



**1918.CH – 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of  
*Landesstreik*: an insight into the  
creative process of retelling history  
through costumes**

*1918.CH – 100<sup>o</sup> aniversário de Landesstreik: uma visão  
sobre o processo criativo de recontar a história por meio  
de trajes de cena*

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[abstract] This article illuminates the costume design concept of the theatre production *1918.CH – 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Landesstreik* with the key question of how to tell history in detail through costumes for a modern audience when the aim is not reenactment but to celebrate the possibilities of theatrical storytelling. Creating an experience for the audience that goes beyond the knowledge of the happenings, the director of the play relied on the costume design to improve the readability of the narrative of this large-scale production. This “behind the scenes” report also gives an insight into the collaboration between the costume design and construction, a combination of volunteers and professionals with specific skills from distinct areas of expertise.

[keywords] **Costume design process. Retelling history. Readability through costumes. Collaboration.**

[resumo] Este artigo ilumina o conceito de figurino da produção teatral *1918.CH – 100<sup>a</sup> aniversário de Landesstreik* com a questão central sobre como contar a história em detalhes através de figurinos para um público moderno, quando o objetivo não é a reconstituição, mas sim a celebração das possibilidades da narrativa teatral. Criando uma experiência para o público que vai além do conhecimento dos acontecimentos, o diretor da peça contou com o figurino para melhorar a legibilidade da narrativa desta produção de larga escala. Este relatório “dos bastidores” também dá uma visão da colaboração entre a criação e a construção do figurino, uma combinação de voluntários e profissionais com habilidades específicas de áreas de especialização distintas.

[palavras-chave] Processo de design de figurino. Recontar a história. Legibilidade através de trajes de cena. Colaboração.

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## Historical context

In Olten, Switzerland, in the summer of 2018, the theatre production *1918.CH – 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Landesstreik* told the story of the *Landesstreik*<sup>2</sup> in November 1918. This was the only general strike there ever was in Switzerland. It drove the country to the edge of a civil war, with the army turning against the uprising people. There is not enough space here to go into all the reasons and happenings in detail, but a quick historical overview might be helpful.

Switzerland had not suffered as much during the First World War, as it was neutral. The soldiers of the Swiss army protected the borders but were not involved in direct warfare. The women also had to replace the lost income by taking their husband's, brothers' or father's places, but after the war, they mostly returned to traditional roles. While some industries – for example, the watchmakers who turned into ammunition producers – made huge fortunes trading with both parties of the war (to sustain “neutrality”), the farmers had to leave their fields for army service. Not expecting the war to last longer than a few months, there was soon a shortage of food supplies. The poor working conditions (as everywhere else in Europe at that time), the hunger, and an unjust voting system left the workers crying out for change in a series of strikes in single cities or industries. The gathering of socialist groups throughout Switzerland and the joining of the railway workers into the strike action that had a national impact led to the army being called back to securing national safety just days after the soldiers had finally returned home, in November 1918. The appearance of the army at home, fully equipped for battle and for the first time, wearing steel helmets, provoked an even bigger crowd to gather in the capital, Berne, and other big cities such as Zurich and Basle. At the same time, right-winged militia groups, fully armed and ready to battle the “Bolshevist uprising”, popped up everywhere in Switzerland. Under that pressure, the general strike lasted only 3 days. Unfortunately, only hours after the cancellation of strike action, a group of soldiers felt provoked and reacted by shooting 3 people in Grenchen. This, combined with the Spanish flu that resulted in a lot of soldiers getting infected and even dead, left its mark in the national memory<sup>3</sup>. To this day, this dramatic episode of Swiss history remains something of an open wound in some regions of the country. It has not been fully processed yet and the anniversary brought up the opportunity for new historic research, as well as a new perception of the events and the multitude of reasons that led to the strike.

<sup>2</sup> *Landesstreik* is the German name for the national general strike of 1918.

<sup>3</sup> The summary of Switzerland in the Great War and the general strike is inspired by Georg Kreis (2014).

## ILLUSTRATION 1 – SOLDIERS PROTECTING THE SWISS PARLIAMENT DURING THE GENERAL STRIKE



SOURCE: SCHWEIZER BUNDESARCHIV (Swiss Federation Archive). **Soldiers protecting the Swiss parliament during the general strike.** Berne, 1918.

