Two Tudor-era shows hit the Great White Way this season and that proved to be a beautiful lesson in contrast. One tells the story of Henry VIII, his many wives, and the cunning Thomas Cromwell. It is poised, serious and historic. The other tells the story of a struggling playwright constantly overshadowed by Shakespeare and the fictional creation of “the musical.” It is irreverent, comedic and theatrical. Both productions clothed their respective performers in beautifully tailored costumes, evoking the Renaissance in stylistically powerful ways, but the results could not be more different.

Remixing the Bard

Set in the 1590s, Something Rotten! follows brothers Nick and Nigel Bottom who are struggling to find success and escape from under the shadow of Renaissance rock star Shakespeare, a.k.a. “The Bard.” With advice from a soothsayer, they set out to write the world’s first “musical,” combining singing, dancing and acting at the same time. The story draws heavily from Shakespeare’s canon, including leads named after some of his most iconic characters, and goes from a 16th-century village in to full blown musical stage numbers that bring audiences to their feet for a first act standing ovation at the drop of a hat.

In describing his overall approach to the production, costume designer Gregg Barnes said, “In essence, we began with a palette and shapes that would be at home in a Shakespearean comedy, and then let the story tell us where to veer off into a heightened musical world.” With the basic silhouette established, he turned to the cast of characters for further inspiration. “The cast of characters in Something Rotten are named after Shakespeare’s characters, so that was a key into how to begin the research process,” says Barnes. One of the characters, for example, is named Shylock. Barnes googled images of “Shylock” and then waded through the hundreds of versions of how the character has been costumed. “I took Al Pacino, F. Murray Abraham, Henry Irving, and mix-mastered those details into our Rotten Shylock. Knowing that the brilliant Gerry Vichi was playing the role gave me license to add a bit of old vaudeville veneer to the package and suddenly there he is!”

The Bard is presented both as the rock star people fawn over, and the celebrity they love to hate. To drive home both the raw sex appeal, and the obnoxious ostentatiousness, Renaissance shapes were reworked in leather with added details to really make Willy and his back-up boys pop.

“T”ran across a website called Deviant Art,” Barnes explains, “and there is a company that creates custom appliqued leather jackets using Celtic and Baroque motifs on the sleeves and backs. The jackets on the web-
site aren’t doublets, but I used them as inspiration for Shakespeare and his posse. The doublets worn by the ‘back-up’ boys are traditional shapes, but they are fit like something you’d see at a Billy Idol concert. We used black stretch leather—Barak Stribling made them and he is a genius at this kind of thing—and mix-mastered details from the Deviant Art website with motorcycle jacket details. Shakespeare’s costumes were made by Eric Winterling’s shop and we used the same approach in pewter and brass metallic leather.”

With the remaining characters, Barnes continued his signature use of bold and unique fabric combinations to add depth, richness and interest to every costume. Because of the physical demands and non-stop dancing of musical theatre, few upholstery or heavy weight fabrics indicative of the period were utilized. Instead, Gregg reached for sheers and various lightweight fabrics with rich depth and interest to capture the spirit of the time.

“I have to say I do exhaust myself (and everyone around me) when the fabrics are sourced and selected,” Barnes confides. “I recently did a video interview and I started counting the number of fabrics used in just one dress. I stopped at eight and there are at least four more as you go through all the layers and edgings and so on. Ironically, the dress is essentially color blocked and mostly registers as one color. I love clothes that are rich in detail. I find that even if a garment appears ‘simple’ in fabrication that by using many elements you add a visual richness and texture that wouldn’t necessarily be present with a single fabric.”

Dressing Wolves

In stark contrast stands Wolf Hall: Parts One and Two, the stage adaptations of Hilary Mantel’s best selling and multi-award winning novel. Wolf Hall centers on Henry VIII’s rage over the lack of a male heir, his passion for Anne Boleyn, his battle with the church, and his pursuit of Jane Seymour, all with the political and religious assistance of the ambitious Thomas Cromwell. The play is staged minimally, and its few set pieces keep the story moving at a rapid pace. This allows the costumes to take central focus. The sheer scale of Tudor costumes demand this amount of breathing room to move fluidly through the space. And whether dancing in a crowd, or sitting regally on a thrown, the size of the women’s layered skirts and the men’s massive shoulders call out for attention. For a time period that has been so richly recreated in film with every garland of flowers and elaborate candelabra the production team could find filling every frame, the striking simplicity of every scene of director Jeremy Herrin’s staging focuses us back on the characters that drive this powerful story.

Costume designer Christopher Oram’s Tony Award-winning costumes are awe-inspiring. Stripped of excessive trim and décor, the costumes tell a compelling story through silhouette, color and texture. The repetition of shape among characters creates a beautiful harmony that propels the play along, while the distinct colors and details allow key players to be easily tracked throughout the action.

Oram, who lives in London, drew on research from “a wealth of portraits, palaces, and pieces of the Tudor world.” Particular sites
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included The Holbein Portraits at The National Portrait Gallery, Hampton Court and The Tower of London. “It’s important to understand, that as much as it is a history play based on real characters and events, it is also a stage drama, and a new one at that,” says Oram. “One aspires to stay ‘true to period’ at all times, but certainly other factors influence too—modern physical types, double casting, quick changing. There was no need for a Tudor queen to ever have to quick change into a lady in waiting!”

Instead of the costumes of the period fighting the physicality of the actors, their massive size served to more closely connect actors to the period and their character. In a discussion of making adjustments for performers’ comfort, Oram shared that “the bulk, the weight, and the scale of the garments—we all agreed in the end—ultimately helped the actors connect with their character, no matter how strange, and physically restricting they felt at first.”

Furthermore, weight and scale served to tell the story of a character’s rise and fall from prominence. Oram explains: “There are a lot of characters in this story from every different walk of life, from common thieves to the king of England himself. It was important for us to differentiate them for our audience’s clarity. The scale of the garments and the richness of the fabrics increase as the status of the wearer increases. Obviously Henry has the biggest and richest garments in the play. And in contrast, Christophe, Cromwell’s servant, the least so. Similarly, Anne Boleyn’s gowns get bigger and richer as her status increases during her rise to power at court. Then as she falls from grace, the silhouettes get leaner, the tones more muted, until eventually she ends in a very simple black gown.”

While both shows are set in the 16th century, and both contain real life characters, the costumes that grace the stage each night are worlds apart. While both Oram and Barnes started with Renaissance research, the nature of the individual stories they were charged with telling, as well as the expectation of the script and physical demands of the actors, called for very different visions of Tudor England. And while both costume designers grounded their work in historic fashion, they each relied on different aspects of their research to help balance that which was of the period that needed to be omitted. In the case of Wolf Hall silhouette, weight, and texture conveyed Renaissance such that Oram was free to strip the costumes of excessive ornamentation. Silhouette, rich color, and elaborate pattern and texture spoke enough to the period that Barnes was free to remove elaborate understructures and heavy fabrics from the costumes of Something Rotten.

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The cast of Wolf Hall. The stark set placed focus squarely on costumes.
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