

ANNETTE SOUMILAS

Dreamer and visionary: discovering costume designer Thelma Thomas Afford

On display for the first time in 2019–20 in State Library Victoria's Victoria Gallery is the only surviving costume commissioned by the International Club of Victoria for the Pageant of Nations performed in 1934 and 1935 to celebrate Victoria's centenary. The costume designed for the pageant's protagonist, 'Victoria', was donated to State Library Victoria in 1998 by Jessie Clarke (nee Brookes),¹ who played that role on the stage of Melbourne's Town Hall for the three performances in 1934, and two additional enactments in 1935. Clarke also donated a hand-coloured studio portrait of herself wearing the costume (shown on page 28). The dynamic ensemble included a hand-painted hooped skirt and a shimmering silver bodice over which trailed a long green cloak veined with silver markings. The entire ensemble was crowned with a striking metallic headdress. State Library Victoria had no record of the identity of the costume's designer until my own research into realia, manuscripts and pictures in the collection in 2013 led me to discover the story of a woman with talent and ingenuity who contributed an enduring legacy to Australia's performing arts. This article adds to the previous *La Trobe Journal* article about the Jessie Clarke costume.²

By age 26, Thelma Thomas had already gained experience as an amateur actress and costume designer and as an educator in her home town, Adelaide,

Thelma Thomas, costume design representing the 'Morse Code Overland Telegraph', for Heather Gell's Heritage: a pageant of South Australia, Adelaide, 1935–36, State Library of South Australia, PRG 689/1, 34

South Australia's 1936
Centenary Pageant

Heather Gell's

"Heritage"

Part II Scene 8.



(Dorothy Glane)

MORSE CODE
OVERLAND TELEGRAPH

Helma Thomas Afford.
1936.



Jessie Brookes wearing the 'State of Victoria' costume for the Pageant of Nations gala events, Victorian centenary celebrations, c. 1934, costume designed by Thelma Thomas, photograph by Broothorn Studios, Manuscripts Collection, Jessie Clarke papers, MS 13268

where she was involved with experimental theatre and influenced by modernist ideals which were sweeping the country. In 1934, Thomas was granted sabbatical leave from her teaching position at Adelaide High School by Dr Charles Fenner, director of technical education, to travel to Melbourne to broaden her skills in and experience of costume design with established practitioners and artists involved with Melbourne's theatres. While performing at South Melbourne's Garrick Theatre, in a play for which she had designed the costumes, Thomas was approached by International Club of Victoria secretary Jane McMillan to design ten symbolic costumes to be worn by principal characters for the Pageant of Nations: the club's planned celebration of Melbourne's centenary, later in the year. Thomas' work was

already known by the club's president and founder, Ivy Brookes, who had seen her designs in Adelaide.³ Ivy Deakin Brookes (1883–1970), mother of Jessie Clarke, was an Australian community worker who held leadership positions for organisations in Victoria, including the National Council of Women of Australia. She founded the International Club of Victoria in 1933 to promote understanding, friendship and cooperation between nationals of all countries. The club closed in 1958.

Thomas' engagement by McMillan launched her career as a costume designer with a distinct talent for conceiving allegorical costume designs. By 1937 Thomas had become Australia's leading designer of pageant costumes, having conceived and illustrated hundreds of original watercoloured costume designs for centenary celebrations not only in Melbourne, but also in Adelaide (1936), as well as for Sydney's sesquicentenary (1938).

Thelma May Afford (nee Thomas, 1908–96) was born in Broken Hill, New South Wales, to William James and Ethel (nee Henderson) Thomas. The Thomas family moved to Adelaide, where Thelma attended Presbyterian Girls' College, Glen Osmond, and studied drawing and design with portrait and landscape painter Maude Priest (1885–1945). Thomas' aptitude for drawing was awarded in 1925, when she was aged 17, with prizes for 'decorative composition and watercolours' from the Royal Drawing Society, established by British artist James Ashton (1859–1935). Ashton's Academy of Arts, founded in Adelaide in 1896, held examinations and issued valued certificates rewarding artistic excellence.⁴ While still a student at the Presbyterian Girls' College, Thomas was also awarded a scholarship to the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts, where she was one of five students selected by the progressive Dr Charles Fenner to 'train as art teachers to introduce art for the first time into the curriculum of Adelaide's high schools'.⁵

