather, it examines the area of media production coded as feminine, and in so doing (re)considers the value attached to this area, and the potentially mutually reinforcing relationship this work has with the feminisation of television as a whole.

Method

Using previously unavailable material from the Motion Pictures Costumers Union's (IATSE Local 705) in-house archives, this article reconstructs the Local's history during this moment of significant change.²⁸ Like other feminist historical projects, this article must contend with the well-documented deficiencies in traditional archiving practices that serve to erase women's contributions to the creative industries. As Jayne D. Stephenson observes, 'documentary sources for writing [women's] history are disappointingly poor in both quality and quantity'.²⁹ Moreover, given this project's focus on 'below-the-line' women, very few oral histories exist. Following in the tradition of numerous feminist historians, I adopt an approach termed by Sherry Katz as 'researching around our subject'.³⁰ Katz describes this approach as 'mining [a] small number of manuscript collections [...] and then working outward in concentric circles of related sources'.³¹ The primary source material here is that provided by the Motion Picture Costumers Union. Specifically, their quarterly newsletter, *Costumers' News* (which would become *The Costumer*). Despite their significant proportion of women members, the newsletters, which began in 1941, were specifically designed for male costumers who had been enlisted and stationed abroad. Thus, the material here is supplemented by documents such as trade presses (e.g. *The Televisor*) retrieved from other digital and physical archives in an attempt to compensate for these deficiencies.

Nevertheless, the Motion Picture Costumers Union's newsletters are a rich source in a number of ways. First, in 1945, upon the return of the majority of servicemen, the newsletter was redesigned following a consultation with members. They were the primary means of communicating key issues with members, and thus provide not only insight into the priorities and strategies of the union, but also the desires of its rank-and-file members. They contain minutes of all meetings that took place within the various subcommittees, wider IATSE news, editorials on relevant topics, members' letters and local news. Second, they contribute to the construction of professional identity. They are the material expression of the organisation's values and beliefs and therefore manifest a collective sense of what it means to work in costume. As John Caldwell demonstrates in *Production Cultures*, communities of

practitioners participate in their own storytelling practices which ‘gain and (re)inforce identity [and] forge consensus and order’.³² Caldwell organises these stories into ‘trade genres,’ which he argues have specific cultural functions. Below-the-line practitioners, he argues, typically tell stories that aid in ‘establishing craft mastery’.³³ As I have argued elsewhere, Caldwell’s work requires a feminist reimagining to account for the ways in which gender identities impact upon the nature of storytelling and the kinds of stories told.³⁴ Nevertheless, his original contribution to the study of production culture is useful here for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the importance of these stories as an indication of ‘the industry’s own self-representation, self-critique and self-reflection’.³⁵ Second, it provides a framework for understanding the construction of value in below-the-line trade stories. While there is an abundance of above-the-line stories in popular and mainstream presses, the voices of those most marginalised in the creative industries are often absent.

Since the purpose of this article is not simply to recount the history of women’s television work, but also to establish the way in which value and meaning is attributed to that work, it uses the principles of Caldwell’s trade genres combined with feminist critical discourse analysis. Feminist critical discourse analysis allows for the analysis of power relations, and the “bottom-up” relations of resistance, compliance and acceptance’,³⁶ often neglected in other kinds of critical discourse analysis. It also has an emancipatory agenda. To use Michelle Lazar’s terms, feminist critical discourse analysis ‘is openly committed to the achievement of a just social order through a critique of discourse’.³⁷ Underpinning this research is a conviction that historical work can play an important role in helping us understand and challenge current patterns of discrimination and exclusion rife within the screen industries. Thus, in order to understand the ways in which cultural value is assigned to work and objects, an examination of historical moments where meaning becomes embedded through discourse, is not only essential but can also help us understand our current situation.

Discussion

Early television and the motion picture costumers union

Following the end of the Second World War, the Motion Picture Costumers Union faced an uncertain future. The return of members in service and their ‘war wives’, coupled with a slowdown in production meant employment was scarce. Specific initiatives for veterans were introduced to integrate them into the workforce, but it was clear that Local 705 would require a broader post-war recovery strategy to weather the significant economic and social upheaval. Part of this strategy was to revise jurisdiction to include new fields such as television.³⁸ This task however, was made more difficult thanks to a growing ‘anti-union’ sentiment within the government (culminating in a series of anti-union laws). Thus, in addition to creating opportunities for members, the Local also had to repair its public image.

