

# Theatrical License: can collaboration and creativity overcome the potential pitfalls of recreative practice?

Dr Veronica Isaac and Dr Rebecca Morrison



Ellen Terry (1847-1928) as Imogen in the Lyceum Company production of *Cymbeline*, 1896 and details from her surviving costume [Ellen Terry Collection, National Trust, Smallhythe Place]

# This is a presentation on a 'work in progress'

It will briefly outline:

- The background to the project (The collection and performer which inspired it, the research upon which it is founded)
- The team of experts collaborating on the project (specialisms and input)
- The progress of the project to date (challenges, limitations, methodologies developed)
- The discoveries which have resulted from this collaborative approach to recreation and the questions it has provoked
- The specific significance of recreating 'costume for performance'



Photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in Cymbeline, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Victoria & Albert Museum.

# Ellen Terry (1847-1928)

‘Of Ellen Terry, the actress, Our Lady of the Lyceum as Oscar Wilde used to style her, what a series of wonderful pictures live in the memory. Ophelia. A pale shadow with bright hair, the perfect Portia, effulgent, golden, Camma of ‘The Cup’, beautiful exceedingly...a very pageant of fair women shown in the likeness of one fair woman.’ [Robertson, *Time Was*, 1931]



Terry as Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Circa 1878. [V&A Collections]



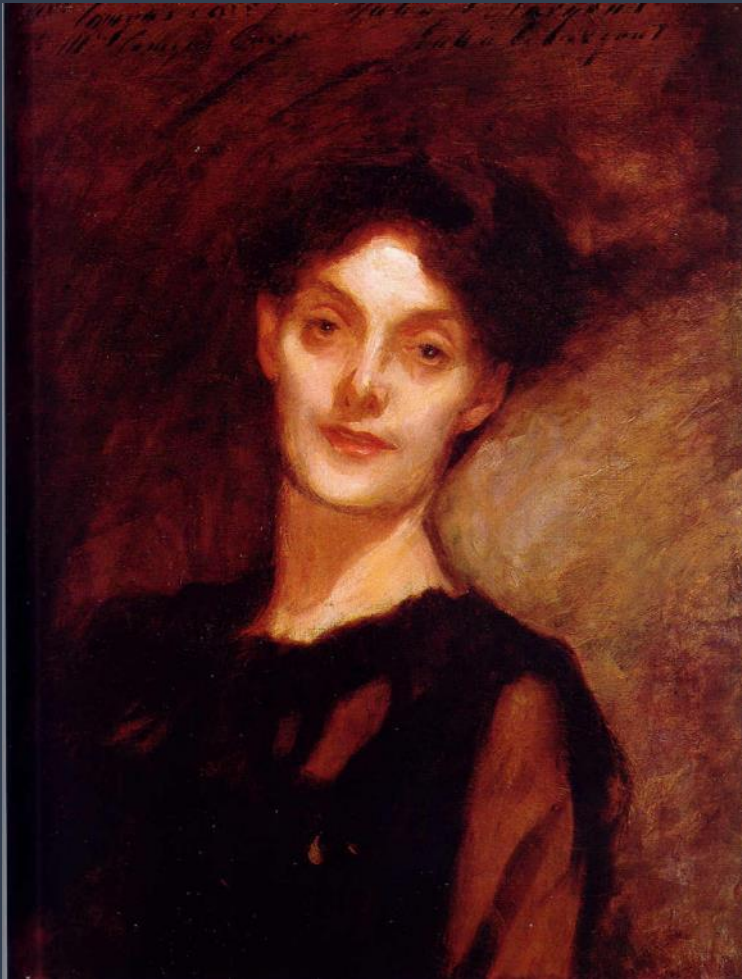
Terry as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. Circa 1879. [V&A Collections]



Terry as Camma in *The Cup*. Circa 1881. [V&A Collections]

# Alice Comyns-Carr (1850-1927)

‘Patience was always in favour of elaborate and pretentious gowns and had but little use for the simple designs I suggested.’ [Alice Comyns-Carr, *Reminiscences*, 1926.]



