

**EXPRESSIVE INTERPRETATION IN DESIGNING COSTUME FOR AN
EXHIBITION. A STUDY OF “BECOMING THE ELEMENT”**

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY.

OCTOBER, 2025.

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE
ARTS IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE AWARD OF THE BACHELOR OF
ARTS,[BA] HONS DEGREE IN THEATRE ARTS, FACULTY OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY.**

OCTOBER, 2025.

DECLARATION

I DECLARE that this project work is based on the study undertaken by me in the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, for the purpose of acquiring Bachelor of Arts (B. A) Degree in Theatre Arts.

ONOKOHWEMU EFETOBORE MICHELLE

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CERTIFICATION

This is to Certify that this research study was embarked upon by Onokohwemu Efetobore Michelle in the Department of Theatre Arts under the supervision of Dr. Mrs Owens Patricia Eromosele.

Dr. Mrs. Owens P. Eromosele
(Project Supervisor)

Date

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to God Almighty, whose inspiration and guidance made this research possible. To my parents, family and loved ones, for their unwavering support, encouragement, and prayers.

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First and foremost, I give all glory and thanks to Almighty God for His grace, wisdom, and strength that saw me through the completion of this project. My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. (Mrs.) Owens Patricia Eromosele, for her patience, guidance, and invaluable insight throughout the course of this research. Her encouragement and scholarly support have been a great source of inspiration.

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ABSTRACT

Costume design is a vital element of the theatre, where ideas are communicated through a visual narrative. Traditionally, costume has been associated primarily with character interpretation, but in contemporary practice, its expressive nature extends beyond giving a character depth. It functions as an interpretative art that breaks the boundaries of creativity, allowing even abstract ideas to be expressed visually through costume.

The aim of this project is to investigate the expressive nature of costume in bringing abstract ideas to life and to examine the processes involved in designing costumes that express not only aesthetic appeal but also conceptual depth. It seeks to conduct a practical investigation of costume as a medium of non-character-based expression in innovative platforms such as exhibitions, using *Becoming the Element* as a case study.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing both primary and secondary methods of data collection. The primary method involves participant observation and interviews, while the secondary method draws on relevant literature analyzed in relation to the study. Findings reveal that expressive design relies not only on technical skill but on the designer's ability to interpret concepts and translate them into visual form. However, designers' expressive abilities can be limited by material constraints and inadequate resources, often leading to improvisation.

This study recommends the encouragement of exhibitions and showcases that explore the limitless possibilities of costume design and the integration of expressive theory into costume design training to foster creative and conceptual innovation among designers.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Background to the Study

Costume can be clothing and accessories worn by an actor to represent a character in a production. It can also create the identity of the character, tell a visual narrative of the world they live in, their personality, status and history. Costume serves as non-verbal communication in a theatrical production. It communicates to the viewing audience and positions the actors in character. It helps the audience understand who a character is before he even speaks.

Costume design involves the deliberate and intentional process of creating the appearance of a character essentially through fabric. It is the costume designer's responsibility to create the garb of a character, he or she must expressively interpret the director's vision through effective communication and design thinking. The designer must first communicate with the director to know his vision for the play, then go on to make thorough research to understand the characters. The designer must deeply understand the characters in order to create designs that express the characters' identities, emotions, development, etcetera. The ability of a costume designer to successfully interpret the characters and create costumes that complete the characters in tandem with the director's vision is essential to the overall success of a production.

Costume for performance such as Fashion Exhibition reflects not only creativity but also interpretation. Unlike conventional theatre where costumes are tied to scripted characters, costume exhibitions explore abstract concepts, natural elements, or thematic expressions that

come alive through fabric, form, and movement. Here, the costume itself becomes the “performer,” embodying an idea, an emotion, or even an element of nature. In this way, costume goes beyond clothing to tell a story through its appearance, movement, and design. Costume Exhibitions allow the costume designer more room to explore their creative abilities without the influence of a director.

The focus of this project, the exhibition titled “Becoming the Element” was conceived as a platform to showcase how costume can be used as a vessel of expression beyond character-driven narratives. It explored a wide range of elemental forces such as wind, fire, desert, earth, natural light, ice, and water, among others, alongside the celebrity concept which creatively reimagined popular figures. The exhibition, which took place on the 4th of June, 2025, at the Theatre Hall, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, is a 400level Costume practical examination done under the supervision of Dr. Owens Patricia Eromosele and Prof. Mrs. Josephine Abbe. The exhibition involved students exploring different natural elements to create beautiful and Interpretative fashion designs. In these elemental explorations, each costume was designed to embody the physical and symbolic qualities of natural elements. This focus allows the study to investigate how costume can function as a language of expression, bridging the gap between theatre and visual art. By concentrating on the Elemental Concepts, the research demonstrates how design thinking, material manipulation, and symbolic interpretation can project emotions, evoke atmospheres, and immerse audiences in a world shaped not by characters, but creative expression.

It is against this background this research hopes to study Expressive Interpretation in Designing Costume for Stage Exhibition, using *Becoming the Element* exhibition as case study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Costume has traditionally been studied and understood in relation to character interpretation in theatre, where its primary function is to visually support the actor's role. In this context, the value of costume is often limited to how well it represents a character's personality, status, or historical background within a narrative. While this remains a vital aspect of theatre practice, such a perspective risks narrowing the possibilities of costume design, leaving little room for the exploration of costume as an expressive art form in its own right.

In contemporary performance and exhibition, costume can move beyond character-driven functions to embody concepts, moods, or natural forces. However, this expressive dimension of costume is still underexplored in scholarship and practice within Nigerian theatre and design education. Exhibitions such as *Becoming the Element* open a space for interrogating how costume can operate outside conventional dramatic boundaries. Here, the costumes were not bound to scripted characters but to abstract elements like Rain, Ice, Smoke, and Nature, raising questions about how intangible concepts can be made visible, tangible, and communicative through fabric, form, and performance.

The problem, therefore, lies in the limited academic and practical investigation of costume as a medium of non-character-based expression in theatre and applied arts. Without critical attention to how designers interpret and execute such elemental or conceptual costumes, opportunities for innovation and broader understanding of costume design remain restricted. This study addresses that gap by examining the processes, materials, and interpretative choices involved in creating elemental costumes for *Becoming the Element*, with particular focus on how they function as vessels of expression rather than as mere character garments.