Up until now, the focus used to be on the political leaders and opponents of that time, zooming in solely on the heroes and anti-heroes.

The theatre production of *1918.CH – 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Landesstreik* chose to investigate the stories of the people – the workers, the women, the unnamed – to gain a broader vision of the societal dynamics. The nine strikers' claims<sup>4</sup>, as issued by the "Oltener Aktionskomitee" (the committee of mostly socialist leaders that met in the small town of Olten), were almost completely addressed in the years and decades following the strike and have turned into the foundations of modern day's Switzerland, although the strike had to be called off after

<sup>4</sup> The nine strikers' claims were:

- Immediate re-election of the parliament (*Nationalrat*) according to the proportional system
- Women's suffrage
- Introduction of a work obligation (instead of speculation with money and food)
- Limitation of weekly working hours (48-hour week)
- Reorganization of the army into a people's army
- Expansion of the food supply
- Old-age and invalidity insurance
- State monopolies for import and export
- Repayment of public debt by the rich

3 days due to the imminent danger of a civil war and the committee's leaders got sent to prison. So, where did these claims originate and why did they divide the people of Switzerland to such an extent that they went on a general strike and were even willing to provoke a civil war?

The narrative of the *Landesstreik* was for years to follow that of the bad socialists vs the righteous nationalists. The role of the army had not really been questioned until the 1970s, and although the Swiss politics now are based on finding a compromise, the events that formed this habit are rarely taught about in school or talked of otherwise.

The theatre production's intentions were to be as objective as possible about the wide arrange of opinions and to draw a picture that left room for the contrasting views, so the audience could begin to understand the motivations, factors, and dynamics that came into play.

### The creative process and challenges

The challenge of the costume design for *1918.CH* was to visually communicate this vast range of political and social opinions of the approximately 400 roles or characters – played by 105 lay actors – while avoiding costume design that would be a mere historical reenactment. Although theatre productions which present recent events in a documentary style are right on trend, this production wanted to investigate and perform the stories in a way that conveyed a bigger picture: that these past events are not so foreign to us as a modern audience as they may seem, that it is as much about them back then, as it is about us right now and how we choose to handle conflicting ideas and opinions nowadays.

So, the question for the costume design that arose was: how to tell history in detail through costumes for a modern audience? How can these costumes help the audience understand social standards, political opinions, and conflicts while having a poetic theatre experience which uses the performativity of costumes and differs from visiting a museum or watching a movie?

ILLUSTRATION 2 – FLYER OF THE PRODUCTION



SOURCE: LAGGER, Eve. *1918.CH* flyer. 2018.

To get an insight into the process of developing the costume design in a way that supported the effort of answering the questions above, more context will be described in the following section, like the setup of the production and the framework:

- a. costume design for 105 lay actors playing more than 400 historic characters;
- b. the orchestra of 15 musicians per show (but all with covers) was situated on stage, so 30 costumes were needed for them;
- c. the stage was a more than 100 years old set of workshops of the national train company SBB in Olten, that was to be demolished afterwards. At first, there was no electricity, no water, no heating, and no infrastructure;
- d. the timeframe for the production was about a year;
- e. the budget was partly state or regionally (kantonal) funded, partly by foundations and sponsors and in the normal scope of budgets for this sort of performances;
- f. there was no pre-existing costume (or other) workshop or infrastructure.

The briefing also included the location of this production: the performances took place in an old workshop of the SBB, the Swiss railway company, that was more than 130 years old and had seen the strike itself. There was no infrastructure, however, and the costume department started as a couple of empty rooms. When the place where the production was supposed to happen was chosen and secured in the spring of 2017, the artistic team had their first meeting there. Along with the set designer, we envisioned the possibilities and tried to find the best set up for stage and audience. We wanted to have the atmosphere of the halls speaking, as well as using whatever leftovers the derelict workshops had to offer. We also talked about the color scheme and other general design decisions, like finding a mixture of historic details and modern items.