John Singer Sargent, *Alice Comyns-Carr* (1850-1927), circa 1889 [Speed Art Museum, Kentucky]



Terry as Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*, Lyceum Theatre, 1887 [Victoria & Albert Museum]

# Adeline Cort (Ada) Nettleship (1856-1932)

‘[...] A woman of intelligence, education and thought’ [*The Queenslander*, 1897]

‘She had a particular specialism in embroidery, both designing her own patterns, and training her staff to carry out such work under her supervision’

– *The Queenslander*, 1897

Originally ‘[...] distinguished as an art embroiderer in the style of William Morris’ daughter,’ in response to the pleas of her clients, she expanded into dressmaking and has since established a reputation in publications such as *Harper’s Bazaar* as ‘perhaps the most unique dressmaker in the world.’

– *Boston Evening Transcript*, 1897



Carte de visite photograph of Nettleship, c.1880s.  
[Northampton Records Office]

# Ellen Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, 1896 ‘Radiant’ and ‘Full of girlish spirits’

“Sir Laurence Alma-Tadema did the designs for the scenery and dresses in *Cymbeline*, and incidentally designed for Imogen one of the loveliest dresses that I ever wore.”

[Terry, *The Story of My Life*, 1908]



Hand-coloured photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in '*Cymbeline*'. First performed at the Lyceum Theatre in 1896. This photograph was printed and published by Window & Grove, 1896 and re-issued in 1906 (Terry's jubilee year).  
[Ellen Terry Collection, Smallhythe Place, Kent.]

# The Collaborating Team

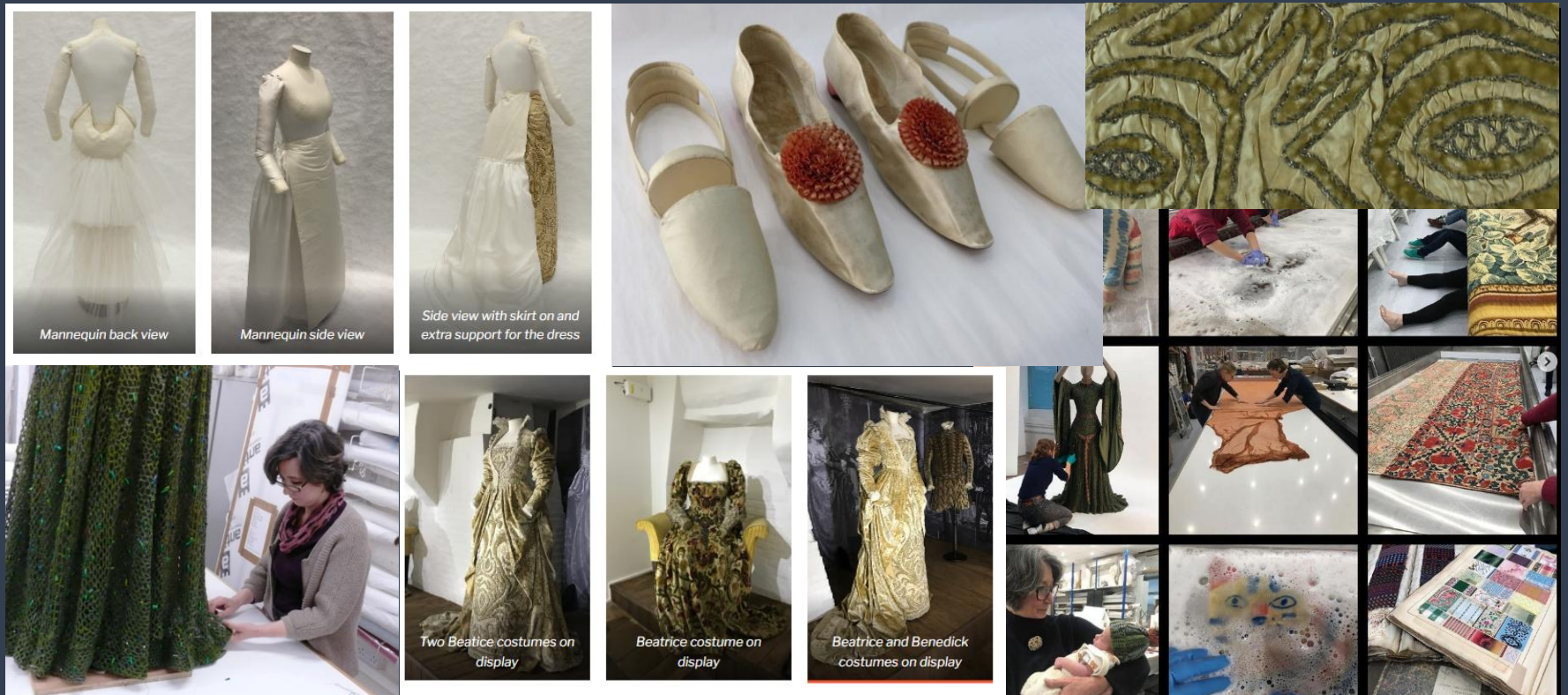
- Experts from the National Trust: including Susannah Mayor (House and Collections Manager at Smallhythe Place), Siobhan Barrett ACR (Textile Conservation Advisor) Eleanor Black (Collections and House Manager, Sissinghurst)
- Specialist Dress and Textile Conservators: Zenzie Tinker ACR and her team at Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd (have been working with the collection for nearly two decades)
- Specialist Dress and Textile Mounter: Janet Wood ACR (Costume Display Consultant)
- Specialist Costume Maker and Researcher: Dr Rebecca Morrison (Former Costume Maker, now Curator, Academic and specialist in recreation)
- Academic Researcher: Dr Veronica Isaac (specialist knowledge of Terry and her evolving costuming practices)



