

Fashioning the Social Value of Opera: *Made by* Juozas Statkevičius, Lithuania

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Abstract

Opera in Lithuania has always been a rather static form of high culture. It was stage director Dalia Ibelhauptaitė who dared to challenge the tradition in 2006, founding an independent opera company *Bohemiečiai* (The Bohemians, now Vilnius City Opera). In contrast to the state opera house, The Bohemians directed their attention to the general, non-elite audiences. One of the major reasons of the troupe's enormous success lies in the fact that their costumes were created by the famous Lithuanian fashion designer Juozas Statkevičius.

Along with marvellous designs, another important element of Statkevičius's contribution to the world of the opera is his communications of the theme in local media that have had a highly promotional effect. Through the analysis of the designer's public interviews and other media messages the article examines how his operatic costume discourse could have contributed to the opera becoming a more open-minded and inclusive genre. Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts of cultural and symbolical capital, the text interrogates how the visibility of the fashion designer contributed to the cultural value of opera-going. Following the theoretical assumptions of Chris Rojek and Graeme Turner about the effects of the celebrity on pop culture, the article explores the result of such union as far as "fashioning the social value of opera" is concerned.

Keywords: Juozas Statkevičius Opera Costumes; Lithuanian Opera Costume; Social Value of Opera; Vilnius City Opera; Dalia Ibelhauptaitė.

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Introduction

Opera in Lithuania has always been a rather static form of high culture, focused on its own exclusivity, and stagnant in its communication with the public. It was stage director Dalia Ibelhauptaitė who dared to challenge the tradition in 2006, founding the independent opera company *Bohemiečiai* (The Bohemians, rebranded as *Vilnius City Opera* in 2012). In contrast to the state opera house, *Bohemiečiai* directed their attention to the general, non-elite audiences. The enormous success of the troupe and its stagings lies in a few reasons, one of the main being the fact that costumes of the performers were created by Juozas Statkevičius, one of the best-known Lithuanian fashion designers who has created costumes for almost thirty operas in Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia, France. In addition to his talented designs, Juozas Statkevičius has contributed significantly to popularizing opera with his media messages that have had a highly promotional effect. Through the analysis of interviews and other media texts, the article examines how the opera costume discourse by Statkevičius could have contributed to the transformation of opera from an elitist practice into a more widely accessible cultural experience in Lithuania. Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts of cultural and symbolical capital, the text interrogates how the visibility of the fashion designer contributed to the cultural value of opera-going. Following the theoretical assumptions of Chris Rojek and Graeme Turner about the effects of celebrity on pop culture, the article explores the result of such union as far as “fashioning the social value of opera” is concerned.

Literature review

The social value attributed to opera has been little researched in Lithuania. The change in the social position of the opera artist after the fall of the USSR has been reflected on by Katinaitė, who follows the transformation process that the institution of the opera soloist has undergone during the years of Independence.¹ The attention to Vilnius City Opera (VCO) has been dedicated in two MA theses: Ivanova analysed its management principles and activities as those of a successful business model in cultural institution;² Baužaitė analysed VCO communication strategies.³ The single academic publication about VCO is also by Baužaitė, who investigated its cultural value, relating it to the theatre’s educational mission to introduce global opera works underrepresented in Lithuanian opera, rendering the creative power of opera art.⁴ Juozas Statkevičius fashion design has also deserved attention of MA students — his 2013 collection has been analysed by Bulbenkaitė.⁵ Yet his output as that of a theatre costume designer has not been separately addressed.

The state of Lithuanian opera at the end of the 20th century

Opera became an elitist genre in the 19th century when, as demonstrated by Levine⁶ and Storey,⁷ from a form of popular entertainment it was elevated to “a source of culture with a capital C”.⁸ Writing in 2003, John Storey reviews the signs that “opera’s status is changing as it becomes more and more a feature of

1. Jūratė Katinaitė, “Operos solistas epochų sandūroje,” *Lietuvos muzikologija*, Vol. 21 (2020).
2. Jolita Ivanova, *Verslumas operos teatro vadyboje: D. Ibelhauptaitės spektaklių atvejo analizė*, (Unpublished MA thesis, Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts, 2013).
3. Elvina Baužaitė, *Muzikinio teatro komunikacija — Vilnius City Opera atvejis* (Unpublished MA thesis, Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2018).
4. Elvina Baužaitė, “Vilnius City Opera kultūrinės vertės žymės,” *Teatroliginiai eskizai*, Vol. 6 (2020): 5–31.
5. Deimantė Bulbenkaitė, *Moters idealo kūrimo strategija Juozo Statkevičiaus 2013 metų kolekcijoje* (Unpublished MA thesis, Vilnius: Vilnius University, 2023).
6. L.W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
7. John Storey, “The Social Life of Opera,” *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (2003): 5–35.
8. Storey, 9.

everyday cultural life”.⁹ His text allows to assume that the trend of “opera popularization” emerged at the very end of the last century. Matheopoulos postulates that the total transformation of opera as an art form occurred due to the “Callas Revolution” which

turned opera into believable theatre ... Until the advent of Maria Callas ... opera was vocally resplendent but usually dramatically ridiculous. The Callas Revolution changed beyond recognition the very nature of operatic interpretation and, through Callas’s own transformation into a sylph, the physical appearance of opera singers. Gone are the ‘fat ladies’ of old, whose looks precluded any serious scenic acting or identification with their roles. In the last thirty years they have been replaced by a new generation of divas ... who look as beautiful as they sound. They could easily double as film stars, and are thus able to tempt fashion designers to the operatic stage.¹⁰