In December 1946, Local 705 published a two-page ‘proposed program’ to deal with these two (related) issues: precarious employment and a poor reputation of both the union and the profession more generally. The proposed program reveals both the core values of the union and its internal perception as a professionalising force.³⁹ To

ensure the survival of the union, the proposed program sought to both 'gain public respect' and to build the 'pride and prestige of costumers'. It reads:

During the past four years, we have worked toward the end of building pride for our work, and toward increasing the self-esteem of our members. This effort must be carried on and the scorn shown through such terms as "rag-pickers", ladies' maids, button-hole makers, valets, stitch dames and many other equally disparaging terms must be combatted. The prestige of our members, our departments, and of our union must be built in the future even more than has been possible in the past if we are to secure our proper niche in this great industry.⁴⁰

The gendered nature of the insults levelled at costumers speaks to the lack of value associated with the 'feminine'. And indeed, the custom tailors, in particular, felt the effects of this gendered value system. A survey undertaken by Local 705 in the same year reported that tailoring was the 'lowest-paid craft in the industry'.⁴¹ In 1946 a tailor earned \$1.44 an hour, whereas a 'partially semi-skilled studio craft with no such record of achievement or loyalty received \$1.80 per hour'.⁴²

The designation of 'women's work' as semi- or unskilled work has been examined extensively across multiple industries.⁴³ Within the clothing trades it is clear that there is a gendered perception of skill when it comes to those who design and those who make.⁴⁴ In addition, there are distinctions within the garment industries themselves. For example, fashion and haute couture enjoy an association with masculine high culture that home sewing is denied. Costume work is typically associated with the latter.⁴⁵ This disparity in cultural status was also reflected in wage scales. The December 1946 issue of *Costumers' News* explains that those working in studios typically earned significantly less than garment workers in the commercial sector. Therefore, tailors sought to emphasise that the craft was 'of long experience, hard apprenticeship [and] great skill'.⁴⁶ Apprenticeships of this kind have historically been unavailable to women, therefore, despite their actual skill level, the lack of formal training has been used to justify workplace inequalities.⁴⁷ Indeed, it is worth noting here that despite the grievances of tailors at the time, seamstresses (their female counterpart) earned less than half (on average \$0.70 an hour).⁴⁸ Thus, a part of the proposed program was to implement a formal job evaluation system to ensure equal pay for equal work.

In addition to wage increases, the proposed plan also called for expansion of job opportunities outside of theatrical film. Local 705 was cognisant of the opportunities television, as a burgeoning industry, would hold for its members and wanted to ensure that they would be in a position to accept work when it became available:

New entertainment fields must be watched so that any costume work made available will fall within our scope so that our members may secure steadier and better employment. Television and 16 mm films will offer work for Costumers in the future. Producers in both fields will want qualified help. We must be in a position to fill the requirements. This may mean much study and research. Audio-visual education will become an important part of our nation's educational program in the future and experienced and capable costumers who can guarantee the authenticity of their costuming will be sorely needed.⁴⁹

The coming of television would therefore not only raise employment but also require costumers to 'study' and 'research' in order to increase their technical and creative skills and become the 'qualified help'. Doing so could potentially elevate the status of

costumers. That said, the cultural status of television was ambiguous at this time. Indeed, there were concerns that the quality of the picture on a 9-inch screen would pale in comparison to motion pictures.⁵⁰ As NBC producer Burke Crotty recounts, 'In those days, TV was a foul weed in the garden of entertainment. The public gawked at us as a curiosity. Radio people viewed us as a freak. And we had absolutely no prestige at all'.⁵¹ It was not simply the case that television's credibility would lend itself to those working in costume. But rather that costumers could enhance the viewer experience and therefore raise both the cultural status of television *and* their professional respect within the industry.