Lawrence Alma Tadema. Preliminary sketch for Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, 1895. Ellen Terry Collection.

# Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd

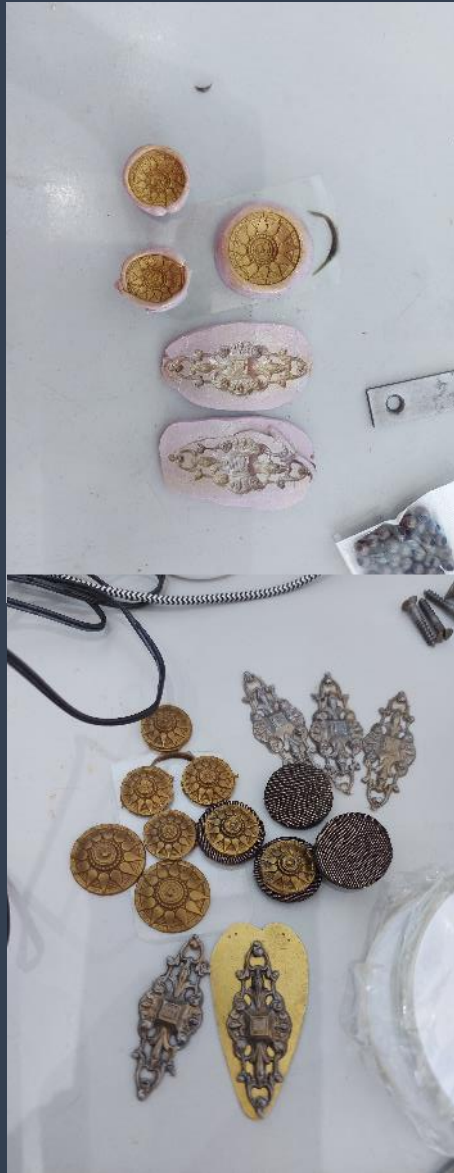
Zenzie and her team have been conserving and mounting Terry's costume for close to two decades. Through this they have gained an intimate knowledge of her changing body and the construction (and re-construction) of her costumes. Their own approaches to conservation and mounting have also evolved in response to the challenges presented by these complex garments.