In Britain, for example, the boom years for opera transformation were the 1980s, when, according to Evans, opera lost its traditional elitist connotations and attracted new audiences “for ‘opera’ as mass event and commercial money-spinner”, though in mid-1990s the trends of advancing mass popularity and interest in ‘opera’ in the opera house “seem to have been offset by new forms of social and economic closure”.¹¹

In Lithuania, however, the last decade of the 20th century was marked by the transformations provoked by the fall of the USSR, yet certain cultural patterns remained rather intact. Opera in the Soviet Union had been the heavy bastion of high Culture, with the capital C, enjoying an exclusive position in the Soviet hierarchy of arts.¹² Not only did opera singers and other employees of the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre (LNOBT) in Vilnius enjoy privileged social positions,¹³ but the very space of the opera was regarded as endowing social prestige. The central box of LNOBT was intended for VIPs, who in Soviet times were mainly representatives of the Communist Party; the opera in general, according to the contemporaries, was “a place for the functionaries to hang out”.¹⁴ The convenient location of the theatre in the centre of the city near the premises of the Party Central Committee and the city administration offices meant that important ‘off grid’ meetings could take place in a respectable, cultured environment and be sealed with a drink in its numerous cafes (called “buffets” in the Soviet tradition). Tickets for the Opera (and other theatres, especially for more popular performances) were not to be obtained easily: people would have to stand in long queues, sometimes even at night.¹⁵ This, together with the common belief that cinema is for the masses, but theatre is for those who consider themselves “cultured”, established the reputation of opera as an elitist form of entertainment in the Soviet world.

The economic, social and institutional changes of the 1990s combined with the need to process the new trends arriving from the West formed a complex challenge for LNOBT. Post-Soviet Lithuanian opera struggled to find its way of reflecting, symbolising and serving “the wealth, status and political interest of the dominant class” as opera would be expected to,¹⁶ because the dominant class was itself in a process of dramatic transformation, with the layers of the Communist Party dissolving and the new social elites not yet formed. The safest method of survival seemed to be holding on to the time-tested notions of theatrical, aesthetic and musical representation, which conditioned the stale and aloof image of opera.

9. Storey, 5.

10. Helene Matheopoulos, *Fashion Designers at the Opera* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 8.

11. David T. Evans, *Phantasmagoria: The Sociology of Opera* (England: Ashgate, 1999), 103.

12. Jūratė Katinaitė, “Operos solistas epochų sandūroje,” *Lietuvos muzikologija*, Vol. 21 (2020): 30.

13. Katinaitė, 30.

14. Ugnius Antanavičius, “Operos ir baleto teatras sovietmečiu: karštas šokoladas, cigarečių dėmai fojė ir galimybė prisiliesti prie Vakarų kultūros,” *15min.lt*, n.d., accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.15min.lt/media-pasakojimai/nauju-metu-proga-prisiminkime-operos-ir-baleto-teatro-istorija-sovietmeciu-karstas-sokoladas-partinio-elio-vakareliai-ir-galimybe-prisiliesti-prie-vakaru-kulturos-1050>.

15. Antanavičius.

16. Evans, *Phantasmagoria*, 69.

The Bohemian revolution

The person largely responsible for revolutionizing Lithuanian opera is stage director Dalia Ibelhauptaitė. After graduating from Lunacharsky State Institute for Theatre Arts (GITIS) in Moscow in 1990 she moved to London, where she worked with various theatres. She was invited back to Vilnius in 2002 by the then newly appointed director of LNOBT to stage Verdi's *A Masked Ball*. It was for that performance that the trio of Ibelhauptaitė, conductor Gintaras Rinkevičius, and fashion designer Juozas Statkevičius cooperated for the first time. The partnership turned out to be highly successful, other productions followed, and in 2006 the trio founded the first private opera troupe in post-Soviet Lithuanian history, *Bohemiečiai*, after the name of their first phenomenally popular staging of Puccini's *La Bohème*.¹⁷ Their paramount goals were two: first, to modernise the very genre that had been stagnant since the Soviet times; second, to provide opportunity for young prospective singers to perform in main operatic roles.

Regarding the modernisation of Lithuanian opera, Ibelhauptaitė has openly spoken about her ambition to “demolish the old, traditional opera where the historical costume dominated, that was simply copied from books. I absolutely wanted to clear off all dust and naphthalene”.¹⁸ She wanted to stage opera in an alternative space, to refuse clichés, to let in some fresh air.¹⁹ She was also greatly concerned with the persuasiveness of the performers — she wanted “real” characters who would align with the plot: if Mimi is an 18-year-old, she cannot be performed by a plump woman of 55–60 years.²⁰ Her intention was to make the opera as persuasive as a realistic film, so that the viewer would believe in the action happening on stage. She also aimed to replace “window-dressing” with real action and a visually convincing stage image that would capture viewers who are newcomers to the opera hall.²¹ The attitude reverberated the operatic changes happening in the West — having spent most of her professional career in London, Ibelhauptaitė was well acquainted with the newest trends. The impressive designs of her collaborator in Lithuanian projects, the British set designer Dick Bird, contributed to the effect of novelty and innovation that *Bohemiečiai* troupe produced with their performances.