#### *Collaboration as a method of choice and necessity*

To aim for sustainability and local involvement, we organized a volunteer costume workshop in a primary school in Olten. At one of the promotion events, about half a year before the rehearsals began, a woman working for a neighborhood community center approached me declaring interest in helping me spread the word. This proved to be invaluable as she was a great networker and made contact with the press, too. I was able to give three interviews over the course of a few months in 2018, which resulted in a pool of about 30 volunteers showing up to help making and altering the costumes.

Said costume workshop was placed in a primary school in Olten, where we were allowed to use their sewing rooms on 3 afternoons and evenings a week. The volunteer workshop with about 3-5 different women showing up each time, some regularly, some more occasionally, was led by a local woman who was a self-taught seamstress with lots of experience leading craft rooms of carnival groups (Fasnachts-Cliquen). After the closure of the costume workshop in summer 2018, when everything was finished, she took over the lead of the volunteer's dresser (backstage) team.

The volunteer costume workshop proved to be one of the best traits of the project. It saved the production a big amount of money for rent, infrastructure and seamstresses, an estimated 30'000 CHF (ca 26'000 €). But especially meeting those volunteers who were easily learning and comprehending what the costume design was about and so lovingly invested their time and expertise, sewing on hundreds of buttons, looking to find solutions for “mass production” items themselves, supporting with their active participation – that was the real find. Some had been seamstresses, tailors or craft teachers, one even a fashion designer prior to reaching pension age and now loved being able to share their skills. The younger ones usually were in it as a hobby, glad that it could be for somebody else’s benefit also. They felt valued and some even went on to help out as dressers later when the performances had started. It turned the necessity of finding a workshop into active participation. Just as the general strike in 1918 had been a people’s movement, their volunteering and experiencing a positive community of creativity took the play’s theme further into their own lives.

Participation was the key in the events a hundred years ago, when the General strike changed the ways of Switzerland and I think it is still key, which the volunteer costume workshop proves. As a designer, it is sometimes difficult to let other people into the design processes and to allow them to contribute to the outcome of the visuals for which you are responsible. I think there is much more room for exploration there, as this was a productive and enriching combination within the costume department of the volunteer workshop and the sophisticated expertise from the company of Kostüm Kaiser. This is a family business that specializes in uniform tailoring and provided us with the more elaborate officers’ uniforms.

To prepare for or to start off the designing process, I began to read into the history of events, conducting thorough research for military clothing as well as looking for visual materials of that time. We had a historian on our team, Stefan Keller, who is a specialist on this subject. He owns a huge collection of postcards and photos of that time, providing a rich treasure of visuals, especially of the lower classes, which often are so hard to come by.

ILLUSTRATION 3 – SOLDIERS. COSTUME SKETCH AND REALIZATION WITH ORIGINAL UNIFORMS OF THE SWISS ARMY FROM THAT TIME (*ORDONNANZ 26*)



SOURCE: BUTZKIES, Eva. **Costume sketch.** 2017. PAVANELLO, Gabi. **Costume realization.** 2018.

### *Creating the costume design concept*

About a year before the opening night, when rehearsals had just started, I was given the text used as a script for the rehearsals. Most of it was non-fictional. It also contained some passages which were more descriptive of poetic moments. And it revealed an overwhelming amount of characters. It was clear from the very beginning that the play aimed to tell the people's story rather than that of singular heroes. New historic research had been undertaken to provide stories of the simple farmer, the soldier without a name, the endless working women that had never been heard of before. To get a feel for the play and to show the director, Liliana Heimberg, how large this undertaking would become if we were to dress every named individual historically correct and detailed, I researched every person mentioned. Then I selected visuals from the literature and desktop research I had conducted as well as from the pictures of the historian of our team.

In a meeting with the director, we both agreed, having spread out over 40 A4 pages of visual material of just the first half of the play on her living room floor to get a feeling for the problem at hand, that there needed to be a form of simplifying the visuals, of grouping them and structure the play through the costumes.

We collaborated on some of the detailed ideas, but the next step was for me to develop a basic costume, a foundation that in its abstract way unified the visuals and therefore helped with the readability for the audience. A basic costume that is versatile enough to leave room for interpretation and specific enough to become the face of the production is often required in other productions, too, where a limited number of people have to play far more roles than possible. It is always a challenge to find out how flexible the basic outfit must be or how complex it can be and still be open to different sorts of interpretations with the help of little extra clothing or other identifiers.