# Ingenuity and attention to detail



Jamie Robinson (member of Zenie's team) recreating the metal decoration which is an integral part of the costume Images © Zenie Tinker Conservation Ltd

# The Final Result – preserving and evoking the original

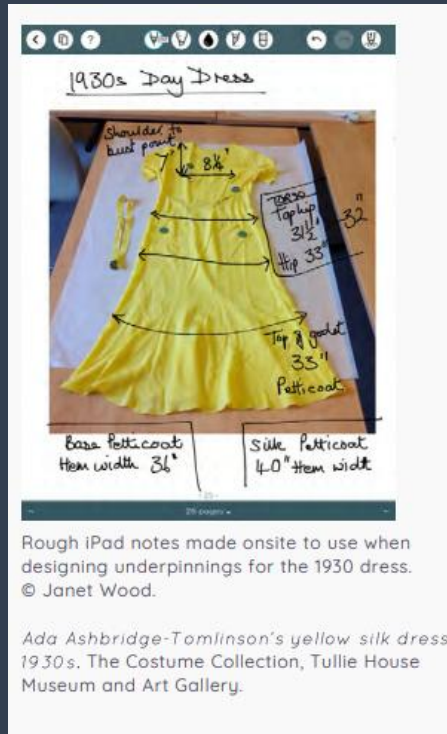


Recreated metal elements (left and centre) alongside details from the original costume (right).  
Images © Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd.

# Janet Wood

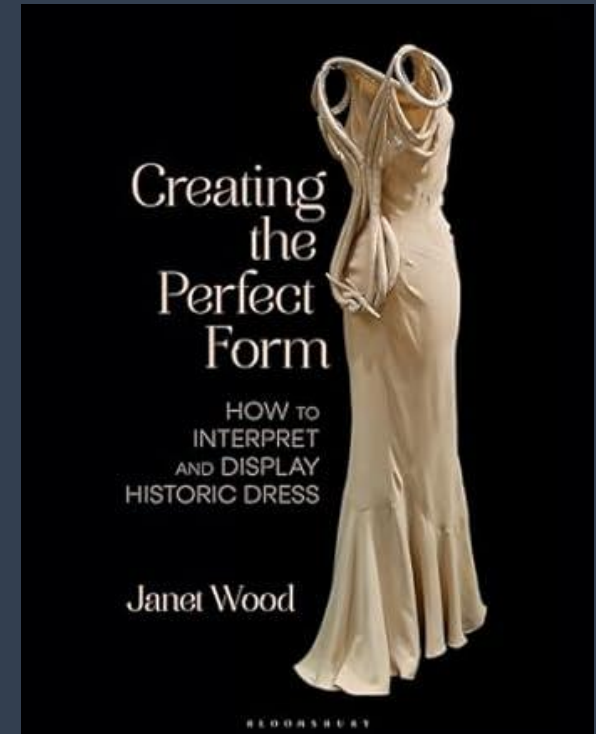
Janet originally worked in fashion. She has translated her knowledge of construction and pattern drafting to her work as a conservator and now specialises in mounting garments for display. She recently published *Creating the Perfect Form: How to Interpret and Display Historic Dress*.

Accustomed to creating toiles of fragile historic garments when commissioning bespoke mounts, she re-mapped the original construction of Terry's costume to gather evidence for the recreation.



Rough iPad notes made onsite to use when designing underpinnings for the 1930 dress.  
© Janet Wood.

Ada Ashbridge-Tomlinson's yellow silk dress, 1930s. The Costume Collection, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery.