1.3 Research Methodology

This research is experimental in nature. Using the qualitative approach, relying on descriptive and interpretative methods. It employs both the Primary and Secondary research methods of data collection. The primary involves participant observation. This researcher, participates, designs and observes other creative designs for the fashion exhibition which were recorded and pictures were taken. For the Secondary research, this researcher consults relevant literatures to the study such as Books, Journals, etc. Data shall be analyzed after interviews have been conducted with the participant designer students.

1.4 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to investigate the expressive nature of costume design as a mode of interpretation, using the costume exhibition 'Becoming the element'. It establishes the following objectives:

- To study the significance of costume design as an interpretative art.
- To examine the processes involved in designing costume for exhibition .
- To study and analyze the costume designs for the stage production “Becoming the Element”
- To highlight the creative and interpretative choices made in the execution of the costumes and their contribution to the overall exhibition.
- To investigate the role of costume as a tool for non-verbal communication in stage production and exhibition.
- To situate costume exhibition as a platform where theatre, fashion, and visual art intersect in the projection of meaning, identity and expression.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the expressive interpretation involved in designing costumes for stage productions, with a case study of the costume exhibition *Becoming the Element* which took place on the 4th of June, 2025, at the Theatre Hall, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus, under the supervision of Dr. Owens Patricia Eromosele and Prof. Mrs. Josephine Abbe. It examines costume as an interpretative and communicative tool. The research explores the processes employed by costume designers in conceptualizing and realizing their designs, from character analysis to fabric choice, its symbolism, and collaboration with the production team.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

- The study is restricted to a single exhibition, *Becoming the Element*, held at the University of Benin in June 2025, which limits the generalization of findings to other productions.
- The cost and availability of materials sometimes affected the execution of designs, leading to modifications that may not have fully reflected the original creative vision.
- Differences in individual students' skills, resources, and creative interpretation resulted in varying outcomes that cannot be uniformly compared.
- As the exhibition was a one-time performance, the analysis relies heavily on photographs, sketches, and recollections, rather than continuous physical access to the costumes.
- Time constraints. The researcher, being a student is met with a time limit of a few months to complete this project. This may hinder the flexibility of the research.

1.7 Significance of the Study

- The study highlights the expressive potential of costume beyond traditional theatre, showing how abstract elements like Silver, Rain, or Smoke can be transformed into wearable art that communicates meaning.
- It contributes to scholarship in costume and theatre design by documenting the Becoming the Element exhibition as a case study, preserving it as a reference for future researchers and practitioners.
- The research provides practical insight into the processes, challenges, and creative decisions involved in translating intangible concepts (such as natural forces) into physical costumes.
- It encourages theatre students and designers to experiment with unconventional materials, symbolism, and design thinking as tools for artistic expression.
- The study deepens understanding of how costume can function not only in performance but also as a form of visual art and cultural commentary.
- On a personal level, the project serves as a record of the researcher's own design journey, particularly the creation of the Silver costume, offering self-reflection and professional growth in the field of costume design

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Costume Design

Costume design, at its core, is the art of shaping identity and meaning through clothing. In performance contexts, it provides the visual framework that allows audiences to immediately perceive character identity, time period, and mood. It is not merely the creation of attractive garments but a thoughtful process of visual interpretation. Costume design engages with cultural codes, collaborates with other design elements, and above all, serves as a vital expressive language of theatre. The functional nature of costume can be understood on the backdrop of Semiotic theory by scholars such as Keir Elam and Roland Barthes.

As Elam explains, “What exactly is a theatrical costume or a set that represents a house on stage? When used in a play, both the theatrical costume and the house set are often signs that point to one of the signs characterizing the costume or the house in the play. In fact, each is a sign of a sign and not the sign of a material thing” (33). This establishes that theatrical costume functions not as ordinary dress but as a semiotic vehicle, carrying meanings beyond its material form.

Costume can simultaneously communicate multiple layers of meaning. For instance, Elam notes, “a costume, for example, may suggest socio-economic, psychological and even moral characteristics” (34). In other words, costume operates within a denotation–connotation

dialectic, where a single garment may indicate its material reality while also carrying second-order cultural or symbolic values. Thus, “every aspect of the performance is governed by the denotation–connotation dialectic: the set, the actor’s body, his movements and speech determine and are determined by a constantly shifting network of primary and secondary meanings” (Elam 34). This semiotic perspective expands the concept of costume beyond character-driven narratives. While traditional theatre often anchors costumes to scripted roles, a production concept may allow the costume itself to embody ideas or elements. For example, in a concept-driven exhibition such as *Becoming the Element*, costumes were not simply dress for characters but visual metaphors that transformed intangible forces like rain, smoke, or silver into material forms. Elam’s point that “things serve only to the extent that they mean” (35) aligns with this approach, as the value of costume here lies in its expressive and symbolic power rather than functional use.

Consequently, costume design operates as both craft and language. It relies on the elements of design (line, shape, form, colour, value, texture, and pattern) and is guided by the principles of design such as balance, proportion, rhythm, unity, and harmony. These elements and principles give the designer tools to translate abstract ideas into tangible visual forms. A carefully balanced silhouette, symbolic use of colour, or rhythmic flow of fabric can all reinforce the expressive intentions of the designer.

The concept of costume is not merely the creation of attractive garments but a thoughtful process of visual interpretation. Costume design engages with cultural codes, collaborates with other design elements, and above all, serves as a vital expressive language of theatre.

“Costumes are often one of the first things an audience will discuss in the interval of a play. They are so powerful in making or marring any production, and if they are too showy, too dull, or just plain wrong, they can create an impenetrable barrier between the public and

the performer.” (Clancy 12). This goes to show that the costume design process for a production is a thoughtful process in which interpretation, creativity and research play a huge part in. Costume design is not simply about dressing a performer but about “creating a visual dialogue between the body and the story being told. Deirdre Clancy emphasizes that costume design is an art form in its own right. She argues that the designer is not merely “dressing actors,” but is shaping a visual narrative that must harmonize with the director’s vision, the set, and the demands of the script.

Traditionally, costume design has been associated with plays, operas, and films, where the designer responds to a written script or director’s vision. Yet, the concept extends further. A costume designer can work on a Production concept, creating costumes as autonomous works of art, designed for exhibitions, installations, or concept-driven performances, as opposed to working under a Director’s concept for a play. In such contexts, costume becomes a form of visual storytelling on its own. For example, a designer working with the concept of Wind may construct garments with sheer, layered fabrics that imitate breezy movements, embodying both the intangible quality of air and the sensory experience of motion. Unlike traditional theatrical costumes, which are character-driven and revolve around the character’s personalities and background, such concept-driven designs communicate emotions, natural elements, or philosophical themes.

