

Costume and Research in Finland

National-level research seminar on Costume Design and related fields

A meeting of costume researchers in Finland

Thursday, 5 June 2025

9:15 - 16:00

Room A123 A1 Main building, Otakaari 1

Aalto University, Otaniemi campus

The seminar is organised by:

Costume in Focus Research Group

Department of Film

School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Aalto University



Seminar Chair

Sofia Pantouvaki, PhD

Professor of Costume Design for Theatre & Film

Department of Film

Aalto University



Aalto University

Programme

9:15 - 9:30 **Registration**

9:30 - 9:40 **Welcome & Introduction, Sofia Pantouvaki**

Session 1 (in English)

Chair: Madeline Taylor, Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Aalto University

9:40 - 10:00 **Joanna Weckman**

Independent performance costume researcher, costume designer
Unknown stories: Tracing the "exotic" in the Theatre Museum collection

10:00–10:20 **Tua Helve**

Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy, The Performing Arts Research Centre Tutke
Costume, culture, and artistic development in performance group Oblivia's early years, 2000–2009

10:20-10:40 **Discussion**

10:40–11:00 **Coffee break**

Session 2 (in English)

Chair: Heini Granberg, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Film, Aalto University

11:00–11:20 **Laya Geramizadegan**

PhD Researcher in Cultural Heritage University of Turku, Finland
Political Listening and the Expanding Imagination of Costume Designers: The "Woman, Life, Freedom" Movement

11:20–11:40 **Susanna Suurla**

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Film, Aalto University
The embodied experience of costume: Evolving practices in contemporary costume design and devised performance

11:40–12:00 **Discussion**

12:00–13:15 **Lunch break (at participants' own cost)**

Session 3 (in English)

Chair: Susanna Suurla, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Film, Aalto University

13:15–13:35 Hilla Ruuska

Independent Researcher and Costume Designer

Valuable work Experiences, challenges, thoughts and hopes of sustainability in the professional theatre costume workshops in Finland

13:35 - 13:55 Nadia Malik

Doctoral Candidate, Department of Film, Aalto University

Preliminary Findings for an Article on University Student-Practitioner Costume Project Experiences

13:55–14:15 Discussion

14:15 - 14:35 Coffee break

Session 4 (in English)

Chair: Sofia Pantouvaki, Professor of Costume Design for Theatre and Film, Aalto University

14:35 –14:55 Heli Salomaa

Program Leader Victoria University, New Zealand

Modular, (3D)Modelled and Medieval: Designing Digital Costumes for the video game Pax Dei

14:55– 15:15 Madeline Taylor

Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Aalto University

Costume Innovation: Applying Science and Technology Theories to Digital Costume Tools

15:15 - 15:35 Discussion

15:35- 16:00 Plenary Discussion and close

Session 1

Joanna Weckman

Independent performance costume researcher, costume designer

Unknown stories: Tracing the “exotic” in the Theatre Museum collection

My presentation introduces one case study of my ongoing post doctoral study researching stage costumes utilized in the early Finnish National Theatre when portraying ethnicity and characters representing ethnic minorities and People of Colour in particular. The study is carried out in collaboration with the Theatre Museum in Helsinki across 2023–2025 and funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Stereotypical stage characters representing different ethnicities were familiar in Finland by the end of the nineteenth century, established with the help of instantly recognizable costumes and make-up, often premised by an internalized racism inherent to historical practices of costume design. Early on, Finnish National Theatre adapted similar aesthetic principles, visible in plays intended for children as well. During my study, several of the surviving costumes for such plays were identified and analysed, and one of them will be discussed in this presentation. By focusing on previously unexplored types of costumes, it is possible to propose new ways by which to enhance the visibility of marginalized perspectives in the museum collection.

Biography

Joanna Weckman, Doctor of Arts (DA) from Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, is an independent performance costume researcher, lecturer and costume designer, and has specialised in her research in the history of stage and film costume and the costume design profession in Finland.

Session 1

Tua Helve

Uniarts Helsinki's Theatre Academy, The Performing Arts Research Centre Tutke

Costume, culture, and artistic development in performance group Oblivia's early years, 2000–2009

This presentation is the first peek at my ongoing post-doctoral research project, "Performance costumes as knowledge producers: costume choices and artistic thinking in the 21st century through the work of performance group Oblivia", funded by the Kone Foundation (2025–2026). I conduct my project as an integral member of Oblivia since 2015. In this presentation, I focus on a material culture perspective and the period prior to our collaboration. The study covers the group's early works, the transition from site-specific performances to black-box theatre, and its breakthrough on European stages, particularly within the German independent scene. Drawing on the video documentation and photographs of 19 performances by Oblivia between 2000 and 2009, as well as personal interviews, I analyse the context in which costume choices for these performances were made. The aims are to demonstrate how costume choices reflect the group's artistic vision and to provide insight into the process that has shaped its aesthetics and visual identity. Key questions guiding the analysis include: How did the artistic environment and performance economy at the turn of the 21st century, along with the personal experiences of the key group members, influence the choice of costume? What resources were available during this period? How did these factors evolve over time?