The other novelty was innovative communication strategies. Since her very first productions, Ibelhauptaitė aimed for *cool, funky, sexy* advertising, presenting to the audience an aesthetically attractive yet thought-provoking cultural product.²² She would invite famous Lithuanian artists, writers, musicians for ad campaigns, opening problematic discussions about socially vulnerable topics.²³ Provocation of the audience was an important part of the advertising process: for example, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* musical advertising included physical meat grinders in outdoor ad stands with raw meat, blood (its role performed by red juice) spilled around them; the “Nightingales Are Returning” concert ad campaign included bird poop on screens and posters, etc.²⁴

Such celebrity marketing strategy was an absolute novelty for the Lithuanian cultural field. With local celebrity culture in its infancy, the very concept of introducing “pop” on the same cultural plane as opera was alien to the Lithuanian context. It rocketed *Bohemiečiai* into fame: the singers, and, of course, the members of the founding triumvirate. As for the overall effect of the troupe on the field of Lithuanian opera, it was manifold — from breaking the monopoly of the state theatre, to creating the concept

17. Kristupas Antanaitis, *Lietuvos operos režisūros istorija: dramos teatro režisierių pastatymų analizė Lietuvos Nacionaliniame operos ir baleto teatre 1990–2020 metais* (Unpublished MA thesis, Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2024).

18. Bulbenkaitė, “D. Ibelhauptaitė: ‘Raudonuoju kilimu visada einu pasipuošusi tik Juozo kurtomis suknelėmis’,” *Elle.lt*, December 22, 2025, <https://elle.lt/d-ibelhauptaite-raudonuoju-kilimu-visada-einu-pasipuosusi-tik-juozo-kurtomis-suknelėmis/>.

19. Juozas Statkevičius, *Interviu* (Vilnius: Fashion House Juozas Statkevičius, 2023), 365.

20. Statkevičius, 366.

21. Statkevičius, 366.

22. Ivanova, *Verslumai operos teatro vadyboje*, 40.

23. Ivanova, 40.

24. Bulbenkaitė, “D. Ibelhauptaitė: ‘Raudonuoju kilimu visada einu pasipuošusi tik Juozo kurtomis suknelėmis’.”

of “opera community” and establishing new aesthetic style of staging. *Bobemiečiai* changed the attitude towards opera in Lithuania by infusing it with youthful energy and modern visuals, democratizing access to performances, elevating young Lithuanian vocal talent, creating a new social culture around opera. The troupe created new assets of the cultural capital of opera-going that appealed to all social classes of Lithuania:

Ibelhauptaitė’s stagings have become the objects of *must have* and *must see*, they are the new fashion trend. Her shows are attended by artists as well as professional critics and representatives of the Lithuanian entertainment world. The opera genre is becoming more and more fashionable, and the profession of an opera singer, according to Ibelhauptaitė herself, is one of the most desirable.²⁵

Attention-grabbing marketing turned *Bobemiečiai* into nationally recognized figures. Ibelhauptaitė is, possibly, the single opera director in the contemporary cultural history of the country whose persona is recognized by audiences of all social classes. At the Vilnius Book Fair (where *Bobemiečiai* would meet the audience and sell tickets for the upcoming performances), she once was pointed at by a child who said: “‘Here is Aunt Opera.’ This is the greatest compliment, because that child learned the word ‘opera’”.²⁶ The publicity of *Bobemiečiai* was effective not only because it was innovative in the Lithuanian cultural context, especially with regard to “High culture”, that had never been advertised in that manner. The marketing style “mediatized” opera as a part of pop culture, inverting its reputation as being “tied to a class”²⁷ and made opera-going a part of the celebrity lifestyle.

The major focus on the sartorial element of operatic performance was another important novelty introduced by *Bobemiečiai*. “During the advertising campaign of the Vilnius City Opera, artistic installations of opera costume design were presented in the windows of large shopping centres... Ibelhauptaitė always emphasizes aesthetic beauty, which would be expressed and created through wonderful photoshoots of opera soloists”.²⁸ In tune with the overall publicity strategy of “being talked about” that exhibiting artefacts of high culture in the mundane commercial environment inevitably sustained, Ibelhauptaitė’s innovative approach to costume in opera relied largely on the creative talent and skill of Juozas Statkevičius. The quality and precision of his work had positioned him among the best Lithuanian fashion designers, while his extravagant personality had turned him into a fashion celebrity, which meant that his name and recognition granted publicity and attendance, i.e., could be used as a marketing tool on its own.²⁹

The reputational capital of Juozas Statkevičius as an opera celebrity

According to Matheopoulos, opera is “undoubtedly the new favourite among fashion designers of both haute couture and ready to wear”.³⁰ She explains fashion’s love of opera as the result of a revolution that “has radically transformed both fashion and opera and narrowed the borderline between the two worlds”³¹ — a revolution of contemporary fashion which brought extravagance and theatricality into fashion shows and clothes presented there, that appear to be not meant for wearing but for show purposes only.

25. Ivanova, *Verslumas operos teatro vadyboje*, 50.

26. In the interview for Deimantė Bulbenkaitė, “D. Ibelhauptaitė: ‘Raudonuoju kilimu visada einu pasipuošusi tik Juozo kurtonis suknėlėmis’.”