More recent scholarship has sought to expand the way we think about costume, moving away from a purely functional or decorative approach. This shifts the conversation towards costume as a living element of theatre, with expressive capacities of its own. Costume design becomes a sort of language communicated by the designer to the audience. The designer’s interpretation of a concept is what comes out as the design.

There are six elements of design which form the visual building blocks of costume creation. Durbin notes: “Designers in every field manipulate the same formal design elements

to create projects: graphics, installation art, animation. Costume designers also combine the elements to establish expressive or symbolic qualities that create characters and build a visual world. The six design elements are line, shape, form, space, texture, and colour” (31). Each of these elements carries interpretive weight:

- **Line:** Costume designers use line in creating garments, when rendering drawings, forming patterns or even garment edges. Line can be determinate (clear, strong) or indeterminate (soft, diffuse), shaping how a character is perceived. For example, wild hair is composed of dynamic lines that create a sense of unpredictability (Durbin 19)
- **Shape** and silhouette are the first impressions for audiences, triggering immediate emotional responses. “Animators use shape language as a foundation for characters, knowing that shapes trigger emotional responses. Costume designers use shape to define the historical era, change the silhouette of a performer’s body, and make character statements” (Durbin 20).
- **Texture** influences both visual and psychological reactions. Fabrics like chiffon or lace create ethereal edges, while velvet traps light, making surfaces appear rich and heavy. “Textures exert a powerful effect on human psychology. Designers manipulate this reaction to create feelings about characters” (Durbin 24)

2.2 Costume Design and the Costume Designer

If costume is understood as a language in performance, then the costume designer becomes the interpreter and translator of that language. The role of the designer extends well beyond sketching garments; it is a process of research, conceptualization, collaboration, and execution. This makes the costume designer both an artist and a problem solver, moving fluidly between creative imagination and technical skill.

The role of the costume designer has long been tied to the collaborative framework of theatre, film, and opera. The designer translates the director's vision into tangible garments, balancing practical needs of performance with visual storytelling.

The costume designer's first task is research. In working with or without a director concept. Research about whatever there is to know about the design concept he/she is working with. Research is one of the most important parts of costume design. Bettina John explains that a designer must understand the play, the playwright, the context, and even the political and social climate in order to create a strong design concept (42). Without this, the costumes can become shallow, disconnected from the meaning of the play, or just decorative with no real purpose.

This shows that costume design is not only about creating something beautiful to look at, but about linking the costumes to the story and the larger production concept. While designers continue to research during the whole process, most of the major research happens before ideas are developed fully. This gives the designer a strong foundation.

The costume designer's role is not limited to representational theatre. In concept-based projects such as exhibitions or performance installations, the designer moves beyond character and script, working instead with abstract themes, materials, and spatial considerations. Here, the designer acts as both artist and researcher, exploring how fabric, structure, and movement can embody intangible concepts.

The Costume Designer and Collaboration

Costume design is a collaborative art. It is important for a costume designer to have good communication skills so as to collaborate with other designers in a production, as this aids the overall success of a production. Similar to when working with a Director's vision for a play, a costume designer working on a production collaborates with the other designers such as set designer and lightning designer. The lighting designer and others would have to

work in line with the costume designer's production concept, which now stands as the guiding concept for all elements of design to be used. The colour palette used by the lighting designer would have to compliment the costume designer's palette, as different colors of light have different effects on fabric. In essence, this reiterates the fact that a good Costume designer must have at least some knowledge of stage lighting and its effects on different kinds of fabric.

Working with production concepts allows the costume designer more liberty to experiment with emerging trends, using technologies and mixing them with fabric in designs to create beautiful effects. For example, creating glow-in-the dark costumes with phosphorescent paint on fabric,

Bettina John, in *Costume Design for Performance*, emphasizes the importance of adaptability in this role. She argues that costume designers today are no longer confined to traditional methods but increasingly integrate digital technologies, unconventional materials, and even elements of performance art into their work. For her, the designer is not only creating garments but also curating experiences that can extend into interactive or immersive performance spaces (22). This broadens the scope of the costume designer's role, positioning them as innovators in an evolving theatrical landscape.

In this sense, the costume designer is a mediator: translating abstract themes into concrete visual realities. In the case of exhibitions where the costume designer creates designs not as accessory to a play, but for an exhibition, the lighting designer and others would have to work in line with the designer's production concept. The colour palette used by the lighting designer would have to compliment the costume designer's palette, as different colours of light have different effects on fabric. In essence, this reiterates the fact that a good Costume designer must have at least some knowledge of stage lighting and how its effects on different kinds of fabric.

The costume designer can use silhouette to define overall shape and form of character's appearance on stage. For example an antagonistic character or villain might have sharp, angular silhouette while the protagonist or hero has softer, curved lines. The designer can apply colour theory to convey mood, symbolism, and character relationships. For example, Using warm colours (reds, oranges) for passionate characters and cool colours (blues, greens) for calmer ones.

The elements of design are combined with the Principles of design to enable the designer's work be complete. Such principles include;

- **Balance:** Balance is achieved in colour, texture, shape, and proportion so that the character looks intentional on stage. Symmetrical balance is when both sides mirror one another, while asymmetrical balance involves contrast, such as one sleeve being simple while the other is exaggerated.
- **Proportion:** This is the relationship between sizes of elements within a design, or between costume and the performer's body. For example, the size of costume elements (hats, skirts, shoulder pads, etc.) should be proportionate to the actor's body and the stage space. Bad proportion makes a costume design look tacky and impractical.
- **Rhythm:** This is created through repetition, gradation, or opposition of design elements, such as patterns, pleats, or colors, to guide the eye and suggest movement.
- **Unity and Harmony:** Ensures that costume elements blend with the overall concept of the production or exhibition. Random use of colours or shapes risks destroying the coherence of the design.

Thus, costume design is more than ornamentation. It is a conceptual and expressive practice that mediates between narrative and abstraction, performance and exhibition, body and idea.

2.3 Costume Design for Theatrical Productions

Costume design for the stage is an interpretive art that translates the script and the director's vision into a visual language. It involves the costume designer's work in creating visual cues that the audience see and recognize. These cues play a huge part in expressing the performer's identity before he even speaks. As Clancy notes, costume is integral to the theatrical environment because it situates characters within the world of the play, clarifying details such as period, class, or personality (42). This makes costumes part of the storytelling, not an accessory to it.