# Mapping the Garment

## Key Challenges:

- The fragility of the costume (risk of overhandling)
- Tracing stages in construction and re-construction
- Finding a suitable fabric to trace the shape of the skirt panels
- Documenting the evidence gathered
- Interpreting the evidence uncovered

We are working together to refine a suitable (and repeatable) methodology for gathering and documenting the evidence required to produce a blueprint for this – and future – recreations



Above: Mapping the skirt panels using silk organza.  
Below: Interior of the bodice. Showing construction and staining.

# Next Steps – Creating a Toile

- In order to draft an accurate pattern for the skirt, Janet Wood realised it would be necessary to create a toile of the current costume.
- This toile serves multiple purposes: Providing a blueprint for further recreations; becoming a ‘copy’ which can be manipulated and handled and preserving a physical record of the original costume and thereby a starting point for future patterns, a tool for display



# Toile to re-creation

## Challenges

- Degrees of separation.
- Complexity of the costume.
- Fabric choices – Budget!
- The life-cycle of the costume and its many wearers.

## Discoveries

- Alterations.
- Parallels with original processes.
- Testing Ellen Terry's assertions regarding underpinnings.

## Questions

- The missing underskirt?
- The knot?



Left: Rebecca Morrison with Janet Wood in Zenzie Tinker's Conservation Studio, Brighton examining the original costume



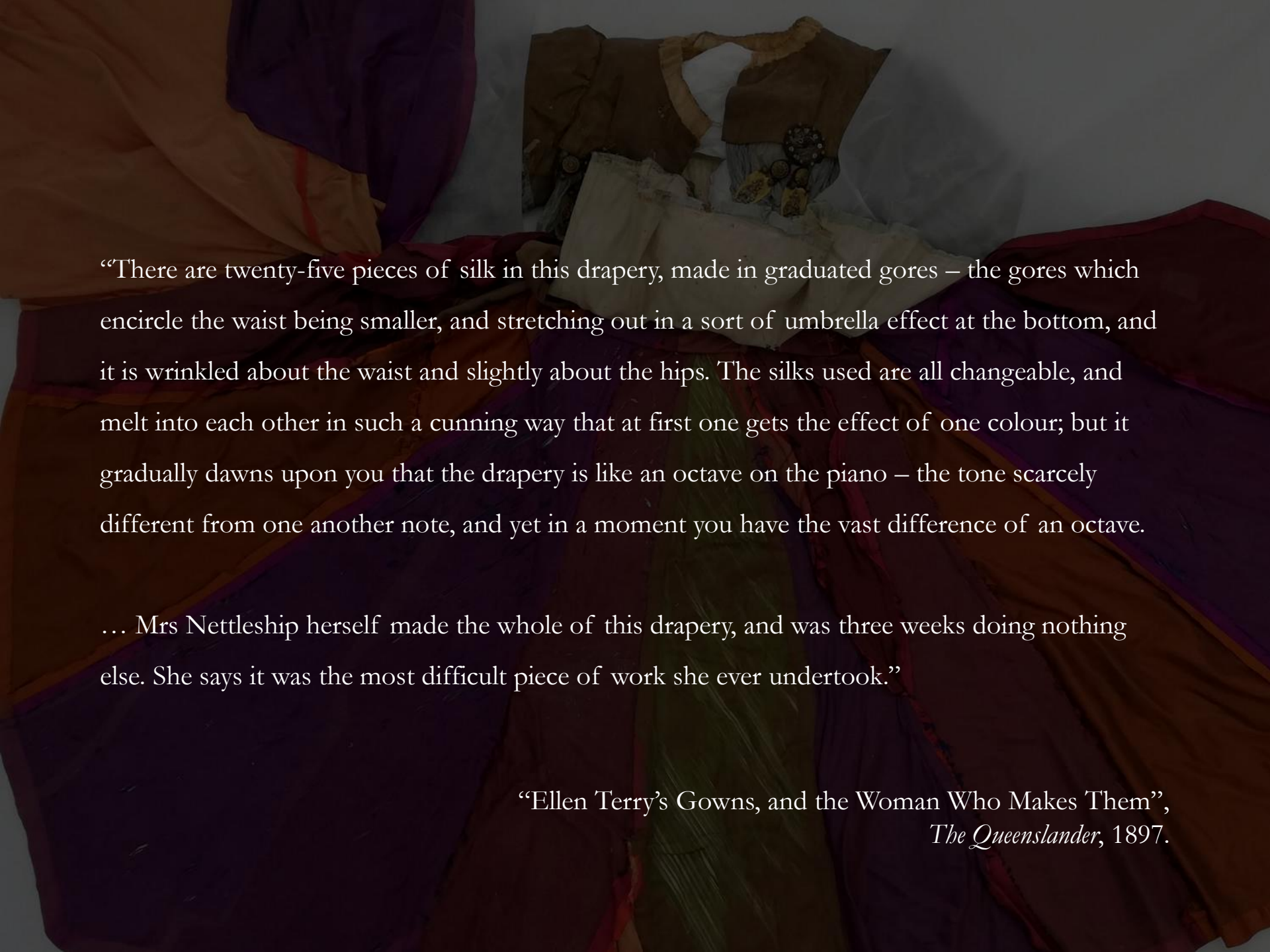
Above: Searching fabrics which are suitable for the recreation, Goldhawk Road, London.