27. Evans, *Phantasmagoria*, 93–94.

28. Ivanova, *Verslumas operos teatro vadyboje*, 44.

29. Ivanova, 49.

30. Helene Matheopoulos, *Fashion Designers at the Opera* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 8.

31. Matheopoulos, 8.

Designers have personal reasons for their involvement with opera: love of the genre since childhood, creative freedom,³² the challenges that the frames of the performance may present, etc. Costuming opera performances offers visibility, which also may serve as a powerful incentive. Obviously, the symbolic capital of operatic involvement works both ways — a famous fashion name may bring media attention and additional audiences which results in tangible economic capital: “Each time a collaboration with a major designer is announced, an enormous ‘buzz’ is created, not only among opera lovers, but also among a wider audience who may never before have set foot in an opera house, and also among the media, and this in turn attracts celebrities”.³³

It should be noted that celebrity figures today do not necessarily always fit the well-known definition by Daniel Boorstin, who explains celebrity as “a person who is well-known for their well-knownness”.³⁴ As for the majority of fashion designers, they become famous habitually because of their professional work. Following Chris Rojek’s celebrity categorization system,³⁵ fashion designers appear to fall under the third type of fame acquisition, i.e. ‘attributed’ by the media’ (the other two being through blood relations and achieved in open competition, for example, sports).

According to Drake, the appreciation of celebrities rests on their performance across media, their visibility, and how they are culturally and economically framed.³⁶ He terms that value “reputational capital” which “fluctuates over time and depends upon an individual’s performance in the business, critical and commercial reception as well as their embeddedness within key industrial, institutional and social networks”.³⁷ Therefore, celebrity power as “measured in terms of reputational capital will rise and fall, depending on promotional visibility, audience demand and social currency”.³⁸ It means that reputational capital may be (and, of course, is) engineered through media that shape the “celebrity capital”, defined as “accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations”.³⁹ It also means that the context in which the reputation-building takes place becomes part of the celebrity field. In other words, the fame of a fashion designer attracts visibility not only to a particular opera staging that they make costumes to but the entire field of opera, thus incorporating it into the sphere of pop culture and compelling opera to follow its laws of operation. It also makes everyone and everything part and parcel of the “publicity campaign”, including the already established reputation of the fashion designer (or, in fact, anyone employed for an opera staging). In this way, adopting the *modus operandi* of pop culture, opera imposes “celebrity identification” — i.e., its audiences adopt “the values, beliefs and behaviours of celebrities as their own, thus role-modelling important aspects of their lives”.⁴⁰

That was also the case with Juozas Statkevičius, one of the most talented fashion designers of his generation, who already possessed an impressive “celebrity capital” in Lithuania before starting his work for *Bohemiečiai*.

Statkevičius graduated from Vilnius Academy of Arts as fashion designer in 1993 and has worked exclusively as a couturier and theatre costume designer ever since. He is the most prominent Lithuanian fashion designer to date both nationally and internationally (promoting himself abroad under the abbreviated name Josef Statkus), he has been titled “the synonym of Lithuanian fashion”, “the living history of fashion” etc. His theatrical work comprises over 80 performances, 28 of them being costumes cre-

32. Matheopoulos, 8.

33. Matheopoulos, 9.

34. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 58.

35. Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), Chapter 1.

36. Philip Drake, “Celebrity, reputational capital and the media industries,” in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliot (London: Routledge, 2018), 276.

37. Drake, 139.

38. Drake, 276.

39. Olivier Driessens, “Celebrity capital: redefining celebrity using field theory,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 42, no. 5 (2013): 543–60.

40. William J. Brown, “Celebrity involvement: parasocial interaction, identification and worship,” in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliot (London: Routledge, 2018), 257.

ated for opera in Lithuania and abroad. Statkevičius has been named “the first costume designer after the regained Independence (in 1990) who has affected the entire history of Lithuanian theatrical art”.⁴¹

Juozas Statkevičius’ *becoming* a celebrity is beyond the scope of this text — it will suffice to say that by the time Dalia Ibelhauptaitė arrived to Vilnius to work for LNOBT, Statkevičius was already the top fashion designer in the country with clientele from the highest social echelons, including First Lady Alma Adamkienė, and a respectable number of theatrical costume productions. More importantly, however, he was also a favourite consultant for journalists on fashion news, with clearly formulated and rather strict opinion on the local fashion and its practices. In the first decade of the 21st century his place among the social elite had been earned by his professional work, and his place among the elite pop culture figures had been guaranteed by media publicity. His personality and his communication style granted him the position of a “media darling” when it comes to fashion comment and expertise, and his personal friendship with Ibelhauptaitė, along with his talent and his personal love of opera, turned him into a perfect “ambassador” of *Bohemiečiai*.

It should also be noted that Statkevičius’ reputation rested on the idea that his discourse has never failed to emphasize — the national lack of aesthetic taste and understanding of fashion in general, rooted in Soviet isolation. The strategy was extremely effective, because it appealed to the hunger for the “high value culture of the West” that most of the society experienced after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The concept of “fashion as art”, actively professed by the designer since his early days, formed his reputation as a creator of one; his involvement with the opera, a “high class” genre, solidified his fame as both of a high-class designer and a high-class celebrity. Both his work and his media comments exposed the cultural value of high fashion, and attending *Bohemiečiai* performances “included” the audience into its world. Because even though few could afford to become a Statkevičius’ client, almost everyone could afford an opera ticket to look at his work. In this way, the prestige of the world of high fashion, which by default was associated with Statkevičius work, was automatically transferred to the audience who would share the opera experience with the designer by participating in the process as viewers. Opera-going gradually acquired new social value that post-Soviet Lithuania had not experienced before.