Writing for *The Televisor*, William Brockway (MGM sound engineer, inventor and screenwriter), reflected on the relationship between television and Hollywood.⁵² In his article entitled 'A Hollywood Technician's View of Television', he writes: 'A television program will not compete with a good motion picture but will build an appreciation for good visual entertainment in the picture audience'.⁵³ The techniques developed in Hollywood, he added, would be incredibly valuable for television: 'The motion picture studios have the technical "know how" that is required for successful commercial television programming'. And yet, he claims, '[w]ith the exception of one motion picture studio, Paramount, very little if any direct television activity or interest is apparent on the part of the major motion picture studies in Hollywood. The reason for such lack of interest is hard to explain'. Brockway's claims echo the dominant histories of early television; however, there are two potential issues with this narrative. First, the assumption that Hollywood necessarily has the skills and infrastructure to assume a role in the development of television and second, that a lack of interest was universal among the very diverse workforce that makes up Hollywood.

Jurisdiction, television and IATSE locals

Claims that Hollywood remained uninterested in the emergence of television were somewhat overstated. Indeed, Local 705 envisaged television work to be a crucial part of its post-war recovery plans. To be sure, there were difficulties in establishing a working relationship between the two industries. Not least of all, the geographical distance between Hollywood and the majority of networks on the East Coast created a jurisdictional issue for IATSE. Indeed, it is no surprise that the only IATSE contract signed in New York in television's infancy was with Dumont, which had financial support from Paramount. However, there were broader concerns expressed within Local 705 that IATSE was unprepared for the arrival of television. In April 1946, *Costumers' News* voiced its concerns that the organisation had not moved quickly enough to capitalise on the work generated by this new industry, which it viewed as crucial for union members. It reads:

[T]elevision is just around the corner and only production is delaying full commercial use of television. At present it looks very much as if IATSE may be left holding the sack as far as protecting its jurisdiction in television is concerned ... no one has been assigned to the important organizational work in television which can mean work for thousands of IATSE men.⁵⁴

Consequently, a number of locals, including 705, took it upon themselves to organise initiatives to learn more about this burgeoning technology.

In August 1944, the Screen Writers Guild, along with seven other organisations from film and radio, formed the Affiliated Committee for Television, in the hope of 'promoting the interests of their members in the new field'.⁵⁵ Brockway, author of the *Televiser* article cited above, would become president of the committee, which was designed to conduct a series of lectures and workshops in addition to pursuing research and 'institut[ing] a study of economic problems'.⁵⁶ The committee dissolved two years later, but a 1946 issue of *Costumers' News* reported that its files were to be made available to the Council of Hollywood Guilds and Unions and members of the Local were encouraged to access them at the Council's headquarters. Similarly, in 1948 the Screen Publicists Guild sponsored a lecture series on television, designed for members of Hollywood unions and guilds to attend. In the September 1948 issue of *Costumers' News*, the union encouraged members to attend in order to 'keep up with the changing [situation of] television'.⁵⁷ The series would become an annual occurrence and Ted Ellsworth (president of the Motion Pictures Costumers union) would attend the 1949 event, to participate in a panel entitled 'What is the outlook for Hollywood labor in television?'.⁵⁸

Ellsworth's participation in the panel would receive significant coverage in trade press leading to an editorial in the August issue of *Costumers' News* on 'Labor Issues in Television'. In the article, Ellsworth writes:

[i]nasmuch as remarks concerning television made by your editor at the recent Television Institute were the subject of much controversy in the trade press recently, we believe that our members might be interested in the high-lights of our talk as they raise some serious problems that must be answered before a contract covering television films is negotiated'.⁵⁹

The editorial is important here for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that there was indeed an appetite in Hollywood for involvement in television. Second, it also acknowledges the complexities involved in organising Hollywood's significant and diverse workforce. The article claims: '[t]here can be no doubt that Hollywood should be the television film capital of the world'.⁶⁰ However, there were a number of factors that prevented this aspiration from being realised. The editorial explains that despite its significant expertise and infrastructure, the majority of television films were produced outside of Hollywood, and that this largely had to do with the cost of labour. According to the *Costumers' News*, television producers were looking to reduce costumers' wages by approximately 25%, relax jurisdictional lines and reduce crew sizes. Capitulating to these conditions would not only undermine hard-earned gains but also threaten their precarious professional reputation.