# Challenges – Complexity

- Layers – Bodice, Blouse, Sleeves, Skirt, Overskirt, Bolero.
- Pattern Pieces – Bodice = 12 pieces; Overskirt = at least 17 irregular pieces.







“There are twenty-five pieces of silk in this drapery, made in graduated gores – the gores which encircle the waist being smaller, and stretching out in a sort of umbrella effect at the bottom, and it is wrinkled about the waist and slightly about the hips. The silks used are all changeable, and melt into each other in such a cunning way that at first one gets the effect of one colour; but it gradually dawns upon you that the drapery is like an octave on the piano – the tone scarcely different from one another note, and yet in a moment you have the vast difference of an octave.

... Mrs Nettleship herself made the whole of this drapery, and was three weeks doing nothing else. She says it was the most difficult piece of work she ever undertook.”

“Ellen Terry’s Gowns, and the Woman Who Makes Them”,  
*The Queenslander*, 1897.

# Challenges – Fabrics (Budget)

- Bodice – linen, on which the rest of the costume is mounted
- ‘Blouse’, Sleeves, Skirt – a pale blue/grey silk gauze with a printed floral pattern, crinkle pleated.
- Draped overskirt – 18 panels of a shot silk twill, in 10 different colour combinations.
- Bolero – ‘cloth of gold’ in a very subtle brocade. The metal threads have dulled over time.
- Neck infill – silk chiffon.
- Trim on bolero sleeves – cut blue/grey taffeta, narrow braid and beads. The taffeta is also used under the ‘blouse’ and possibly under the skirt.



# Challenges = Compromise

- Silk gauze = white cotton gauze, dipped to the correct colour.
- ‘Cloth of Gold’ = a synthetic ‘curtain fabric with a metallic sheen.’
- Shot silk twill = white silk twill, dyed to match the original weft threads.



# Discoveries - Parallels with original process

Costume worn by Terry as Titania in 1863:

“Mr. Godwin designed my dress, and we made it at his house in Bristol. He showed me how to damp it and "wring" it while it was wet, tying up the material as the Orientals do in their "tie and dry" process, so that when it was dry and untied, it was all crinkled and clinging. This was the first lovely dress that I ever wore, and I learned a great deal from it.”

Recurring feature in Terry's theatrical wardrobe:

Comyns-Carr used a potato steamer - ‘twist[ing] the stuff up into a ball and boil[ing] it’ - to achieve a ‘crinkled effect’ for both her personal dress and several of Terry’s stage costumes – including the dress she first designed for the actress to wear as Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*.