Evans identifies five meanings of social value, attributed to opera by its various audiences, which are not mutually exclusive: “opera as ritual of high social value, opera as business, opera as ‘high’ art to be received auratically, opera as serious obsession, and opera as entertainment”.⁴² The following analysis aims to examine which of those occur in Statkevičius’ media messages related to opera.

Research data collection

Two methods have been used to select Statkevičius’ media texts for analysis: 1) text search using Google-Search (performed on September 13, 2025), and 2) identification of relevant texts from the designer’s collection of interviews, published both in print and online in 1991–2023, issued as a printed book (in 2023). Texts relevant to the themes of ‘opera costume’, ‘theatre costume design’, ‘theatre costume’, ‘opera costume design’ by Juozas Statkevičius were selected — in total 30 texts on the subject of theatre and opera costume creation: interviews, features and open letters, dating from 1999 to 2025.

Analysis of those texts disclosed four message formulation strategies in relation to opera costume creation and how it is communicated to audiences: 1) strategy of narration; 2) strategy of self-representation; 3) strategy of subject (i.e. opera costume) presentation; 4) educational strategy. They translate into four dominant themes of Statkevičius’ opera-related discourse: behind-the-scenes opera storytelling; celebrity status reinforcement; costumes as audience enticement; aesthetics and prestige of opera. As all the themes integrate and organically intermingle, recurring arguments in Statkevičius media messages encourage reflection on the social value of opera-going.

41. Daiva Šabasevičienė, “Naujam spektakliui kostiumus kuriantis Juozas Statkevičius: ‘Tai subtilaus skonio ir juodo humoro tragikomedija’,” Press release, *Tėatras.lt*, 2024.

42. Evans, *Phantasmagoria*, 93–4.

Storytelling strategy

Naturally, it is one of the most widespread styles among the creatives. Taking audiences “into the kitchen” of creative work is a favourite type of media communication. Yet this type of “behind the curtains” activity was not often, if ever, applied to opera before or used to advertise a play. The distance between the stage and the reality of life would be consciously maintained by both opera people and critics. Ibelhauptaitė’s determination for all the available means of publicity coincided happily with Statkevičius’ personality and his manner of narrating the behind-the-scene stories, as well as with the audience’s growing interest in “cultural gossip” and cultures’ declining hostility to intrusions into the ‘sacredness’ of the theatre. Both artists were eager to recount the funny mishaps of the opera creation process that, according to the designer, are part of “the magic of the theatre”.

A favourite story is that of their first joint project, Verdi’s *A Masked Ball*, which was staged at Trakai Castle. For the atmosphere of the ball, Statkevičius set his imagination free: the costumes were enormous, formed on welded metal frames, etc. During the first rehearsal, it turned out that the stage door is too small and the choir cannot enter. The scene of that revelation was no less vibrant than the performance itself, with the director screaming into the microphone “What nonsense in this, why are the costumes so huge???” and the designer screaming back “Why is the door so small, break it down!!!”.⁴³

Another favourite story is about precision. For a beggar costume in the *Sweeney Todd* musical, the designer showed Ibelhauptaitė the underskirt he was making:

‘Look, I worked on it all night. The beggar was walking and fell. Here is a blood stain, because she scraped her knee. Then she got drunk, peed over herself and rolled around in a puddle’. He realistically transferred that whole story onto the underskirt, which no viewer probably was ever going to see. Dalia replied: ‘Juozas, it’s just an underskirt’. To which he said: ‘Yes, but if the actress falls on stage, the skirt may slip up and it will be visible’.⁴⁴

Such storytelling technique and designer’s conversational style help to establish “para-social relations”⁴⁵ with the celebrity. More importantly, that relation extends to the opera performance itself, producing a certain “friendliness” towards it, which cuts down the distance and pompousness that the term “opera” would often trigger in the general public. Opera appears entertaining, accessible, engaging and welcoming — a hybrid of high culture and social spectacle.

Another important feature of Statkevičius’ narrative is his manner of “echoing” previous media messages about himself, which makes the reader feel always slightly “behind” those who have already heard the story. It is enhanced by the designer’s use of such phrases as “like I always say”, “as I have already told”, “as the French/ Swiss/ Latvian/ local media have noted”, etc. Journalists interviewing him often practice the same technique — first, because Statkevičius is a really popular media figure and is often written about, and second, because it creates the effect of credibility (providing a level of support satisfactory for entertainment journalism). In fact, the same stories are told over and over again, and, depending on the “class” of the publication, the language used will be more or less ‘juicy’, with more or less details of the event, which also adds to the echo-impact, solidifying the prominence of the designer. This variation of the ‘FOMO effect’ engages the audience by insinuating the social prestige of opera-going and enhancing the desire to refine one’s cultural taste.

Interestingly, the anecdotal mishaps about opera costume design that circulate in the Lithuanian media are mainly from *Bohemiečiai* or VCO context, with less examples from Statkevičius’ other work.