Theatrical costumes also respond to the physical realities of performance. Gillette stresses that costumes must balance aesthetics with functionality, since actors need to move freely, perform physical actions, and at times undergo rapid changes between scenes (203). The costume design process therefore requires a designer to be meticulous in ensuring that the materials used will not restrict the actor's movements and are easy to manipulate. The designer must consider that in addition to aesthetic value, the costume should not limit or subtract from the performance. She must know how many dress changes there are for each scene and ensure she cleverly creates the designs with these in mind, blending durability with visual effectiveness.

The theatrical costume must align with other elements of production such as set and lighting. For example, certain colours may appear different under stage lights, meaning a designer must anticipate how a fabric will behave on stage rather than in the workshop. In this way, costume design becomes a collaborative practice, in constant dialogue with other

design departments (John). One very important thing to consider in designing costumes for stage performance is the interplay of stage lights and how they transform the look of costumes. For example, a green costume under red light will appear dark or even black because green light is not reflected by red. This stresses the fact that costume design is a collaborative art, and the costume designer must understand colour theory, and work with the lighting designer to ensure that the lighting plot for the production accentuates the beauty of the costume, not subtract from it.

Thus, theatrical production demands costumes that are well informed, visually expressive, and practically adaptable. When designed with these dimensions in mind, costumes not only clothe the performer but also become an essential means through which a production communicates meaning to its audience.

However, while theatrical costume is anchored in narrative and character, the principles it relies upon (fabric selection, silhouette, colour theory, and symbolic association) remain transferable to non-narrative contexts such as exhibitions. Theatrical traditions thus provide a foundation upon which more experimental forms, like the exhibition *Becoming the Element*, can build. These experimental forms allow a costume designer to express her ideas without the restriction of a directorial concept. The onus of creating the perfect design rests upon the designer's ability to make thorough research, interpret design concepts and utilize creative thinking abilities.

2.4 Costume Design for a Fashion Exhibition

Fashion exhibitions function as vital artistic and cultural arenas where garments transcend their practical purposes to become mediums of storytelling, cultural preservation, and visual communication. Within these spaces, fashion is interpreted not merely as clothing but as a form of language, one that conveys identity, heritage, and artistic imagination.

Through carefully curated displays, exhibitions reveal the creative and symbolic dimensions of costume design, situating fashion within its broader historical and cultural contexts.

Valerie Steele observes that fashion exhibitions have long played a role in promoting heritage and national identity, particularly in post-war Italy, where fashion became an emblem of cultural renewal and artistic confidence (17). A notable example is Germana Marucelli's Milan fashion show, which drew creative influence from Renaissance art, merging classical imagery with modern couture. Similarly, an exhibition held at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence showcased designs inspired by Renaissance paintings, uniting fashion with fine art and historical symbolism (17). These instances demonstrate how costume and fashion exhibitions serve as living museums, spaces where creativity and history coexist through material, design, and form.

Beyond their archival and historical significance, fashion exhibitions are also powerful forms of contemporary artistic expression. They enable designers and costume artists to construct immersive narratives that extend beyond conventional runway presentations. Through such displays, costume becomes an experimental and interdisciplinary art form that incorporates sculpture, performance, and visual storytelling. The exhibition space transforms into a stage where fabric, light, and texture communicate emotions and ideas, turning fashion into a kind of visual poetry.

In this same spirit, the *Becoming the Element* exhibition, organized by final-year costume students of the University of Benin, embodies this creative duality. Each costume design serves both as an artistic experiment and a visual metaphor, using dress as a medium of expressive projection and conceptual interpretation. Like the historic exhibitions of Milan and Florence, *Becoming the Element* situates costume design within the larger discourse of identity, creativity, and cultural expression.

Functions of Costume

The purpose of costume, whether in theatre or exhibition, extends well beyond adornment. It operates as an expressive and communicative tool that conveys character, mood, and context. J. Michael Gillette notes that costumes help the audience visualize the world of a production by clarifying elements such as setting, period, and social background (Gillette 212). At its core, costume design ensures that the audience can comprehend and connect with the story being presented.

However, its function also encompasses deeper expressive and symbolic dimensions:

1. **Character and Concept Definition:** Costumes can articulate personality, social status, or even abstract ideas such as Fire or Wind.
2. **Emotional Expression:** Through deliberate use of colour, texture, and silhouette, designers can evoke specific emotions or atmospheres. For example, sheer fabrics may suggest delicacy, while metallic tones can imply power or rigidity.
3. **Support for Movement:** In performance, costume interacts with the body, enabling or restricting motion to enhance physical storytelling.
4. **Symbolic Representation:** Costumes often embody metaphors or themes that reflect cultural, spiritual, or natural ideas.

In exhibitions, these functions evolve. Instead of supporting a live performance, the costume itself becomes the central narrative. The *Becoming the Element* exhibition demonstrates this shift, presenting costume as both sculpture and symbol. Each garment interprets natural element such as Rain or Cloud, by translating their qualities into form, texture, and colour. In such contexts, costume moves from being a supporting design to becoming an independent artwork that invites contemplation.

Ultimately, costume performs a dual role: it provides structure and context while also enabling conceptual and emotional engagement. Whether displayed on stage or in an

exhibition, costume bridges the tangible and the intangible, transforming invisible ideas into visible, embodied art.

2.5 Costume as a Means of Expression in a Production

Costume in performance is more than a decorative layer. It functions as a visual language through which ideas, emotions, and identities are communicated. Pravina Shukla argues that dress inherently performs, since “clothing always signals identity, intention, and cultural belonging, whether in everyday life or in art” (27). In theatre, this expressive function is heightened: costumes are deliberately designed to highlight what words or gestures alone may not convey. Sofia Pantouvaki searches for new methods and delves into the less traditional function of costumes. She explores the educational function of costumes, where children learn cognitive skills through active participation in creating the costume of characters in plays. She also explores the psychological and social benefits of costume, in the form of hospital clowning; the colourful costumes have a good psychological effect on the sick children, which in turn promotes their recovery. This amongst others show the vast functions of costume which should be explored. For example, she states, “Costume itself can be used as a method of political expression, struggle and communication.”(371). She talks about costume design for radical performance.