The specific circumstances of Local 705 were such that despite these issues, the promise of greater and more stable employment opportunities made television a desirable field to enter.

The article concludes: 'As for the costumers and the costume industry, every reasonable request has been considered and an agreement reached, and we are sure that as far as the costumers' Local is concerned, we will do all in our power to spur television film production'.⁶¹ Evidence of this commitment to finding an amicable path forward can be seen in later issues dedicated to television film production.

The editorial of the October 1949 issue revisits the difficulties Hollywood faced in becoming the main site of production for television film once more, and again, Local 705 reaffirms its commitment to television producers: '[w]e are ready and willing to

meet with the television producers to help them work out their problems'.⁶² There was an additional concern that a separate television local might be established, and thus, the Motion Picture Costumers union urged its members to 'try and work out our costume problems within our own organization'. It added, '[w]hile a television local may be necessary and beneficial in some crafts it appears to us that it would only create problems within costume crafts'.⁶³ These concerns appear to be borne out of the difficulties the union already faced when it came to dealing with the Theatrical Wardrobe Union (Local 786).

As the following years would demonstrate, difficulties in establishing jurisdiction over television continued, specifically with regard to live television. Live television, as opposed to television film, exposed the idiosyncrasies within labour unions that made it difficult to agree work rights within the television industry. For example, in 1949 disputes began between Local 705 and the Theatrical Wardrobe Union (Local 786). Typically responsible for stage performances, the Theatrical Wardrobe Union argued that live television broadcasts fell under their jurisdiction. An effort was therefore made by Local 705 to establish stage costumers as ill-suited to television work, despite early television's preoccupation with broadcasting live theatre productions. For example, the headline of an article in the October 1949 issue of *Costumers' News* reads: 'Stage Costume Not Right For Television Programs'. It details how the 'texture and design of costumes used for Broadway stage shows is often unsuited to the needs of video'.⁶⁴ Thus, it could not simply be the case that theatre productions costumed for the stage could be broadcast with no thought to television. Knowledge of the ways in which the camera transformed images was necessary. Thus, live television should fall under their remit.

A lengthy back and forth ensued following advice from the president of IATSE that the two unions should merge in order to resolve the issue. Ultimately, the proposal was rejected, and a tentative agreement had to be written up between Local 705 and Local 768 so that contract negotiations with the newly formed Alliance of Television Film Producers could proceed. These negotiations began in the early 1950s.

Local 705 set up the Independent Studio Film and Television Production Committee made up of seven workers from the independent and television field and overseen by President Elmer Ellsworth. Following a brief one-hour strike in February 1952, negotiating meetings commenced with CBS-TV and NBC-TV. While things progressed with NBC, CBS was reluctant to increase base wage scale. Local 705 would form a joint committee with Theatrical Wardrobe Union in order to negotiate television contracts and managed to ratify a live television contract with NBC in that year.⁶⁵ Ultimately, following the 1954 IA Convention, then IATSE President Richard F. Walsh granted Local 705 jurisdiction over live television broadcast in the Los Angeles area (but not elsewhere). In a gesture of goodwill, members of the Theatrical Wardrobe Union were invited to join Local 705 in the newly formed Live Television member group. The difficulties in mounting a collective and coherent response between unions were not unique to those representing costume. Kate Fortmueller's work demonstrates that the multiple unions representing different aspects of screen labour also 'struggled to work together as they competed for jurisdiction over television jobs'.⁶⁶

Local 705 strictly enforced specific group membership classifications in order to ensure the largest number of members could be employed at any one time. Consequently, if a member belonged to the 'Live Television' membership group, they were unable to

work on a motion picture or television film without authorisation from the Business Representative (union leader).⁶⁷

The job classification system, of course, invites with it assumptions about the value and skill level of different groups. In addition, so did the seniority system at work within the union, which allowed for the longest-serving members to be offered more opportunities for employment. Those on the seniority roster of the major studios were less likely to work in television. As a new membership group/area of activity, television was populated by less-experienced costumers and therefore could potentially be perceived as lacking in value.⁶⁸ However, as understanding of the affordances (and limitations) of television became known, costumers working in television became more specialised to deal with the specificities of television form.