43. Bulbenkaitė, “D. Ibelhauptaitė: ‘Raudonuoju kilimu visada einu pasipuošusi tik Juozo kurtomis suknelėmis’.”

44. Statkevičius, *Interviu*, 366.

45. Rojek, *Celebrity*, 52.



Figure 1: The Bohemians. The Sweeney Todd Musical photoshoot in Vilnius streets, Director Dalia Ibelhauptaitė, Costumes Juozas Statkevičius, Photographer ©LinaFisheye



Figure 2: The Bohemians. The Sweeney Todd Musical photoshoot in Vilnius streets, Director Dalia Ibelhauptaitė, Costumes Juozas Statkevičius, Photographer ©LinaFisheye

Celebrity self-representation strategy

Anecdotes from behind the stage usually have the same undertone running at the back — it is the notion of top-level quality of Statkevičius' work which is the mark of his exceptional devotion to his profession. "All his costumes are real haute couture from the inside out. And artists wear them differently, they feel special when wearing them, and because of that they sing and act differently"; "Juozas is a unique costume designer. He does not create a dress or costume, he creates a character, the face, emotions [...] His imagination very often exceeds my expectations and visions"; "On the other hand, working with him is also very difficult, because this person is a complete maximalist".⁴⁶ For example, he would ignore the complaints of the singers to make their dresses less tight — the director required the singers to run on stage, so they wanted to have their dresses loosened to be able to do it. Statkevičius refused to correct, telling them to learn from the fast-walking geishas.⁴⁷ "The costume completely changed the physicality on stage, but that physicality or physics helped create the characters".⁴⁸

The focus on professionalism, together with constantly echoed references to the volume of his work and the variety of experience (costumes for opera and theatre, dance performances, private clients and haute couture shows) solidify his reputation as the best designer with various skills. At the same time, of course, this narrative promotes his celebrity status, transforming his technical skills into prestige and honour. The favoured technique is to compare himself to the undefined crowd of "others", who are doing things "not right", while his work is exemplary:

I really don't like "flat" things, like simply sewing a dress. There must be headgear and hats... Now costumes for performances are made by anyone, carelessly, but this only shows that people do not understand what quality is.⁴⁹

Self-promotion like this facilitates the growth of social capital: by being "the best" he increases his own weight and symbolic power, reinforcing his dominant position in the field.

The celebrity motive has been a prominent element of Statkevičius' media communication since the early days of his career. In 1999, at the age of 30, he won the title of the Best Theatre Costume Designer in Lithuania, yet his reputation of a highly talented fashion creator would precede him at the time already. His focus on being celebrated as a fashion professional, however, separates him from Turner's concept of celebrity who "will usually have emerged from the sports or entertainment industries, they will be highly visible through the media, and their private life will attract greater public interest than their professional life".⁵⁰ Statkevičius, on the contrary, is rather closed about his personal life, no really intimate details like names of his circle of friends, his employees or some "curious" information is ever published. Except for his mother, whom he calls his inspiration and muse, other people from his intimate circle remain outside of his public media texts (apart from his social media discourse, which is entirely different). He is very clear about the roots of his fame, which is creating fashion, especially theatre and opera costumes, and that type of celebrity he finds most satisfactory:

I have been offered to create set design more than once, but I tend to do only what I know well. ... I create makeup, hairstyles and clothes. And that's it. ... It also happens — these are not my words — that after a lot of effort, the costumes overshadow the main thing, the performance.⁵¹

Such thinly veiled self-flattery enhances the "star designer" branding process and increases his symbolic weight through association, signalling superior taste and cultural authority. Moreover, Statkevičius does

46. Ibelhauptaitė in Juozas Statkevičius, *Interviu*, 366.

47. Bulbenkaitė, "D. Ibelhauptaitė: 'Raudonuoju kilimu visada einu pasipuošusi tik Juozo kurtomis suknelėmis'."

48. Bulbenkaitė.

49. Kornetas, "Operai 'Kornetas' kostiumus kuriantis Juozas Statkevičius; laukite siurprizo," *Opera.lt*, February 6, 2014, <https://www.opera.lt/naujienos/operai-kornetas-kostiumus-kuriantis-juozas-statkevicius-laukite-siurprizo/299>.

50. Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2014), 3.

51. Juozas Statkevičius, *Interviu*, 77.

not shy away from the label of snobbery either: “Whether you like it or not, whether you admit it or not, my name is a certain example of snobbery, prestige, and a sign of quality”.⁵² The boundary between “high” and “low” culture that this attitude signals is, obviously, transferred into the opera hall: attending performances, appreciating the costumes of his creation, valuing his professionalism and precision transmits the social value attributed to opera to its audiences, which elevates them culturally, endowing them with symbolic capital of social prestige.

Opera costume presentation strategy

A close reading of Statkevičius’ comments on opera costumes as objects of the audience’s attention discloses two recurrent ideas. The first is summarised in his 1999 interview where he says: “I believe that costumes are an applied art and, at the same time, an integral part of the performance”.⁵³ As much as it is a natural thought for a costume designer, Statkevičius’ attitude was not widely shared in Lithuanian theatre discourse — as a matter of fact, he was one of the first fashion designers to have been hired separately for creating theatre costumes (before it would be the task of the set designer).