Expression through costume can operate on multiple levels. On the most immediate level, colour, texture, and silhouette create mood and atmosphere. For instance, flowing fabrics in pale tones may suggest delicacy or transcendence, while angular shapes and dark materials can create tension or foreboding. Bettina John notes that costume designers often use such visual strategies to “amplify the inner life of a character” or to embody abstract themes (64). Thus, costume acts as both a psychological and symbolic extension of performance.

This expressive quality extends beyond traditional theatre into conceptual design work, such as stage exhibitions. Here, costume is not bound to a scripted character but instead becomes a medium to explore abstract ideas or natural forces. For example, in a design inspired by the element of Wind, the costume might utilize lightweight materials like organza or chiffon, layered in such a way that movement creates ripples, echoing the invisible currents of air. The silhouette may avoid rigid structure, instead embracing openness and fluidity, so the garment seems to shift shape as the performer or mannequin moves. Through this, the audience perceives “Wind” not as a literal illustration, but as an embodied experience made visible through fabric and form.

In such contexts, costume becomes an expressive artwork in itself, independent from character or dialogue. By transforming intangible concepts into tactile, wearable design, the costume establishes a new form of storytelling, one that communicates through visual poetics rather than linear narrative. This aligns with the exhibition model of *Becoming the Element*, where each design articulates the essence of natural forces, using costume as the bridge between imagination and perception.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 The Costume Exhibition Concept

A costume exhibition is a curated display of garments that convey an artist's vision, identity, and interpretation. Traditionally, exhibitions focused on preserving historical costumes through static displays. However, as Patricia A. Cunningham and Sarah Scaturro note, curation today "allows for a more theoretical and creative approach, which sometimes can privilege the thesis over the object" (2). This evolution has transformed costume exhibitions from passive presentations into dynamic explorations of meaning and form.

Over time, exhibitions have evolved from simple mannequin displays to runway presentations, performative installations, and even digital exhibitions. Scaturro observes that modern curators employ "runway presentations, video projections, and digital interfaces" to engage audiences and expand the expressive range of costume (4). These innovations have redefined the act of exhibiting as a creative process in itself; one that merges art, performance, and technology to express conceptual ideas through visual storytelling. In this sense, the act of exhibiting costume becomes a performance. Each design embodies a narrative, and the exhibition space transforms into a stage where the designer's creative vision interacts with the viewer's perception. Costume exhibitions thus blur the boundaries between theatre and gallery, offering audiences an immersive experience that merges fashion, art, and dramatic expression.

The *Becoming the Element* exhibition, which is the focus of this research, was held on June 4, 2025, at the Theatre Hall, University of Benin, Ekehuan Campus. The exhibition exemplifies this evolution. Supervised by Prof. Mrs. Josephine Abbe and Dr. Mrs. Patricia Owens Eromosele, the event was a collaborative presentation by the 400-level costume major students as part of their examination. The exhibition took the form of a runway presentation,

where Natural elements were shared in a ballot amongst the costume major students, each individual was tasked with creating a design that expressed each element creatively.

The exhibition sought to explore how the essence of natural elements such as rain, ice, cloud, nature, smoke, and silver can be interpreted and personified through costume. The Costume Major Student designers were encouraged to move beyond literal representation to embody the emotional, symbolic, and aesthetic qualities of each element. Through this creative process, the exhibition celebrated the expressive power of costume as a medium that bridges art, nature, and storytelling.

3.2 Expression in Rain Concept: An Interview with Favour Orodjie Egbaran



Fig. 1

Orodjie, Favour. *Rain Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection.

Figure 1 above presents the Rain costume designed by Favour Orodjie Egbaran, a 400-level Costume Major student who participated in the Becoming the Element exhibition. In her discussion, Favour explained that she designed and constructed the Rain costume as

part of her examination project. Though she did not personally select her element (it was assigned to her through a random ballot) she embraced the challenge with enthusiasm, seeking to transform a natural phenomenon into a tangible work of art.

When asked about her inspiration, Favour revealed that her concept stemmed primarily from environmental observation. She explained that she was fascinated by the movement and transparency of rainfall; how each drop falls effortlessly, how it seems to appear from nowhere, and how it connects the sky to the earth. This subtle, almost mystical quality of rain became the emotional and visual foundation of her design.

Favour also noted that she conducted both environmental and visual studies. She observed rainfall in real life and explored online platforms such as Pinterest to gather artistic references that could guide her interpretation. Through this research, she began to imagine how the fluid and ephemeral quality of rain could be captured in costume form.

In response to questions about material selection, Favour explained that she chose to represent clouds with fiber foam and raindrops with transparent white beads suspended on invisible threads. The combination, she said, created the illusion of rain descending from clouds, a delicate, almost poetic visual effect. A straw hat base supported the headpiece, while a black tunic beneath the design provided a background that contrasted with the glimmering beads, symbolizing the dark sky from which rain falls.

Her creative process, as she recounted, began with sketches inspired by her research findings. After approval from her lecturer, she sourced materials such as fiber board for structure, fiber foam for the clouds, and transparent beads for raindrops. During construction, she realized the costume appeared too plain, prompting her to spray the clouds in shades of grey to evoke a moody, rain-filled atmosphere. This decision, coupled with the black fabric beneath, gave the costume its final dramatic tone.

According to Favour, “The transparency and lightness of the beads expressed the essence of rain, while the fiber foam gave a soft, cloudy texture.” Each element was deliberately chosen to express the purity and calm associated with rainfall, while also suggesting its unpredictability and depth. Like many designers, she faced some challenges during execution, most notably financial constraints and the constant tangling of invisible thread while stringing the beads. However, through patience and careful handling, she managed to complete the piece successfully.

Reflecting on her work, Favour shared that her goal was to evoke in the audience the feeling of standing beneath a heavy downpour, the quiet tension before rain falls and the serenity that follows. She expressed particular pride in the headpiece, which she described as the most striking aspect of her design.

In conclusion, Favour noted that the project significantly enhanced her creative confidence and technical ability. It deepened her understanding of costume as a tool for expressive interpretation, one capable of transforming abstract ideas and natural elements into visual narratives that are easily recognized.

3.3 Costume Expression in Ice Concept: An Interview with Sharon Macaulay



Fig. 2

Macaulay, Sharon. *Ice Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection.

Figure 2 above is the Ice costume, designed and modeled by Miss Sharon Macaulay, a Costume Major in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin. In addition to her design role, Sharon served as the Assistant Production Manager and was an active member of the sponsorship team during the Becoming the Element exhibition.