Television aesthetics and costuming techniques

In its infancy, there were concerns from across the screen industries over the quality of the television image. Histories of early television acknowledge the difficulties in broadcasting certain sports and live theatre productions due to their scale. Thus, an opportunity presented itself for costumers to demonstrate their importance in securing the success of television. In the 1947 issue of *Televiser*, Ollie Tucker, merchandising editor for *Glamour*, published a two-page essay entitled, 'Expert "Styling" – The Key to Better Pictures'. Tucker's article drew on data compiled from a six-month research project in which she identified a number of 'faults' for early television to avoid. Her credentials as a freelance stylist with five years' experience working in advertising photography lent legitimacy to the article. In addition, she had experience in television, credited as 'stylist' on ABC's *The Fashion Story* (a short-lived comedy series in 1948). Consequently, Tucker's article was taken up by the Motion Pictures Costumers union as a blueprint for how to approach costume work in this flourishing industry.⁶⁹

The focus here is not on the practical advice given to those responsible for 'styling' television, save to say that the television aesthetics was certainly a priority for the industry. Rather, its significance has to do with the way in which Local 705 deployed the article for its own purposes. The article served as evidence for costumers of the importance of their work. In her opening pitch, Tucker explains: '[i]f black and white video pictures are to have the clarity and brilliance required for successful entertainment, they *must* be "styled" as *expertly* as advertising photographs'.⁷⁰ She writes:

many styling *musts* are being neglected in television today, with the result that many current video shows entertaining and pleasing to the eye in the studio, lose interest when viewed on a television screen. In many cases poor pictures are caused by selections of costumes, props and sets with little regard for "telegenic" qualities-for their reproduction in grey scale.⁷¹

The reader is left in no uncertain terms of the importance of this aspect of programming. Moreover, it is clear here that the goal for television is not the distracted viewership later associated with the medium, but the desire to hold the attention of the audience. Indeed the 'success' of the medium depended upon it. However, there is also a gesture towards the lack of 'regard' afforded the status of this kind of 'feminine' labour. An attempt to recuperate the professional respect of this aspect of television work is therefore mobilised in Tucker's comparison to advertising photography. The practice of 'styling' television

requires the ‘painstaking attention to detail’ and ‘expertise’ previously reserved for this kind of creative work which is positioned here as a highly skilled profession.

The significance of the costume department is demonstrated by the number of column inches given to fabrics, colours and tones over most other aspects of ‘styling’, which here includes makeup, production design and casting. And indeed, Tucker observes that many television workers already understood the value of ‘styling’ and sought to ‘lure’ costume designers from the stage and screen.⁷² However, she warned that this ‘procedure will not necessarily result in immediate good video pictures. Since stage designers may not understand photography, their work may be full of mistakes for television’.⁷³ While those working in motion pictures are ‘thoroughly schooled in photography’, Tucker also has reservations to do with the specificity of television design. She writes:

they [film costumers] are likely to be quite unfamiliar with some of the problems involved in television-particularly the use of a screen as small as six by eight inches. For example, many spectacles involving large numbers of people, while very effective on a theatre screen, become dull and confusing on a video screen. The type of picture that will reach maximum effectiveness on a small video screen will be similar in styling and composition to a good advertising photograph.⁷⁴

Tucker’s article made the front page of *Costumers’ News* in its April 1947 issue and prompted a lengthy dissection by Mal Caplan (head of costume for MGM) that demonstrates how highly her expertise was valued. He writes: ‘The importance of styling for television was made and elaborated upon by Ollie Tucker in the last edition of “The Televiser”, the most widely read television magazine’.⁷⁵ The addition of this description of the *Televiser* suggests an optimism that regard for costumers might increase not only within the industry but beyond to the wider readership of this press.

The *Costumers’ News* article extends Tucker’s argument that costume departments will be significant in addressing some of the shortcomings of television. The headline claims that ‘Television Costuming Will Require Better Techniques’, and further emphasises the ‘need for *expert* designers’ to compensate for the fact that ‘television will not have the advantage of cutting and retouching in the dark room or of the large screen that makes for large spectacles’.⁷⁶ Thus, the message is clear for members that television will require a certain kind of upskilling, and perhaps other aspects of filmmaking will be of lesser importance (i.e. editing and post production). In addition, a more significant relationship with above-the-line personnel is imagined as necessary: ‘A closer consultation with the director, more thorough knowledge of the script, and a more careful dovetailing of props and costume will be necessary in television production’.⁷⁷ Perhaps an additional hope was that this closer association with the above-the-line staff might increase their perceived importance within the industry more broadly.