The second idea at the core of Statkevičius’ opera discourse is his conviction that it is costumes and stage spectacle in general that are the universally understandable element for viewers of any background and cultural capital. Some may not have enough competence to evaluate the musical aspects of the play or its dramatic value, but all will have enough skills to enjoy the visual aspects of the performance, and primarily the costumes:

People sometimes cannot appreciate the music, maybe they don’t understand the whole plot, they don’t know if the dance is well or badly staged, how the actor acts or sings... But everyone knows everything about the costumes and can say it out loud! That’s why they are talked about so much.⁵⁴

That universality establishes a certain ‘parasocial interaction’ with the opera experience. A question may arise as to whether such para-social relations may be sustainable, i.e., whether the strategy of promoting opera through emphasizing its costumes would maintain the audience’s interest in the genre in the long term. In this regard, a seemingly relevant comment comes from Brown, who refers to Cohen claiming that

Audiences that identify with celebrities, from Cohen’s perspective, share the perspective of the celebrity and imagine being like the celebrity ... When a person identifies with a celebrity, he or she takes on the identity of the celebrity during media consumption; but repeatedly taking on the identity of a celebrity can lead to long-term behavioral changes after media exposure has ended.⁵⁵

In the case of Statkevičius, it doubtfully creates audience identification with the designer; on the contrary, his communications show that he understands the less operatically educated viewers and is happy to offer them a certain ‘relief’ — the visual aspect of the opera, costumes. In this way the designer establishes the para-social relation element at his end, which, in a curious reversal, opens for the audience the opportunity of sharing the perspective of the celebrity.

Such a seemingly simplifying attitude may appear belittling, but it is, in fact, inclusive. It invites viewers to enjoy opera without judging their background or their intention, offering, at the same time, a visual pleasure combined with a dose of education. “I am very happy that people come even for the sake

52. Statkevičius, 274.

53. Statkevičius, 80.

54. *MOTERIS Interview*, n.d., accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.moteris.lt/lt/laisvalaikis/g-54888-juozas-statkevicius-galiu-daryti-koki-nori-mena-bet-is-grindu-skuduru-buteliu-ir-kamsciu-prabangos-nedarysiu>.

55. William J. Brown, “Celebrity involvement: parasocial interaction, identification and worship,” in *Routledge Handbook of Celebrity Studies*, ed. Anthony Elliot (London: Routledge, 2018), 258.

of fashion, for example, for costumes. In this way, they also get a certain injection of culture' says the designer".⁵⁶

In this way, opera appears as a form of educational practice, introducing culture to new audiences. The process mirrors symbolic capital acquisition: even those who come to opera for the spectacle of fashion are inevitably exposed to high culture and accumulate cultural knowledge, convertible into cultural prestige. Understanding about costume, meanwhile, refers to cultural sophistication and is, according to Bourdieu, a source of symbolic power.⁵⁷

Educational strategy: the importance of aesthetics and opera prestige

The fourth highly prominent element of Statkevičius' opera discourse is related to the idea of aesthetics and taste in general, including the prestige of the social practice of opera-going. This is the most didactic segment of his opera-related comments, based on what may be seen as the traditional concept of opera-related activities, i.e. representation of the taste of the dominant class. The Soviet manners about opera having been rejected because of ideological reasons, the remaining void of knowledge of "operatic behaviour", i.e. social conduct related to opera-going in Lithuania was very quickly replaced by "democratic" trends arriving from various cultures of the West, brought in mainly by local travellers, and shaped by the modesty of their knowledge, experience and finances. Casual appearance and no concept of the evening etiquette in general characterised opera-going in Vilnius at the turn of the millennium. A long-term theatre and opera lover and expert Statkevičius, whose "cultural trajectory"⁵⁸ embraced aesthetic-oriented family upbringing, fashion education and experience of Parisian life, could not help but express his resentment to the lack of a festive approach to opera-going. He started preaching to his audiences about matters of taste very early in his career; at the same time, he saw it as his mission to educate the public with his work: "It seems to me that the greatest thing, the surprise when coming to the theatre, is to get a certain dose of aesthetics".⁵⁹ "If the costumes leave an impression, entice someone to come to the performance, then my mission is accomplished".⁶⁰

Texts of this type also emphasize his versatility as a costume creator, his professionalism, the huge volume of his experience, his love of opera and the theatre in general. The value of his aesthetic solutions lies in his experience and practice as a designer, his knowledge of costume history and the ability to combine it with modern materials: "After all, today we cannot get the silk or wool that was used a hundred years ago. Modern materials allow us to solve many problems — for example, it is a pleasure to sew ballet costumes from modern, stretchy fabrics".⁶¹ But also in his "theatrical feeling" that not everyone has: "You need to feel the whole. You will not learn it in one day, and you will not learn it at all. You are either able to create for theatre or not. I can. I love the theatre very much! I am artistic myself".⁶²

The most prominent motive in this theme is the critical reproach to the Lithuanian audience about its lack of taste and sense of aesthetics. In a 2025 interview, Statkevičius exclaims:

It is very lacking! It has been eradicated, trampled. I cannot say who is to blame for that. Not our parents. And not the Ministry of Culture. The speed is different. It takes us a few

56. *Kornetas*, "Operai 'Kornetas' kostiumus kuriantis Juozas Statkevičius; laukite siurprizo."

57. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (trans. Richard Nice, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984).

58. Pierre Bourdieu.

59. *Kornetas*, "Operai 'Kornetas' kostiumus kuriantis Juozas Statkevičius; laukite siurprizo."

60. *MOTERIS Interview*.

61. Eglė Černiauskaitė, "Juozas Statkevičius: Teatras prasideda nuo grimerinės", *Muzikos barai*, Vol. 1–2 (2000). <https://www.muzikusajunga.lt/zurnalas/muzikos-barai-232/juozas-statkevicius-teatras-prasideda-nuo-grimerines>.

