

# Instantaneous Costume Transformation

In Summer 1976, Tabs published a translation by Christopher Baugh of a chapter from Moynet's treatise *L'Envers du Theatre: Machines et Decorations*, published in Paris in 1875. This chapter was entitled *Lighting the Stage by Tallow, Candle, Oil, and Gas*. The entire book has now been translated and augmented from other contemporary sources by Allan S. Jackson and M. Glen Wilson, and published by the American Theatre Association as Volume 10 in their Rare Books of the Theatre Series. The book reproduces some 200 illustrations and the scope of Moynet's text is indicated by the chapter headings. Among the many joys is a detailed backstage tour during the performance of a play which appears to depend rather more upon its spectacle than its dialogue. But this is not just a history book; there are some tricks that we could re-adopt. Many recent pantomime productions have lacked the in-

genious magic of this simple costume transformation. . . .

"If you examine with care the costume in which he is dressed you will discover that it is in two pieces that are held together by means of a strong thread, starting from the foot and extending to the shoulder by a series of eyelets and going down along the arm. This is a catgut, the lower end of which is provided with a ring, and the other end stops in a slip knot or bow that the actor can undo at will. The costume, whatever pattern and design it may be, is then made of only two pieces, front and back. If the character places himself on stage at a predetermined point, usually marked by chalk, a little trap opens behind him, and at the agreed signal the actor concerned unfastens the buttons or bows that keep the costume up. The costumer, from underneath, pulls down the rings and the catgut strings. The costume falls by itself and is quickly yanked down the trap, and the actor appears transformed . . . for example . . . As she (the old woman) places herself at the appointed and marked spot, the trappillion opens, the hand of the stage hand seizes the rings placed at the end of the catgut strings. On the cue the actress throws back the hood mounted on a steel wire frame to protect her coiffure, and the transformation takes place, as you can see, instantly. A fairy would not be able to operate without a wand. See with what

adroitness a stage hand passes to her the sign of her power. He makes it arrive in her hand through a little practical opening in the floor of the stage."



*This engraving and our excerpt from the book is taken from the chapter entitled "Performance of a Spectacle Play viewed from backstage".*

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