Above: Pleating the fabric for the recreation

Left: Terry as Ellaline in *The Amber Heart*, Lyceum Theatre, 1887 [Victoria and Albert Museum]

# Discoveries: Negotiations over Ellen Terry's 'stomach'

“Alma Tadema had the true Dutch love of perfection of detail [...] he was always prepared to sacrifice beauty of line for the sake of complete accuracy. This was a characteristic which once brought him into conflict with Ellen Terry.

Tadema was designing the costumes for *Cymbeline* at the Lyceum, and Nell and I went to discuss with him the dress she was to wear as Imogen. By this time her slender days were over, and she was no longer willing to swathe her waist under a clinging robe to give the right thirteenth century line. “No my dear,” she said to me as we drew up to the house. “I’m not going to have my stomach made a laughing stock”

“Miss Terry is afraid the tight drapery may not be becoming to her figure”, I murmured diffidently in the course of the discussion.

“You mean she tink it will show her schtomack? But I will ‘ave ‘im, her schtomack [sic]” cried the irate Dutchman. “It is just what I require”. For once Nell had to give in. Tadema had his way; and the dress was one of the most becoming she ever wore”

- *Alice Comyns-Carr Reminiscences*



Photograph of Ellen Terry as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Victoria & Albert Museum.

# Discoveries – Alterations

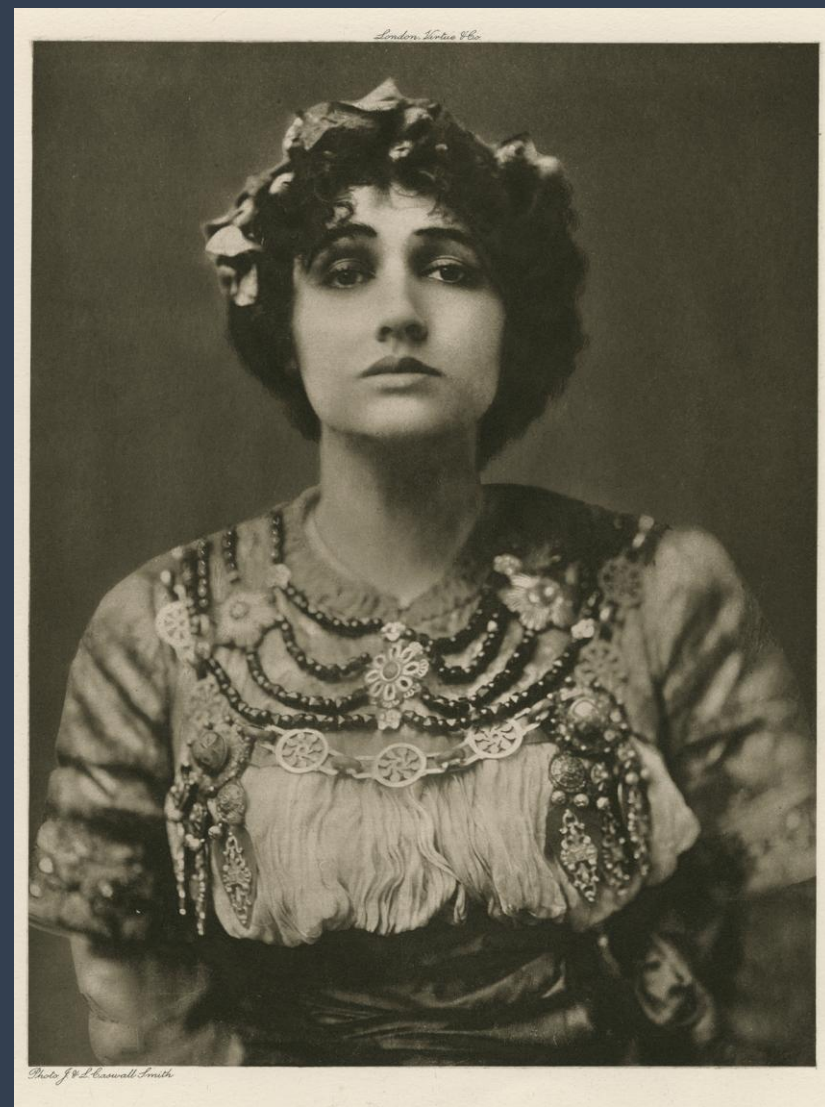
Alteration, repair or earlier conservation?