ILLUSTRATION 4 - TRYING OUT PROTOTYPES



SOURCE: LAGGER, Eve. **Rehearsal photo**. 2017. After analysis of the historical pictorial material and creation of the figurines of all roles of the piece, the resulting basic costume is checked by fast prototyping: In the first rehearsals with borrowed skirts, the women signaled that they felt more at ease to rehearse in the costume, and especially in long skirts. They moved differently and more freely, the skirt encouraged them to shed inhibitions and get more involved with the instructions of the director. For the director, the choice of material becomes a decisive factor, because the atmosphere of the costumes becomes part of the spatial and theatrical experience. The silhouette and the cut of the skirt evolved with more prototypes.

It was clear to us, because gender discussions were part of the content of the play (and the women’s right to vote one of the nine strikers’ claims), to choose a male and a female version. For the women, I had to deal with all shapes and sizes of bodies prompting me to look for the “ideal” shape of a silhouette that would accommodate most of them. I constructed patterns, reconsidered fabrics and tried everything out in rehearsals, continuing to change length and volume of the skirts and also to design a version of wide-legged pair of trousers that a few of the more progressive characters were to wear (WOLTER, 1994).

ILLUSTRATION 5 – ACTORS IN BASIC COSTUMES



SOURCE: BUTZKIES, Eva. *Actors in basic costumes*. 2018.

The basic costume representing “the people” was created as individually designed clothes building a bridge between past and present so that players could easily jump from one character to the next without having to leave the stage to change. Throughout the play, an actor could have up to 10 different characters to play. While the director tried to take this into consideration in the casting process and tried to have them at least politically consistent (like an actress who plays a well-known socialist cannot later be part of a right-wing militia group), a lot of subtle changes in the outfit were necessary. I tried to simplify as much as possible, referencing suits and silhouettes of 1918 more than giving a complete and correct visual. The impression of class and history was still achieved, as the audience confirmed. They felt “transported to another time” (BUTZKIES, 2019)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> For the case study of my MA thesis on “Authorship of the costume designer“, (BUTZKIES, 2019) I took a survey with the audience of two try-out performances just days before the opening of the show, in August 2019. Whenever the audience is mentioned in this article, the insights are taken from that case study.

The basic costume was to be made out of materials that had been available at that time (or gave the atmosphere accordingly) and created a look that is capable of being upgraded or downgraded socially where needed. The starting point were second-hand Swiss army working clothes, which with their timeless silhouette served our purposes well. We recut the jackets for the female bodies and reshaped some of the trousers for a more modern appearance. We also had to consider the climate: while the *Landstreik* had taken place in cold November, the events leading up to it had happened in every season and the show opened in a very hot August. The army clothes were made from cotton in a denim-like style and were dyed in shades of blue and green to lose their army feel. They were then decorated with style elements such as countless buttons, zippers, and laces. The donated buttons (many from the time of the strike) representing the transition from craft to industrialization, and cotton ribbons carrying the strike demands as slogans in all four Swiss languages, were processed by the costume workshop.

After the basic decisions for the female costumes had been taken, I ordered them to be made at the local training school for tailoring (Berufbildungszentrum Olten), from the patterns I had developed; thus, we got young people involved and interested in the historic events. The skirts were made from the left side of denim and a heavy grey jersey that allowed for good movement. The tops for the women consisted of newly bought and second-hand cotton blouses that were redecorated with laces and the striker's claims. As did some men, some women wore cotton jersey shirts that at that time would have counted as underwear but in our modern eyes looks suitable for a proper outfit. The costume design was, therefore, a constant juggling of historical accuracy vs modern storytelling on the one hand and modern perception of clothing on the other hand. For the denim skirts, we had left the edges raw, so they unraveled with the wearing, to get more of a used, worn-out look.

The reactions of the audience were twofold as seen in the survey: while some suggested everything looked still too nice and proper, not filthy and poor enough, others proposed that it would have been against the dignity of the working class to be seen with fraying hemlines.

