O’Dell Tucker

Professor Olivia Trees

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*The Retreat from Moscow* Costume Design Project

Going into this script, I honestly expected a play titled “*The Retreat from Moscow*” to be a World War II-era military drama that followed the Germans’ retreat from the Soviet Union after their loss at The Battle of Stalingrad. However, instead of the Soviet Union, the play takes place in England at the turn of the 21st century, and instead of being about a band of beleaguered soldiers, the story is about the how the longtime marriage between Edward and Alice abruptly falls apart as their middle-aged son, Jamie, is caught in the crossfire between his separated parents. Although, it wasn’t the gritty war-flick that I was hoping for, *The Retreat from Moscow* uses a similarly somber tone to a domestic setting in the relatively modern day to create a gripping drama that questions interpersonal responsibility of those within marriage, and I did my best to demonstrate this within my costume choices for Edward, Alice, and Jamie.

Starting off, Edward is where most of the conflict, both internal and external, stems from. To put it bluntly, Edward was a hollow shell of a man in the first act of the play. After the spark in their marriage had died long ago, Edward came to the concluded that Alice could never be satisfied with him as her husband, which led him to become emotionally distant toward her. We later learn that he stayed in that marriage for so long because he believed that it was the selfless to do. For his costume, I took inspiration from a show on Amazon prime called “Clark’s Farm” which had many examples of what older British men normally wear, so I tool a lot of inspiration from there. I tried to give Edward a very dreary and faded color pallet to represent how he felt like his days of happiness were behind him. The only exception to this would be the pink/salmon colored tie tucked beneath his sweater vest, which was meant to symbolize the little spark of hope that his affair with Angela gave him, which ultimately gave him the courage to leave and never look back.

While this was hinted toward in the first act, the second act is where metaphorical significance of the title truly came into play. “*The Retreat from Moscow*” is in reference to Edward’s interest in the Napoleonic Wars and how the harsh conditions of the Russian winter forced many French soldiers to either risk their lives trying to save their wounded comrades or selfishly abandoning the weak, thus guaranteeing their own survival. This morbid “rock and a hard place” scenario serves as a perfect metaphor for the moral dilemma Edward faces after leaving his emotionally unstable wife, so to visualize this, I decided to design Edward’s act two outfit off the winter uniforms worn by French soldiers during the Napoleonic war. The Navy-blue coat, white pants, red mitts and scarf, and Russian Ushanka hat all helps to capture this look. I also made it a point to remove the ring off his left hand to show that he has already moved on from his old marriage.

Next is Alice, who, unlike her husband, is incredibly loud, idealistic, and dramatic. Once again, to put it bluntly, Alice is a woman of extremes in almost every sense of the word. One moment, she’ll quoting poetry and being almost childishly idealistic, and the next, she’s physically and verbally abusing her husband or aggressively imposing her values onto other people. I honestly think she might have some kind bipolar personality disorder, which might also explain why Edward’s reason for staying. He knew how unstable Alice was, so he probably figured that the shock of him leaving could potentially push her to do something drastic, which he was right about. As a result, Edward believed that staying with her and putting up with her abuse was the selfless thing to do., but he could only take her toxic behavior for so long.

When designing Alice’s costume for act one, I tried to create something that was completely opposite of Edward’s design. Instead of faded cool colors on more formal looking clothing, I gave Alice a younger-looking outfit with a warm, saturated color pallet. Also, I intentionally placed Alice’s wedding ring on her right hand to show how she is more of a right-brain person (I’m aware that, in real life, this is technically wrong). Edward, on the other hand (get it), wore his ring on his left representing that his more logically oriented mindset makes him more of a left-brain person.

After Edward divorces her, Alice descends into what can best be described as a depression fueled madness, as lives in denial of her dead marriage. From getting a dog named Edward to planning to take her own life in front of her former husband, she has an almost passive-aggressive tone to everything she says. It is almost like her eccentricities went from an 11 to a 20. This is the idea that I followed when designing Alice’s costume for act two. The loose coat and sunglasses are meant to be a thin veil to the crazily colored pajamas she wears underneath. Additionally, instead of the flats she used to wear, Alice now has bed slippers and overgrown hair to show how little she was taking care of herself. Finally, I purposefully kept the wedding ring on her right hand to show she still hasn’t given up on her dead marriage.

Last but certainly not least, is Jamie, the 30-year-old son of both Edward and Alice. I personally consider him to be the protagonist since he largely serves as the intermediary connection between his parents and the audience, which is especially true during the second act. However, it would be inaccurate to say that Jamie is just an expeditionary plot device, its clear that he has his own personality and story. However, the strange thing is that despite the fact he is present in most scenes, not much concrete information is given about Jamie’s personal life, so most of what is known can only be extrapolated from vague hints. This is likely because Jamie is just like his father, in the sense that he is a very “unforthcoming” about his private matters and doesn’t want to burden his divorced parents with his own personal struggles. He does his best to support his parents’ feelings, but it is evident from his melancholy disposition that there is plenty bothering him. At first, I thought that Jamie was a rather static character, but I was shocked to find such hidden depth to his character; nevertheless, such a discussion is outside the scope of this essay

In terms of Jamie’s costume design, I chose to take a more subdued approach. Even though I previously called Jamie the protagonist, he is purposefully written to be a supporting character to his parents, so I wanted his outfit to reflect that idea. Just like I did with his dad, I wanted to give him clothes that felt “British” (without being completely stereotypical), so I gave Jamie an Irish newsboy cap and classier looking clothes to fit the aesthetic. Additionally, I tried to use earthier tones like browns, greens, and grey-scale tones to give him a more grounded feel to his appearance since he often acted the neutral voice of reason to his parents (especially is mom).

To be frank most of the changes that I made between act one and two were mostly to accommodate the winter setting, so they don’t really need much explaining. However, during the transitions between “scenes” Jamie swaps between coats to both better represent the passage of time while also reflecting his relationship with the coat’s respective parent. When talking with Alice, Jamie wears a green windbreaker in reference to what Alice said in the first Act when describing going to church made her feel. She said that people wearing windbreakers were one of the many things about the church that she found unpleasant despite it still comforting her. Although Jamie reminds Alice too much of her former husband, she ultimately appreciates the support he gives him. In contrast, Jamie wears a more rough-looking brown jacket when meeting with Edward since he doesn’t need the same level of emotional support as Alice. If anything, Jamie is much more outspoken with his father’s mishandling of the divorce.

While *The Retreat from Moscow* was, by no means, as historical as the title would imply, it uses a historical setting to explore the moral greyness that can arise when our loyalty to one another is put to the test. What the cast lacks in quantity, it easily makes up for in quality. Both Edward and Alice both made critical mistakes that hurt the other and eventually culminated in the death of their marriage, but regardless, I can’t either of them for feeling the way that they did give the situation they were in. And just like Jamie alludes to in his final monologue, Edward and Alice are the “explorers” that discover the path ahead as well as the dangers that lie on it; it is our job as the followers to head the warnings as we forge our own paths into the future.