Thomas was teaching at Adelaide High School in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the country, including the city of Adelaide, was struggling with the great economic Depression. Despite this and the advent of American 'talkies', Adelaide was alive with amateur theatres known as 'little theatres',⁶ and Thomas became enthusiastically involved with them. This period had a significant and lasting influence on her artistic practice. Later in her life, in 1979, Thomas documented this time of experimentation, creativity and invention in a manuscript that was published posthumously, in 2004, as *Dreamers and Visionaries: Adelaide's little theatres from the 1920s to the early 1940s*.⁷ She believed that Adelaide's little theatres were well ahead of their time, and she wanted to record their activities and influential figures. In her book Thomas reminisced,



Thelma Thomas designing costumes for the sesquicentenary celebrations at Town Hall, Sydney, 1938, photographer unknown, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, PX*D 330/ff.1-253. Courtesy Perpetual Private

I came to know this city and its Little Theatre/art world well, and also the many young people working with or interested in the various arts. Restaurants such as the Arcadia in King William Street became meeting places, as did the Beehive Corner at the intersection of Rundle and King William streets. Earnest young students gathered at Mitch's eating house of King William Street for supper, or at a coffee shop in Harris Scarfe's Arcade where the more practical problems of the world were nicely settled over endless cups of coffee, while the more esoteric theories were argued until the small hours – no matter if never solved. There was dancing at the Glenelg Palais and at the North Terrace Palais where Frank Kennedy and Joy Badenoch sang and Tom King played the piano with the band.⁸

By 1931 Thomas was acting in plays at the WEA Little Theatre, originally known as the Workers' Educational Association of South Australia Dramatic Society's Little Theatre,⁹ where she also assisted with designing costumes. But while the WEA was producing traditionally inspired plays, the zeitgeist was embracing modernism.



Thelma Thomas and performers preparing for the sesquicentenary celebrations at Town Hall, Sydney, 1938, photographer unknown, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, PX*D 330/ff.1-253. Courtesy Perpetual Private

Ab-Intra Studio Theatre and the modernist cult

In 1932 an announcement appeared in the *Adelaide News* headed 'Modernists come to Adelaide'.

There is a modernist cult working in Adelaide. It has nothing to do with 'flaming youth.' The fires burn very low, glowing instead of crackling with a vivid display of pyrotechnics. The members of this cult are concerned with art in general and the theatre in particular. They are not convinced that art is being interpreted as a living force. What they really think about it will be published in *The Mail* on Saturday.¹⁰

By this time, Thomas had already become an active member of this 'cult' known as the Ab-Intra Studio Theatre. Meaning 'from within', Ab-Intra was conceived from a theosophical belief that recommended an alternative vision of the world and a total restructuring of spiritual ideology based on a concept of inner reality. Ab-Intra's founders, Kester Baruch and Alan Harkness, met by chance at Adelaide's Theosophical Society in 1930.¹¹ Harkness' interest in

theatre design and production and Baruch's pursuit of journalism and writing, plus a mutual interest in interpretative movement and mime, ignited to create arguably the most experimental theatre in Adelaide at the time.

In an article about Ab-Intra published in *Australasian Drama Studies* journal in 1988 Thomas recounted,

Ab-Intra Studio Theatre was inventive, experimental, and probably the most genuinely creative of all the Little Theatres in Adelaide during the 1930s decade. Its distinguishing characteristics were an emphasis on the importance and beauty of visual communication with an audience, and highly individual methods of production. Although it existed for only three years, Ab-Intra made a singular and lasting impact on those associated with the work attempted by the two founders of the theatre.¹²

At Ab-Intra, Thomas learned to interpret and adapt the Japanese Noh theatre tradition for an Adelaide audience. Harkness' particular interests in movement, mime, pattern, colour and light rather than dialogue led to collaborations with dancer Robert Helpmann, Dalcroze eurhythmics and music teacher Heather Gell, absolute dancer Joan Joske and artist Colin Ballantyne, among others.¹³ The 'scope for creating visually, orally, mentally, emotionally and atmospherically, the inner content of a play',¹⁴ resulted in properties such as grotesque masks and inventive costumes created from experimentation with unusual materials and use of unconventional patterns.