The fittings took place at the training center for the young seamstresses and again, we tried to cooperate as much as possible, sharing the costume concept and vision as part of inviting them to have an experience into a world that is usually foreign to them as part of the problem that there is no formal education in costume design in Switzerland but many tailors would love to work in that area.

#### *Historical accuracy vs catering to the audience*

Liliana Heimberg, the director, gave me a list of historic characters like politicians, strike leaders, etc. who needed to be recognized or recognizable or identified repeatedly throughout the performance. As important as the readability of the costumes was, at the same time Liliana relied on the costume design to give the audience enough optical stimulus and a varied experience spatially, depending on the closeness of the actors. Being close to the audience there was a lot to discover visually, as well as getting an overall structure.

Passing on the responsibility for a color scheme, the costume design developed an atmosphere of warmth as a reaction to the stage setting, she described. Being present at rehearsals, she felt I, as the costume designer, created pictures that could stand alone, filling them with juxtapositions of colors to achieve depth. She choreographed the bigger scenes, knowing I would work on the visual details later. She felt free within this huge production to concentrate on text and content, knowing I would co-author the pictures (BUTZKIES, 2019).

Costumes have a somatic impact on the body and thus the experience of the performer<sup>6</sup>, especially when the performers are lay actors and actresses. They rely on the costume to help them find and switch roles (BUTZKIES, 2019; MONKS, 2010). This was one of the reasons the basic costumes were on stage as soon as they were ready, around three months before the opening night. This also gave me the chance to redesign, decorate and adapt while attending the rehearsals. This way, we found out together, as director, designer, and performers, which characters needed special costume parts added, and which could be transformed into by just a hat or another prop.

ILLUSTRATION 6 – HELVETIA AND THE PEOPLE



SOURCE: BUTZKIES, Eva. *Helvetia and the people*. 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See the works of Sally E. Dean (USA/UK), international, interdisciplinary performer, teacher, writer and somatic practitioner for over 20 years. Sally leads the collaborative “Somatic Movement, Costume & Performance Project” (2011), designing Somatic Costumes that elicit psychophysical awareness and generate performative experiences.

We had decided early on to use the theatrical options of telling the story of the *Landesstreik* in a different, more atmospheric way than would be possible in a movie or museum. This became apparent by the use of the “Helvetias” who turned into an artistic research area, and some of them quite open until the end.

There were seven different aspects, like character traits of the Helvetia<sup>7</sup>, some of them took inspiration by paintings, postcards or caricatures of that time. We (the director and I) had decided that each of the Helvetias should be in red, the national color of the flag. They should each wear a crown of golden leaves to show off their “otherness” and also to find a solution for each to be elevated like the Greek goddesses would have been when portrayed in Greek theatre, then usually on a wooden high heeled shoe (cothurnus). This was an element we had also discovered on the images we had from the historian – the Helvetia was usually one head higher or larger than everyone else. Apart from these common factors, each Helvetia looked different, citing Swiss traditional costumes, modern teenage outfits or a 1910’s style dance robe worn by an androgynous male Helvetia.

#### ILLUSTRATION 7 – GOLD-HELVETIA



SOURCE: PAVANELLO, Gabi. **Gold-Helvetia**. 2018.

As Liliana Heimberg puts it, these allegoric depictions of Switzerland, who were a common theme on postcards of that time, were our research project in itself (BUTZKIES, 2019). We wanted them to represent different character traits of Switzerland and use them dramaturgically to tell a different story, to shed a different light and tell something that was not in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Helvetia is an allegoric depiction of Switzerland, just like Britannia would be of England.

### *Using costumes to tell the story*

There were also some scenes that originated in costume parts, where the direction of the material found scenic solutions: for example, the shoe changing scene, where the women changed from the tender heel shoes as part of the basic costume to more sturdy shoes or even boots for the long march and fight for the women's right to vote. Most of them anyway, one chose bright red high heels. In Switzerland, it was a very long march – nationally it wasn't until 1971 that women reached their goal.

The scene of the Spanish flu, that had brought more death to Switzerland than the Great War itself, used the performativity of costumes as well: while singing about the hunger of death and the danger to gather in larger groups, the performers took off their jackets, folding them neatly into a parcel and laying it down at their feet before leaving the stage for the next scene. The field of folded jackets that remained invoked the inner pictures of the rows of tombstones associated with World War I and II.