When asked how she came about her concept, Sharon explained that Ice was not her personal choice. The themes were assigned randomly through a ballot, and she happened to pick Ice. However, rather than feeling limited by this, she embraced it as a creative challenge.

“If I were to pick,” she said, “I would have chosen Smoke or Cloud. But I was given Ice, so I had to make it work.”

Her inspiration developed from a personal desire to experiment with unconventional materials. “I remember our lecturer saying, you can create costumes from anything,” she recalled, “and that motivated me to see Ice not as a limitation but as an opportunity.” She approached the project as both a learning experience and a test of innovation, aiming to interpret the element through material manipulation rather than literal representation.

Before designing, Sharon conducted research into materials that could visually and physically embody the qualities of Ice; its clarity, coldness, and structure. She studied fabric transparency, reflectivity, and cost-effectiveness, ensuring that her materials could support the resin ice cubes she planned to incorporate.

In translating the concept into costume form, Sharon combined creativity with experimentation. She crafted ice cubes using clear resin poured into silicone molds and created icicles using hot glue and foil paper for shaping. “I used quinoline mesh for the shirt and trousers because of its transparency,” she explained, “but it was uncomfortable to wear. It gave the right look though; that icy, glassy feel.”

The design process evolved through trial and adaptation. Her first sketch which was a suit gown, had to be changed due to technical issues with her tailor. The final version was two-piece outfit consisting of a long-sleeve shirt and palazzo trousers adorned with resin cubes. Once the base garments were completed, she glued the cubes and icicles onto the fabric, carefully arranging them in balanced, symmetrical patterns to reflect the geometric order of Ice.

Lighting played a vital role in bringing the concept to life. During the exhibition, the stage lights reflected off the resin and crinoline mesh, producing a shimmering, watery glow that mimicked the visual quality of Ice. Sharon explained that translucency and reflection

were central to her vision. The way light interacted with the materials helped evoke the cold, crystalline atmosphere she intended.

Sharon also faced significant challenges. Resin was expensive and time-consuming to work with, and the icicles' weight made attachment difficult. The base fabric was harsh on the skin, and delays from the tailor nearly jeopardized her schedule. "I had to work day and night to meet up," she said, recalling how persistence and adaptability helped her finish in time.

Despite the difficulties, Sharon expressed pride in her final outcome, particularly the shirt, which exceeded her expectations. She aimed to communicate calmness and transparency, qualities she associated with Ice, through her choice of color, form, and arrangement.

Reflecting on the experience, Sharon shared that the project taught her patience and reinforced her belief that costume design is a limitless art form. "I learnt that with time, research, and effort, anything can inspire creation," she said. Working on Ice expanded her sense of possibility, pushing her to think beyond comfort zones. "At first, I thought I couldn't do it," she admitted, "but I realized I could push past my limits and still create something beautiful."

If she were to revisit the concept, Sharon said she would make a few adjustments, maybe smaller ice cubes, softer materials, and perhaps a gown instead of a two-piece design.

3.4 Costume Expression in Silver Concept: A Self-Interview with Efetobore Michelle Onokohwemu



Fig. 3

Onokohwemu, Efetobore. *Silver Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection.

Figure 3 above shows the Silver costume, which I designed and created for the Becoming the Element exhibition. I also served as the leader of the Set Design Team. As a researcher, I conducted interviews with some of my classmates who designed other costumes for the exhibition, including myself, to explore the role of expressive interpretation and the challenges in costume design.

I didn't originally pick Silver as my element. Through a ballot system, I had first selected Light, but the design idea I had in mind was too expensive to execute. With my lecturer's approval, I changed to Silver because I wanted something unique, shiny, and challenging to interpret. My creative direction was inspired by the knights of the medieval age, though I contemporized the idea to make it more relatable. My interpretation of Silver came mainly from cultural and historical associations, particularly the image of medieval armor, which I saw as a strong representation of endurance and power.

When I began my research, I browsed through several pictures of silver costumes online but found most of them too simple or repetitive. Then the idea struck me – armor. I started researching how to make costume armor and chainmail, learning about breastplates, pauldrons, leg guards, arm guards and how to create them from EVA foam to resemble real metal. That discovery shaped the entire design direction.

Translating the reflective nature of silver into a wearable costume required careful material selection. I focused all my efforts on achieving one thing, the essence of silver. My creative process started with sketching. My first sketch wasn't approved, but through a wave of inspiration, I came up with a new armor-based design which I drew digitally using ibis Paint. Once it was approved, I began sourcing materials gradually due to financial limitations. I had already bought two yards of silver satin, which I used for the skirt. I then worked on the armor using EVA foam. To shape the breastplate, I wrapped my upper body in paper and cello tape, cut out the pattern, traced it onto foam, glued the pieces, and used an iron in place of a heat gun to bend them into form. I painted it in four layers; top bond, white acrylic, black, and finally silver spray paint, leaving darker areas to give a slightly tarnished metallic look. The skirt and armor complemented each other beautifully, with the soft shine of the satin balancing the strength of the armor. I also created a sword using mirror card and added foam details on the handle. I later made matching silver ear cuffs to complete the look. Some

earlier ideas, like adding chainmail and a cape, were dropped when they began to look tacky, but these changes ultimately refined the final design.

EVA foam was my main material choice because it was light, easy to shape, and affordable. The silver satin added the reflective quality I wanted, and the spray paint unified the whole costume under the metallic theme. Light reflection played a major role in the design since silver is the most reflective metal. I wanted the costume to respond to light, creating an illusion of real metal under stage lighting.

The process came with many challenges; getting the perfect breastplate shape, making the foam look metallic, and balancing structure with comfort. I didn't have all the ideal tools, so I improvised wherever possible. Despite these limitations, the process taught me patience and problem-solving. Looking back, I am proud of every part of the costume, but the breastplate remains my favorite. It was completely new to me, and seeing it come to life after so much trial and adjustment was deeply rewarding.

For me, Silver symbolized strength and resilience. The wear and tear of armor doesn't diminish its beauty— it tells a story of survival. That was the essence I wanted to communicate: strength and elegance – a “warrior princess” aesthetic, exuding power and grace.

Through this project, I began to see costume as a visual language capable of expressing emotion, mood, class, and history. I now view costume design not just as adornment but as storytelling through fabric, form, and texture. The experience made me appreciate how much the choice of material shapes audience perception. A well-chosen material doesn't just decorate, it speaks, interprets, and connects the concept to the viewer. If I were to revisit Silver, I would like to explore a mirror-based interpretation or expand the armor concept further, perhaps with chainmail, a helmet, and a shield.