Thomas acted in and assisted Harkness with designing costumes for plays that caught the attention of British Shakespearian actress Dame Sybil Thorndike during her Australian tour (1931–32)¹⁵ and British actor and designer Bruce Winston (1879–1946), touring with Thorndike's company from England. Winston became involved with Ab-Intra as a mentor, rehearsing the group and designing and making costumes including an elaborate headdress worn by Thomas for the production of *Woman Song* (1932), a stylised mimed interpretation of Japanese Noh theatre.

Thomas' emerging talent for designing costumes was noted by Winston when she conceived an eccentric, unconventionally modern costume for her part as 'Columbine' for *A Merry Death* (shown opposite). The play was written by Russian director, dramatist and theatre practitioner Nikolai Evreinov (1879–1953). Interpreted by Alan Harkness, it was performed at Ab-Intra Studio in 1933.¹⁶ Winston believed Thomas held promise and recommended she study film and stage costuming with designer Leslie Thomas in Melbourne.¹⁷ Interviewed by the *Adelaide News* before leaving for Melbourne, Thelma Thomas stated,



Thelma Thomas performing as Columbine in *A Merry Death*, Ab-Intra Studio Theatre, Adelaide, September 1933, photographer unknown, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 7769/2. Courtesy Perpetual Private



Pageant of Nations, Town Hall, Melbourne, 22 October or 19 or 20 November 1934, photographer unknown, Pictures Collection, H18047

What I want is training in the mechanics of costume designing for the modern stage. I can cut costumes out and make them up, but I cannot put down on paper my theories about them.¹⁸

Granted 12 months' leave from teaching, she headed to Melbourne in January 1934 to seriously pursue a career in costume design.

Melbourne

State Library Victoria holds the original play script *Nebuchadnezzar; or, This Great Babylon*.¹⁹ Thelma Thomas performed in the play at the Garrick Theatre soon after she arrived in Melbourne.²⁰ This play, written by the Rev. Dr Archibald Law, 'attempted to capture some of the drama and pageantry of a period famous in biblical history'. Besides acting in the play, Thomas designed the costumes, which were enthusiastically reviewed. One critic for the *Herald* newspaper gave a detailed report of them:

The effect of rich deep reds, blues, greens and varied shades of Oriental garb against a dull gold background made some impressive scenes, while

the diaphanous flame coloured frocks of dancing girls made startling but pleasing contrasts to the subdued tonings of Nebuchadnezzar's throne room. The excellent blend of colour schemes is a feature of the production.²¹

Centenary of Victoria Pageant of Nations: designing 'Victoria'

It was while Thelma Thomas was engaged in the play *Nebuchadnezzar* that Jane McMillan approached her with the compelling centenary of Victoria costumes commission. The Pageant of Nations offered Thomas the opportunity to conceive costumes that communicated meanings on a grand scale about nationhood and progress. The design representing 'Victoria' was required to embody technological, agricultural and architectural achievements since settlement, in 1834. 'Britannia' was to personify historical and political meaning, and 'Prosperity' and 'Peace' to suggest messages of hope. The symbolic figures representing Australia's states and territories celebrated each region's flora, fauna and significant landmarks. Protagonist 'Victoria', played by Jessie Clarke, had to stand out among these and the many other colourful costumes worn by national groups offering 'felicitations to Victoria for reaching her hundredth year' on the stage of Melbourne's Town Hall, (shown opposite).²²

Thomas spent hours working out the colour scheme for 'Victoria'. In an interview with the Adelaide *Mail* in 1935 she recalled,

Planning this costume proved the most absorbing part of the work. I spent hours deciding on the colour scheme. I decided on a panel of material, shading from silver blue to sunset shades running down the front centre of the gown. This meant buying lemon toned taffeta and tinting it myself with Batik dyes until I got the right effect. Government House, conventionalised and carried out in blues and greys appeared at the bottom of the panel. I did this in oils.²³

The costume included a silver bodice worn with a crinoline skirt depicting Melbourne's skyline and featuring landmark buildings: Government House, Flinders Street Station and the Town Hall. A long, flowing velvet cloak with irregular markings of glittering silver symbolised green pastures irrigated by Victoria's water supply. The headdress, fashioned in silver metallic materials styled as bolts of power shooting from an electricity pylon, represented the Yallourn Power Station, the state's electricity system.