The article not only seeks to emphasise the increasing importance of the costume department, but also seeks to encourage its members to be prepared to rise to this new challenge. It reads:

[m]any interesting observations by Miss Tucker bear further study by our members ... With television so close at hand careful study should begin in this field both for proper and expert costuming and for protection of our jurisdiction in television. The easiest way to protect our jurisdiction is to have expert costumers available who thoroughly understand telecasting and who can protect our jurisdiction by growing with the industry.⁷⁸

Further attempts to protect the jurisdiction of Local 705, and reinforce the importance of television costume work were made within the subsequent newsletters. In June 1949, the newsletter reprinted an article from the *Los Angeles Daily News*, entitled 'Clothes make the actress on TV as well as ability, says Hubert'.⁷⁹ The article recounts fashion designer, Rene Hubert's experience of working in television. It reads: '[i]t is Hollywood fashion designer Rene Hubert's belief that the clothes television actresses wear are nearly as important as the artistry of their performance'.⁸⁰ Once again, an equivalence of costume and above-the-line creative talent is assumed. The importance of costume is also indicated here by the disclosure of Hubert's potential salary. According to the article, Hubert was offered '\$50,000 to supervise costume designs for one of the major eastern television networks'.⁸¹ Once again, the article makes the front page of *Costumers' News* presumably to help convince members of two things. First, that their skills are valued and important, and second, that television has the capacity to provide stable and well-paid employment. However, there is potentially an additional consequence of this kind of reporting in that it serves to reinforce gendered value systems and secure television's association with the feminine. Hubert's comments refer only to female actors as the subjects of the new medium, and indeed, this assumption is replicated in other articles related to costuming for television.

A March 1949 article entitled 'Costuming for Television' reads:

As television develops costuming will assume an ever-increasing importance and simple but important rules will become apparent. For the present and for some time to come, the most important part of the body, video wise, is the face. The costumer's job is to enhance not detract from the face. For instance, if a hat is worn it should be small and not hide the important features of the hair and face. The neck and shoulders are of next importance. If the neck is bony – cover it, and if gorgeous give it the elegance of selected jewels. For men the collar and tie are important.⁸²

The assumption in the passage above is that the costumer's default subject is female. This is made clear through the specific designation attached to the male performer (i.e. 'for men ...') which marks him as the 'other'. Such is the case in Tucker's article for *The Televiser*, in which she discusses casting:

Casting for television must, of necessity, produce a new species- an "actor model" with photogenic qualities of a model with acting ability of an actor [...] Facial bone structure, "sparkle," grace, regular features and other points determine the photogenic qualities of a model. Many attractive girls with smooth rounded features are poor photogenic subjects.⁸³

Tucker's discussion of casting does not even entertain the idea that the 'new species' would be male. The male actor is conspicuous by his absence.

There is some truth in this assumption, however. By the late 1950s, there was an increase in women-centric genres, and more women were appearing on the small screen.⁸⁴ Given the segregated nature of costuming work, this created difficulties within the union between the men's and women's finished wardrobe departments. According to minutes of an August 1958 meeting published in *The Costumer*, there was a 'heated discussion' between their respective committees.

It began following concerns from union member Bill Edwards, who had accepted a job on a Desilu Production in which there were a significant number of women's clothing changes. He was told by producers that he would be required to handle women's

costumes. Edwards did not feel this was in line with the Local's job classification clauses and suggested they hire a woman costumer. With potentially more female-centric television shows, more opportunities would be created for women costumers. Consequently, Edwards observed that this 'was a handicap to his and others' livelihoods' and requested that the Business Representative provide clarification on what could be expected of male costumers.⁸⁵

