



Most design processes begin with a conversation about the director's vision and how they see that vision playing out on stage through the show's design elements. Oscar Wilde brought *The Importance of Being Ernest* to the London stage in 1895, and director Mark Silence chose to embrace that time period in all its late Victorian splendor for King School's production. Late Victorian dress for women is dramatic and elegant. Menswear is starting to become more informal, but suits with vests, stiff collared shirts and smart hats still rule the day.

Researching a period is always the first place to start and I immediately jumped online to look at the wonderful fashion archives of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Fashion Institute of Technology. These troves of images of actual clothes, together with fashion plates from the period are a gold mine. Paintings from the era are another wonderful resource, a rich slice of life that gives information about clothes and how people wore them. John Singer Sargent's famous portrait of the newly-wed Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes was one I found very helpful and a delight. Meant originally to be formal portrait, Sargent instead chose to depict a young couple in the more informal sportswear of the day. (You will see echoes of the young bride's attire in Gwendolyn's costume for Acts II and III.)

After assembling research images for each character and discussing those choices with the director, the next step is to sketch images for clothes that will then be bought, borrowed or "built". Here's the sketch

I did for Lady Bracknell. The images for other characters show pieces of clothing I hoped to find.

And find I did! This show offered me the chance to take advantage of a wonderful vintage costume rental company I've long hoped to use. Helen Uffner's Vintage Clothing company, housed in a huge warehouse space in Long Island City, is a treasure trove of real clothes from periods spanning almost 200 years. I took sketches of clothing I'd hoped to find, together with measurements for our student actors (some of whom I knew would be perfectly sized to fit the period clothes) and came away with outfits for most of the characters in the show. To fill in the holes, where sizes or styles were not to be found, I bought pieces at resale which were resized to fit actors, and one exquisite suit from a period clothing company in England. I also built a vest and blouse pair for Gwendolyn to coordinate with a vintage skirt we had chosen from Helen Uffner's.

It has been a delight to make this period come to life, with all its finery and pomp. And a delight to work with the students and faculty here at King School. Hope you enjoy the show we all have worked hard to bring to life!

Katie Touart, Costume Designer