When I create symbolic costumes, I can use my own ideas and I am not tied down in any way. Miss Jessie Brookes' costume for Miss Victoria in the International Pageant was a sheer joy for me to think of. Costume designing

on a large scale is like painting a huge picture, but to me it is far more satisfactory because the result is alive with movement as well as colour.²⁴

The result was a kaleidoscope of colour, with the *Argus* newspaper reporting,

The figure of Victoria, impersonated by Miss Jessie Brookes was almost breath-taking in its beauty ... The whole effect was superb.²⁵

The pageant was ambitious and a huge achievement for the International Club.

Adelaide and Sydney pageants

Thomas returned to Adelaide in 1935 to continue work as costume designer for the even more ambitious pageant planned for centenary celebrations in South Australia. Reunited with Heather Gell, with whom she had already worked – Thomas miming the part ‘Water’ in, and Gell directing, Maurice Maeterlinck’s play *The Blue Bird* (1933)²⁶ – Thomas began designing historic and symbolic costumes for Heritage: a pageant of South Australia and for the Pageant of Progress. Gell and Thomas’ collaboration resulted in the creation of idiosyncratic personifications of abstract concepts, such as the ‘Morse Code Overland Telegraph’, (shown opposite and on page 27). Many costumes were created using unusual materials, such as paraffin, glass and tinfoil, and animated by imaginatively choreographed dance routines; that of the ‘Morse Code Overland Telegraph’ entailed ‘tap dancing the first message sent from Adelaide to London through the Overland Telegraph to Lord Kimberley [John Wodehouse, 1st Earl of Kimberley] from Governor [James] Ferguson and the reply’.²⁷ Thomas resigned from her position as art teacher at Adelaide High School after the success of the city’s centenary led to her appointment to design costumes for Sydney’s sesquicentenary celebrations, in 1937, in preparation for the event held in 1938.²⁸

Thomas fully and confidently embraced experimentation with resources in her design practice, with fascinating and effective results. In 1937 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported,

Celluloid, rubber, cellophane and tinfoil are some of the materials which Miss Thelma Thomas of Adelaide uses to gain striking effects.

The newspaper described Thomas’ work with a chemist to treat material with salt for a costume representing ‘Salt’ and the ingenuity in her creation representing ‘Honey’, which was made by dipping dyed fishnet in wax. And ‘Coal’ was symbolised to great effect by a combination of black and red celluloid.²⁹



Thelma Thomas, costume (for Dorothy Slane, tap dancer) symbolising the 'Morse Code Overland Telegraph', for Heather Gell's Heritage: a pageant of South Australia, Adelaide, 1936, photographer unknown, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 7769/2. Courtesy Perpetual Private

The Melbourne *Herald* interviewed Thomas in 1937 when she was on her way to Sydney. By then she had met and collaborated with playwright Malcolm 'Max' Afford, whom she married the following year.³⁰ Reflecting on her career thus far, she said,

Designing is such a pleasure to me that I really cannot call it work. I have always longed to work on a large scale and I have been exceptionally lucky in the opportunities I have had.³¹

After designing pageant costumes for Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney, Thomas designed period costumes for theatre and screen productions in Melbourne and Sydney – notably for Ken Hall's Cinesound Productions, Sydney (*Mr Chedworth Steps Out*, 1939) and for the Minerva Theatre, Sydney (Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, 1940), where she became resident designer – as well as for JC Williamson's musical theatre in Melbourne and for the very first live production on Australian television, in 1957. She also authored articles for journals and newspapers about Australian fashion, costume and theatre. Towards the end of her career she returned to teaching art, at Queenswood private girls' school, in Mosman, Sydney, retiring in 1978. She left instructions for the establishment, after her death, of a fund – the Thelma Afford Award for Costume Design in Stage and Screen – to further the education and training of emerging designers.

Her beautiful costume designs, held by collections Australia wide, are as innovative today as they were when she conceived them. The design for the costume 'Victoria' has not yet been found among them, but thanks to Jessie Clarke's generous donation, Thelma Thomas' story is now also part of State Library Victoria's collection.