This issue had come up multiple times in the Local's past. Some years earlier, when television was in its infancy, 'a certain amount of elasticity was countenanced by the Union' in the interpretation of these clauses.⁸⁶ This was in part a response to the 'labor issues' identified by Ted Ellsworth in 1949, specifically that television and independent film had smaller budgets than theatrical pictures and therefore would need to limit the money spent on personnel. However, in 1954, Local 705 asked the Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers (SIMPP) to 'tighten the present loosely interpreted concession (by them) on handling costumes by members of the opposite sex'.⁸⁷ While the SIMPP confirmed in a written statement that they would seek to abide by these job classification clauses, the issue arose again in 1957, prompting the executive board of Local 705 to intervene.⁸⁸ The board's position was that the loose interpretation of these job classifications was 'unsound by virtue of the improvement of conditions in these fields'.⁸⁹ They write:

As a result of these various and generally unauthorized interpretations as to just what amount of wardrobe a costumer member of the opposite sex may handle on a production, the legitimate employment rights of many of our other members have been lost, and even now threatened with becoming almost non-existent unless reasserted positively, and without the benefit of further interpretation at once.⁹⁰

After consultation with key stakeholders, the board agreed a basic policy which was published in full in the January 1958 issue of *The Costumer*. However, it was clear from Edwards' complaints in the August of that year, that the issue was not so easily resolved. Nevertheless, his concerns that television might affect his livelihood seem unfounded. By 1960, the demand for costumers in television film was such that the Local was forced to reclassify and move members to meet the need for experienced costumers.

According to a 1959 front-page article, titled 'Television Film Spurs Industry Boom':

The vast hunger of the Television Monster that has spurred production, and the need for experienced personnel ... [shows] no signs of appreciable let-up ... one might safely assume, without over optimism, that we will not again experience the deep levels of unemployment ... As long as Television is a Hungry Monster, and with the possibility that Pay-TV will be established, we will need and require at least the present membership level we have of Costumers and costumer-apprentices.⁹¹

It would therefore seem that, as predicted, television formed an essential part of the union's post-war recovery strategy.

Conclusion

The role of the Motion Picture Costumers union in responding to the changing demands of television and preparing its members cannot be overstated. The material examined above demonstrates, in contrast to claims that Hollywood had a lackadaisical or

hostile attitude towards television, that Local 705 persistently sought opportunities to enter the television industry. The dual focus on upskilling their workers and ensuring remuneration for their efforts was a significant programme of work for the union during television's early years and was not without its challenges. Challenges that, at least in part, had to do with the gendered nature of costume labour and the feminisation of television.

Reflecting in a special issue marking the 'First Annual Jamboree' of 1950, Ted Ellsworth writes: 'Since the war ended our problems have increased due to curtailed production which has resulted in heavy unemployment and a reduction in membership to under 900 active members. However, due to the advance of television, prospective production increases have resulted in better employment and a brighter outlook for our members'.⁹² Following record levels of unemployment in 1948, employment levels had reached their highest level to date in 1952. The successful negotiations between Hollywood unions and television certainly played a major role in this upswing. In October 1952, the union reported that these new levels were 'due to the improvement in employment in both television and television film'.⁹³ The first television college course was launched the following year, with costumers encouraged to participate to hone their craft.

In 1958, Local 705 sought to recognise the efforts of those who had successfully transitioned into television at their 'Adam and Eve' Costumers' Awards. For the first time, categories were introduced for men and women's live television and television film, alongside theatrical film. This gesture demonstrated that the techniques of television costuming were markedly different from that of theatrical film, and thus required a separate category, but that they were of equal merit and worthy of recognition. However, the extent to which television was able to increase the professional respect afforded to costumers is more difficult to assess. If one examines the current climate, the union finds itself in a markedly similar situation. The rise of streaming platforms brought with it another increase in opportunities for costume work, but also, as in the early days of television, lower wage rates.⁹⁴ In addition, the recent well-publicised disputes between the IATSE Locals and the Association for Motion Picture Producers amplified the frustrations currently felt by the Motion Picture Costumers union resulting from a lack of understanding and appreciation from those within the industry.⁹⁵

In revisiting the histories of these below-the-line workers, it is possible to see how patterns of disadvantage can be built into industries, and the lasting effects they can have. Understanding these relationships is important, not only to provide a corrective to dominant histories, but also to provide context for contemporary injustices, and in so doing, hope we can prevent history from being repeated.

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