# Discoveries – Other Wearers?

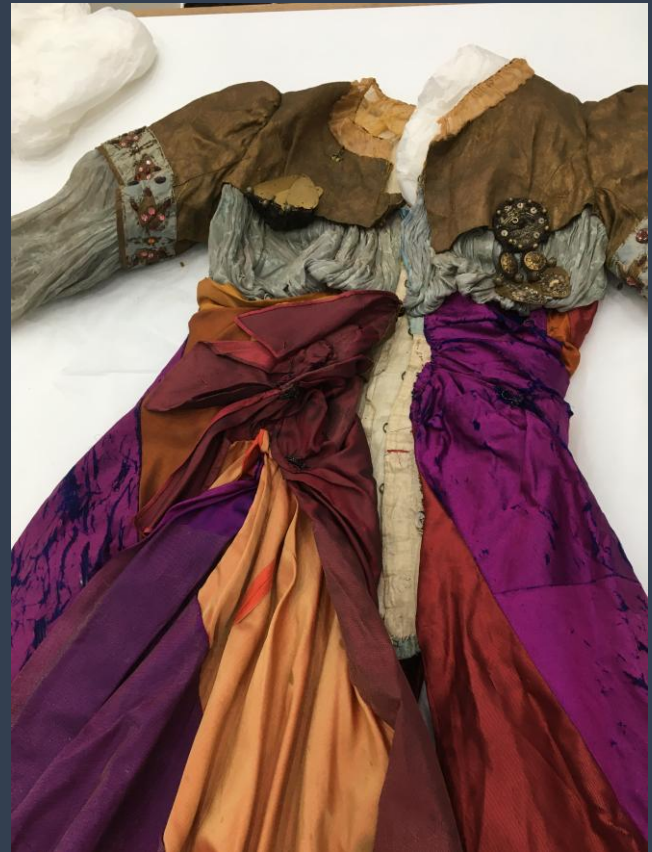


Photograph of Ellen Terry (1847-1928) as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Lyceum Theatre, 1896. Victoria & Albert Museum.



Julia Arthur (1869-1950) as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, She first acted with the company in 1895 and replaced Terry in this part in 1896, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Questions - The missing underskirt?  
The knot?





# Why performance costume matters

- Relationship between garment, wearer and character – created to facilitate embodiment of a role
- Potential level and nature of provenance – in this instance about wearer, designer and maker
- An overtly ‘designed’ object – created with a specific purpose, wearer and audience in mind
- Materiality of the garments – the multiple lives and hands imprinted on fabric and preserved through thread
- Greater potential need for recreation to preserve, document and recapture the original garment – These were garments designed to be viewed from a distance, under lighting and to withstand repeated wear and wearers



An overhead view of the costume before conservation. Both the sleeves and skirt are shattering and incredibly fragile. © Zenzie Tinker Conservation Ltd.

# Returning the costume to the stage...

- Another aim is to share the recreated costume with a wider audience by casting a 'performer' to wear the costume on the stage, under lighting which evoked the gaslight originally used at the Lyceum.
- This would allow us to see how the costume interacted with the body, to observe how the fabric and construction appeared under lighting and from a distance, and to recapture and share an evocation of the original performance.

Clare Atwood. Painting of the exterior of the Lyceum Theatre. c.1900.  
[National Trust Collections]

Photograph showing the interior of the Lyceum Theatre as it was under Irving's Management ca.1878-1902.  
[National Trust Images]