Another of these pictures was the re-mobilization of the army. The securing of nationally important buildings, like the parliament of Berne by the Swiss army in the early days of November 1918 as a precaution, had felt to the protesters like an over-reactive provocation and ultimately sparked the general strike. The first use of the steel helmets had further ignited the rage. These were part of the freshly modernized uniforms of the Swiss army. The redesign had involved a change from the old blue and red-colored, highly decorated uniforms to the soberer camouflage-like, greyish green<sup>8</sup>, as most European armies had lost their colorful uniforms before the war. The steel helmet then used to be green and had been inspired by the German helmet. It depersonalized the soldier by shading the eyes. The notion that their own people had been perceived as a bigger threat than outside enemies during the war lead thus to further rage.

We were fortunate to have the Swiss army as one of the supporters of this nationally co-funded theatre production. They have an archive of original uniforms from almost all decades and let us rent some of the *Ordonnanz 26* uniforms. The decision to use both types of uniform, new and old, dramaturgically led to having the simple soldiers and masses for the strike action in the new *Ordonnanz 26*, while General Wille and the other officers of rank stuck to the old, more colorful and historic-looking *Ordonnanz 98*. It was like a clash of the new and the old world, as the strike brought a collision of ideas from both worlds to the surface.

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<sup>8</sup> The old blue and red uniforms were named *Ordonnanz 98* (see illustration 8). The new uniforms from this new series that had been slowly switch out during the war, were known as *Ordonnanz 26*, because by 1926 they tried to have everyone only using the new ones (see illustration 3). More on this is found in the works of Burlet (1992), Lütolf (2008) and Sommerfeld (1915) in the bibliography.

## ILLUSTRATION 8 – GENERAL WILLE AND HIS OFFICERS



SOURCE: BUTZKIES, Eva. *General Wille and his officers*. 2018.

But how can a modern audience experience the rage and terror that the re-mobilization of the army in their new uniforms and helmets caused? Most perceived the original uniforms from 1918 as quite modern because the same color scheme is still in place. Most people in the audience have never experienced war themselves and we are all kind of desensitized by war movies and other depictions of war. It took several attempts to find a solution to create the atmosphere and tension that was tangible on the streets with the army being brought in to secure the national security in 1918. We only had 105 performers to represent the soldiers, many of them female and/or too old for active army service and an audience of around 500 people per show. Obviously, the spectators could not be made to experience just the same terror the Swiss citizens had felt when feeling under siege by their own army. We had the chance to use 100 steel helmets from the Swiss army and wanted this symbol of the terror to be present in the show. But our modern collective memory has seen so many strong depictions of war, especially from World War II.

The solution we developed at rehearsals was to use the setup of the stage and the performers we had to our advantage: the audience faced two rows of windows and with the light pointed at them, the silhouettes of the steel helmets and military coats obscuring the female or elderly bodies created the illusion of even more players than present. Meanwhile, the male actors went to the back of the audience and started shouting military orders. Both actions combined produced the desired effect by creating the atmosphere more abstractly rather than showing a naturalistic version.

## Final considerations

This became true for the whole production: although the events of the *Landestreich* of November 1918 were presented historically accurate and from a modern point of view, rich with new research results, the narrative was presented through the performance and the visuals in a more abstract way. This allowed for a rapid change of scenes and huge amounts of individual stories to be told in less than 2 hours. The basic costume of the women in mostly long denim and jersey skirts, the men in old redesigned Swiss army working outfits, and especially everyone in a similar color palette brought an abstraction. There were a lot of individual decorations and treatments that provided visual interest within the clarity of the costume concept. This spoke to our modern individualistic world view but also transported the spectators back to a time when persons would be easily identified visually by their status or profession. To involve contemporary aspects like denim and a modern take on what the audience read as complete, historical costumes helped reach the goal to offer an experience of the events. The production of *1918.CH* became a great success: the nearly 30 shows from August 16<sup>th</sup> to September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 were all sold out and around 30,000 spectators took the chance to rediscover the dramatic events of the *Landesstreich* of 1918.

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