3.5 Costume Expression in Cloud Concept: An Interview with Owhoaridowho Kate



Fig. 4

Owhoaridowho, Kate. *Cloud Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection

Figure 4 above presents Cloud, a costume designed and modelled by Kate Owhoaridowho, a costume major in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin. In the Becoming the Element exhibition, Kate created and presented her piece inspired by the element Cloud. Her design drew inspiration from the beauty of the sky. The ever-changing forms of clouds and their gentle harmony with sunlight became her main influence, reflecting her interpretation of calmness, softness, and aesthetic grace.

Before beginning her design, Kate researched how clouds are formed, their types, and their symbolic meanings. Translating something as intangible as a cloud into a tangible costume was, according to her, quite challenging. She found her solution in cotton wool, which perfectly captured the softness and shapeless quality of clouds. After sketch approval, she sourced soft blue fabric and cotton wool for the main design. The gown was sewn by a tailor, after which she hand-decorated it with cotton wool using glue. For her accessories, She made a blue wig from hair extensions, treated with hot water and conditioner for smoothness. Her headpiece was made from leftover embellishments and gum stay, which she shaped, attached to a headband, and adorned with silver details.

The colour palette of blue and white was intentionally chosen to represent the sky and clouds, evoking feelings of peace and serenity. While attaching the cotton wool proved tricky, with the glue drying too fast at times, Kate cleverly layered more cotton to conceal imperfections, giving the costume a soft, cloudlike finish. Kate's design aimed to express kindness, softness, and peace. Her use of colour and texture created both visual and emotional harmony, allowing the costume to communicate beyond aesthetics. She explained that arranging the cotton wool in natural formations was her biggest challenge, but observing real clouds helped her achieve the right balance.

Looking back, Kate expressed pride in every part of her costume, saying each element complemented the other to form a cohesive whole. Designing Cloud, she noted, deepened her understanding of costume as a medium of emotional and visual storytelling. "When costume is done right, it tells a story," she said. She also mentioned that if she was given another opportunity, she would use a stronger fabric to better support the train and design a more elaborate headpiece to elevate the celestial essence of Cloud.

3.6 Costume Expression in Nature Concept: An Interview with Emmanuella Esegboria Omorodion



Fig. 5

Omorodion, Esegboria. *Nature Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection.

Figure 5 above depicts Nature, a costume designed by Miss Ese Omorodion, a Costume Major student from the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin. During the Becoming the Element exhibition, Ese worked with the concept of Nature, which she

described as deeply personal and instinctive. Aside from being a designer, she also served as the Sponsorship Director, overseeing communications, negotiations, and feedback from potential sponsors.

When asked why she chose Nature as her concept, Ese explained that her love for all things natural; flowers, trees, and grass, made the theme an easy choice. She noted that it felt like something she could connect to on a personal level, “something that would come naturally.” Her inspiration stemmed from her environment and everyday encounters with plants and flowers, which influenced her decision to use materials like carpet grass and artificial flowers in her design.

Before starting, she conducted research into the symbolism of nature and how it could be interpreted through costume. Ese shared that her goal was to capture the beauty and harmony of the natural world through visual expression. She began by sketching her design and, after receiving approval from her lecturer, moved on to sourcing materials. She selected organza for both the blouse and skirt because of its lightweight texture and reflective quality, which allowed the glued flowers to sit gracefully on the surface. She also incorporated artificial flowers, vines, and carpet grass, choosing artificial over natural because of durability concerns. Ese explained that the combination of green, red, and brown tones represented life and growth, echoing the vibrancy and diversity of nature. According to her, “the green base of the skirt reflected vegetation, while the colorful flowers symbolized the beauty and variety found in the natural world.”

Ese admitted that narrowing her focus was difficult. She decided to emphasize flowers and grass; elements she personally resonated with, and applied basic colour theory to balance her design. She placed darker shades beside lighter ones to avoid overwhelming contrasts, which helped her achieve visual harmony. One of the highlights of her creation was an umbrella decorated entirely with flowers. She recalled that it initially seemed like an

afterthought, but it later became her favorite part of the entire piece. “It turned out far better than I imagined,” she said proudly, noting how it completed the natural look she envisioned.

Throughout the process, Ese learned that even small or discarded materials could transform a costume when used creatively. She gave an example of reusing flower pistils she had almost thrown away, which ended up adding realistic detail to her final piece. Reflecting on the experience, Ese emphasized how the project deepened her understanding of costume as a communication tool. By carefully selecting textures, colors, and shapes, she realized that costume could express meaning without the need for dialogue. When the audience immediately recognized Nature in her presentation, she felt she had succeeded in visually translating the concept. If given another opportunity, Ese shared that she would love to experiment with real flowers to heighten the authenticity and fragrance of the design.

3.7 Costume Expression in Smoke Concept: An Interview with Justina Chielo



Fig. 6

Chielo, Justina. *Smoke Costume*. 4 June, 2025. Personal Collection.

Figure 6 above features Smoke, a costume designed and modeled by Miss Justina Chielo, a Costume Major from the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin. Beyond her role as a designer and model, she also served as the Production Manager for *Becoming the Element*, overseeing the pre-production process and ensuring coordination among the team.

When asked what inspired her design, Justina admitted that as she began her research and sketching, she found herself emotionally drawn to the concept. She explained that her inspiration was guided by both visual and emotional cues, drawn from online references and her own observation of how smoke behaves. “I got emotionally invested while sketching,” she noted, “and that motivated me to give my best.”

To interpret Smoke as a costume, she began by studying its visual behavior; smoke in a room, smoke in videos, etc. This research helped her determine the kind of materials that could mimic smoke’s weightlessness and movement. Online platforms like Pinterest became sources of visual inspiration, aiding her understanding of how to recreate the soft, drifting essence of smoke through fabric. In her design process, Justina moved from research to illustration, fabric sourcing, and eventually, construction. She started with a short dress base, painted to resemble fire using acrylic paint on padded crepe. Over this, she built a voluminous detachable skirt made from multiple layers of net in brown and white, chosen to reflect the wispy, translucent texture of smoke. The layering, she explained, was crucial in creating depth and motion, giving the costume an almost floating appearance.