Biography

DA Tua Helve is a post-doctoral researcher, artist, and visiting lecturer in the performing arts. Tua specializes in costume design processes in contemporary performance, the history of dance costume in the West, artistic collaboration and collective practices, as well as research methodologies within these fields. Her recent research interests also encompass feminist thinking in her field.

Session 2

Laya Geramizadegan

PhD Researcher in Cultural Heritage University of Turku, Finland

Political Listening and the Expanding Imagination of Costume Designers: The “Woman, Life, Freedom” Movement

This presentation explores the concept of political listening as a method for costume designers to engage with the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of protest, with a focus on the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in Iran. It considers how costume design can respond to sociopolitical struggles not merely as visual inspiration but as a deeper act of listening—an intentional and ethical engagement with the voices and bodies of those resisting oppression. By analyzing how Iranian women have used clothing, veiling, and unveiling as symbolic gestures, the presentation invites reflection on how these visual codes can inform costume practices across cultures. Political listening becomes a way to expand the designer’s imagination beyond traditional narratives, allowing for more layered, contextually rich, and politically conscious work. This approach challenges designers to rethink their role as silent observers and instead become active participants in storytelling—using costume as a medium for amplifying silenced voices, collective memory, and cultural resilience. Drawing from research, field recordings, and performative archives, the presentation repositions costume design as a vital site of resistance, where aesthetics and activism intersect in meaningful and transformative ways.

Biography

Laya Geramizadegan is a PhD researcher in Cultural Heritage at the University of Turku, Finland. With a background in costume design and theatre, her work explores the intersection of aesthetics, activism, and identity—focusing on Iranian women, political performance, and diasporic narratives across academic, artistic, and digital platforms.

Session 2

Susanna Suurla

Doctoral Candidate Department of Film, Aalto University

The embodied experience of costume: Evolving practices in contemporary costume design and devised performance

This presentation outlines the ideas within my upcoming doctoral thesis article that focuses on the evolution of increasing body-awareness through materially-oriented, and devised-theatre approaches to costume design over the past 10 to 15 years. The article aims to illuminate how 'devising' or collective and process-based creation is present in contemporary costume discourse and scholarship, with increasing emphasis on the influence of costume's material agency and the embodied experience of costume in enriching the performance-making process. I aim to comprehensively analyse contemporary costume design methods that highlight costume, material, and bodily movement as the initiators of performance. Examples of such approaches include Somatic Costumes and Aware Wearing (Dean, 2011-present), the Costume Agency research project (Lindgren and Lotker, 2018-2023), and Insubordinate Costume (Marshall, 2024), among others. To provide a broader context for these developments, I will examine these approaches compared to current discourses on contemporary dramaturgy and devising, particularly focusing on using autobiographical material and embodied thinking as driving forces in the devised performance-making process. Through this analysis, I aim to establish a contextual framework for devised, embodied and materially oriented approaches to costume design.

Biography

Susanna Suurla (MA) is currently a doctoral researcher and University Teacher at Aalto University, Finland, with over 20 years of experience as a costume designer and performance maker in contemporary dance and circus, theatre, revues, children's plays and more. Her research and artistic interests centre on material-led, body-aware and devised performance-making practices.

Session 3

Hilla Ruuska

Independent Researcher and Costume Designer

Valuable work: Experiences, challenges, thoughts and hopes of sustainability in the professional theatre costume workshops in Finland

This presentation summarises the results of my MA thesis, which participates in the ecological sustainability transition by studying the situation of professional theatre costume workshops. This emancipatory multi-method research expands views on how sustainability could better be implemented in these contexts in the future with radical empathy, through a framework of feminist ethics of care. The research survey mapped sustainability-related values, feelings and ideas of costume professionals in Finnish professional theatres, and how these professionals perceive sustainability development in their own workplace. In addition, the research explored how environmental values are included in current work culture, how environmental values could be included in future work culture, and what kind of support costume professionals need in moving towards more ecologically and ethically sustainable working practices. The research illustrates the current situation and discusses possible futures through the values and hopes of the costume professionals of Finnish professional theatres. The study argues that sustainability is an accessibility issue and that more accessible ways of making responsible choices must be developed to promote the ecological sustainability transition. The thesis proposes radical empathy and care as approaches to change, alongside practical tools such as the Frame of Practical Activity and the Spheres of Influence Analysis for sustainability development.