For the dress, she used net because of its light weight and texture, and crinoline mesh underneath to give the skirt fullness. The upper part, depicting fire, served as a visual contrast, it was a fitted corset while the lower part flowed freely, representing the unpredictable spread

of smoke. Justina explained that she worked to balance proportion and movement according to her body. The fitted bodice contrasted with the airy skirt, symbolizing the rise of smoke from fire. Her colour palette of whites, greys, and browns helped evoke the ethereal quality of smoke.

Emotionally, she wanted the audience to feel the presence of smoke as if they had stepped into a misty, enclosed space. “I wanted them to understand the silent yet consuming nature of smoke,” she shared. To enhance the audience’s experience, she also coordinated sound, lighting, and stage elements to complement her costume. Together, these created a multisensory impression of movement and atmosphere, allowing the costume to express its concept effectively.

Discussing challenges, Justina revealed that financial limitations were a major hurdle. The voluminous layers of net required over 20 yards of fabric, and experimenting with different materials to test acrylic paint absorption increased the cost. Despite these setbacks, she persisted and found creative ways to maximize her resources. Her proudest feature was the fire-painted bodice. “It required a lot of creative thinking,” she said, “because it wasn’t just plain sewing, it involved painting and artistic manipulation.” The result became the focal point of the design, embodying transformation, energy, and motion.

Reflecting on the experience, Justina observed that the project expanded her understanding of fabric manipulation and the use of design principles to convey emotion. “It widened my creativity, and made me realize how limitless costume design can be, from natural to synthetic concepts.” (Justina)

If given another opportunity to reinterpret Smoke, Justina shared that she would make the corset section more elaborate and design a bolder headpiece to complement the overall silhouette.

3.8 Challenges of Expression in Execution of Concepts

The process of translating abstract costume concepts into tangible, stage-ready designs presents numerous creative and technical challenges for designers. Within the *Becoming the Element* exhibition, each participant encountered unique difficulties while attempting to visually interpret natural elemental phenomena through costume. What appeared imaginative in theory often demanded practical negotiation with materials, time, and available resources.

One of the most common struggles was the materials. Designers like Justina Chielo, who worked on *Smoke*, discussed how difficult it was to find fabrics that could mimic the movement and lightness of real smoke. The layers of net had to look airy yet structured enough to maintain form. Others, such as the designer for *Rain*, experimented with fabrics that suggested transparency and fluidity without compromising durability. These challenges required innovation, prompting the designers to manipulate materials in unconventional ways to achieve desired visual effects.

Budgetary constraints also played a major role in shaping outcomes. Ambitious ideas often had to be adjusted to fit financial limits. For instance, the *Smoke* and *Silver* costumes demanded extensive yardage and specialty fabrics, increasing production costs. Rather than being discouraged, designers adapted by reusing materials, layering creatively, and sourcing affordable alternatives. These solutions not only preserved the visual impact of the designs but also demonstrated adaptability as a critical skill in costume realization.

Another recurring difficulty involved expressing intangible ideas. Translating ephemeral elements like wind, cloud, or smoke into wearable form required perceptive interpretation. Designers such as Kate, who created *Cloud*, relied on visual metaphors; soft colour palettes, light fabrics, and delicate layering to capture movement and atmosphere.

Similarly, the Nature concept focused on texture and colour harmony to evoke organic growth and vitality. This underscored costume design's role as a visual language that communicates emotion and symbolism beyond aesthetics.

Collaboration also proved essential to expressive success. Several designers noted that their costumes gained deeper resonance through coordinated stage elements such as lighting, sound, and scenic design. In the case of *Smoke*, the interplay between costume, background imagery, and sound effects heightened the illusion of motion and mystery. This integration emphasized costume's interdependence with other theatrical elements in achieving total visual expression.

Time management further compounded these challenges. The limited production period required quick decision-making and continuous adjustments. While this occasionally restricted experimentation, it also encouraged efficiency and problem-solving under pressure, skills vital to professional practice in costume design.

CHAPTER FOUR: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

4.1 Summary

This research examined expressive interpretation in designing costume for the stage, using the Becoming the Element exhibition as a practical case study. The study explored how costume functions as a visual language capable of communicating emotion, mood, concept, and symbolism beyond mere aesthetics. Through interviews with the student designers who represented different elements such as Rain, Ice, Silver, Cloud, Nature, and Smoke, the research investigated how ideas were translated into tangible costume forms.

Each designer's creative process revealed a deliberate interplay between research, imagination, material selection, and technical execution. The study found that expressive

costume design is not limited to skill or craftsmanship alone, but also relies on the designer's ability to interpret abstract concepts and transform them into visual form. In *Becoming the Element*, every costume became a medium of expression. Silver communicated strength and resilience, Cloud embodied softness and calm, Nature reflected vitality and beauty, while Smoke expressed mystery and transformation.

The study further discovered that designers encountered significant challenges such as limited resources, material constraints, and the difficulty of balancing symbolic meaning with functionality. Despite these challenges, improvisation, adaptability, and creative problem-solving became essential tools that enhanced expressive projection. Ultimately, the exhibition demonstrated that costume design, when approached interpretively, transcends decoration to become an expressive art form that supports visual storytelling and deepens audience engagement.

4.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I have the following recommendations:

1. **Integration of Expressive Theory in Costume Training:** Costume design curricula should emphasize expressive interpretation, encouraging students to move beyond literal representation toward conceptual and emotional projection.
2. **Enhanced Material Access and Technical Support:** Institutions should provide easier access to diverse materials and technical tools that enable experimental and expressive work.
3. **Collaboration and Feedback:** Designers should engage in collaborative critique sessions with peers and supervisors to refine expressive choices and ensure clear visual communication.

4. Documentation and Reflection: Costume students should document their creative process; sketches, experiments, and reflections, to foster self-awareness and theoretical grounding in expressive practice.
5. Encouragement of Exhibitions and Practical Showcases: Projects such as Becoming the Element should be sustained and expanded as they provide invaluable experiential learning platforms for translating theory into creative practice.

4.3 Conclusion

This study concludes that expressive interpretation is central to the art of costume design. Costumes are not merely garments for performance but are visual statements that embody ideas, emotions, and identities. The Becoming the Element exhibition demonstrated that through thoughtful research, conceptualization, and technical innovation, costume can effectively communicate the intangible, transforming abstract ideas into vivid theatrical realities.

The process revealed that true expressive costume design emerges from the harmony of creativity, interpretation, and execution. When designers engage deeply with their concepts, they create works that transcend aesthetics and evoke meaning, making costume not just a support to performance, but an integral voice within it.

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