Biography

Hilla Ruuska is a costume designer and an aspiring researcher who is currently working as a freelancer after completing her Costume design MA at Aalto University, Finland. Ruuska's artistic practice concentrates on how radical empathy and care can inform the design process for more sustainable costume design in times of climate crisis.

Session 3

Nadia Malik

Doctoral Candidate Department of Film, Aalto University

Preliminary Findings for an Article on University Student-Practitioner Costume Project Experiences

My article-based doctoral research focuses on Costume Pedagogy through Knowledge Exchange (or KE) - a specific way of working in UK university systems that aims to foster mutually beneficial, non-hierarchical academia-industry working practices and projects. My next article will be based on 16 interviews with students who have taken part in work experiences / assistantships / placements / internships as part of their costume studies, and practitioners who have hosted such experiences. This presentation will highlight and discuss some preliminary findings from the interviews which will form the basis for insights about costume learning, student-practitioner relationships and the development of industry-academia encounters.

Biography

Nadia Malik is a costume designer and has exhibited and curated costume events and conferences. She is the Performance Department Head at London College of Fashion (University of the Arts London) and a Reviews Editor for the journal *Studies in Costume & Performance*. Her doctoral studies at Aalto University, Finland, focus on academia-industry exchange through experimental pedagogical practice.

Session 4

Heli Salomaa

Victoria University, New Zealand

Modular, (3D)Modelled and Medieval: Designing Digital Costumes for the video game Pax Dei

Pax Dei is a multiplayer online game inspired by the myths and legends of the medieval era. The Icelandic/Finnish game developer Mainframe hired Heli Salomaa to build a modular costume system and crafting framework grounded in historical, tactile skills of cloth-manufacture. This system was developed to support both player immersion and the game's player-driven economy. As in medieval society—where people could “read” textiles and the cut of clothing as indicators of profession and wealth—the social standing of a digital costume's “wearer” in Pax Dei is similarly communicated through the garment's fit to the character's body, the quality and quantity of fabric, the type and volume of decoration, attachment methods, access to fibre and dye resources, as well as pattern cutting and construction techniques. Although the game draws inspiration from the medieval period, the historical accuracy of the costumes is constrained by technical limitations in depicting and simulating drape, fabric volume, and specific textile types on animated digital bodies. This presentation explores the development of the costume system, focusing on how historical believability and technical practicality were balanced in the design of original costumes that remain faithful to Pax Dei's fictional world.

Biography:

Heli Salomaa is a digital costume designer and a Programme Leader in Fashion Design Technology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, with 15 years' experience in dressing up physical and digital bodies for 40 productions on stage and screen, including costume design for an award-winning video game, Control, and a multi-player online game, Pax Dei.

Session 4

Madeline Taylor

Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Aalto University

Costume Innovation: Applying Science and Technology Theories to Digital Costume Tools

This paper presents preliminary findings from the European Union funded Technological Innovations in Costume Practice (TICP) project, examining the integration of Industry 4.0 manufacturing technologies in costume production for live performance. Focusing on virtual patternmaking software and 3D printing, the research explores barriers and enablers to technology adoption by costume professionals through domestication theory and diffusion of innovation frameworks. Initial data from interviews with early adopters and digital ethnography in professional online communities reveal consistent adoption challenges internationally. While these technologies offer productivity, financial, sustainability and creative benefits, findings emphasise they remain sophisticated tools requiring knowledgeable users rather than replacements for craft expertise. Their use opens questions about ethical concerns regarding body data ownership and authorship attribution, and also the traditional tight hold of costume patterning knowledge as a holdover from traditional apprenticeship/guild models of knowledge transfer. This research aims to develop costume-specific adoption models and tools, contributing to elevating the field of costume production and strengthening the future employability of professional costumers.

Biography

Dr Madeline Taylor's research draws on 20 years of experience in live performance costuming and explores contemporary costume practice, design collaboration, and social engagement using clothing. A lecturer in Fashion at Queensland University of Technology, she is a co-director of Brisbane-based design group The Stitchery Collective, and was Australian Editor for the World Scenography Project Vol II – 1990 - 2005. In 2025 she is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Film at Aalto University, Finland, with a project focused on technical innovation in costume practice.

The seminar is organized by:



Costume in Focus
Research Group
Department of Film,
School of Arts, Design and Architecture
Aalto University



costumeinfoocus.com