62. Dalia Juškienė, "Dizaineris Juozas Statkevičius: gyvoji mados istorija," *Kaunodiena.lt*, March 2, 2025, <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/laisvalaikis-ir-kultura/zvaigzdes-ir-pramogos/dizaineris-juozas-statkevicius-nepatogus-skersvejis-ar-estetikos-genijus-1214062>.

seconds to glance at Instagram and get information. We are moving faster than ever. We are working harder than ever.⁶³

But the speed does not appear to bring results that would make the designer's eyes happy with the looks of the public.

In relation to this, it is interesting to look at his open letter to LNOBT visitors, published in the weekly *Style* supplement of a popular newspaper in 2004. In it the designer raises the issue of social class directly "The opera is not a stop for the poor!"⁶⁴ Having praised the recent renovation of the Opera building, he implies that now the visitors should

dress in evening clothes, open the necklines that have been hidden for years, ... rise on the high heels, pin a brooch shining with... gems..., wash and curl your hair or sleek it into an elegant ponytail. After all, it is an opera night!⁶⁵

The educational moment is then replaced with dismay about lack of culture, respect for self and others, and the urge to "learn the culture of dressing". The letter ends with an invitation to "live beautifully", even though it is not easy.⁶⁶

The text perfectly conveys Statkevičius' perspective of the symbolic capital of opera attendance: it is cultural participation that signals distinction to others. He perceives his role as that of an educator and a guide to refined taste, teaching audiences how to appreciate the high aesthetics of opera that comes with exercising the evening etiquette and wearing fashionable attire. The attendance of the opera in his educational messages is presented as cultural development and a prestigious social activity that allows to accumulate symbolic capital: "Nowadays, going to the opera is a matter of prestige and fashion".⁶⁷ Audiences gain prestige, taste recognition, and cultural legitimacy, at the same time engaging in visually spectacular experiences that indicate social distinctiveness.

For summarising on Statkevičius' opera discourse, a paraphrase of Turner's claim about the society's "usage" of celebrity may be appropriate: "In effect, we are using celebrity as a means of constructing a new dimension of community through the media",⁶⁸ with celebrity communication replacing the deficit of direct social relations. In the case of Statkevičius, the process seems to be inverted: a celebrity contributes to the creation of an opera community with his media communication, using his professional authority and his cultural capital to highlight the importance of opera's social value.

It is also worth pointing out that Statkevičius' rhetoric about opera does not change with time; the features of his discourse discussed here remain stable, with arguments and explanations echoing one another. This stability solidifies his professional reputation and his cultural authority.

Hence, of the five meanings of social value attributed to opera,⁶⁹ four can be quite distinctly identified in Statkevičius' media discourse: he is rather explicit about *opera being 'high art'*, yet, due to the specifics of his profession, he emphasises not the auratic, but the visual aspects of it; it is the *visuality of opera* that allows to enjoy it as *a form of entertainment* for a wide variety of audiences; he speaks of his undying love of opera and theatre that could not be read as *obsession* as Evans describes it, yet the eagerness of him and stage director Ibelhauptaitė to recount opera stories may point the viewers in that direction; and the entirety of his operatic media discourse confirms and promotes the meaning of *opera as a ritual of high social value*.

63. Juškienė.

64. Statkevičius, *Interviu*, 177.

65. Statkevičius, 177.

66. Statkevičius, 177.

67. *Kornetas*, "Operai 'Kornetas' kostiumus kuriantis Juozas Statkevičius; laukite siurprizo."

68. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*, 6.

69. Evans, *Phantasmagoria*, 93–94.

Conclusion — fashioning the perception of opera

To conclude, the analysis of Statkevičius' media communications proves Turner's point that the media have become increasingly dominant in moulding our lived experience of politics, culture and society, and in this process, celebrity has served as a discursive bridge between the media and the daily life of "ordinary people".⁷⁰ Statkevičius' public statements framed opera-going as both a cultural and a lifestyle practice, generating broader engagement.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that Statkevičius' media discourse alone has managed to cause the cultural shift that resulted in the ever-growing interest in opera among the Lithuanian public. Yet, it can be affirmed rather safely that the media comments of Statkevičius on the social value of opera attendance was an agreeable support for the *Bohemiečiai* communicative strategy, forming a rewarding combination that made a significant impact on the popularity of the genre: opera has been modernized, its attendance has increased (including LNOBT, where new or popular performances today sell out very quickly). The results extend to include the Live in HD broadcasts from New York Met in cinemas that also sell out fast. Opera-going has become a socially acceptable and popular activity among various audiences. Opera as a genre and as a cultural field has become more open. With regard to opera costumes, the audience's attention to the subject along with the effectiveness of *Bohemiečiai* / VCO "costume promotion policy" led other theatres to adopt the strategy. In recent years, Statkevičius' comments on his costume work have become the main theme of a new drama or opera staging press release (e.g., at the National Drama Theatre in 2020, 2024).

Before Ibelhauptaitė and Statkevičius, the theatre costume designer would be just another member of the staging team; the communicative strategies of both the director and especially the fashion designer did redirect the attention of the media and their audiences onto the process of opera creation. Due to the creative vision of Juozas Statkevičius, as well as his already existing reputation, but especially due to his comments on the operatic costume in general and the ones that he created for *Bohemiečiai* / VCO in particular the symbolic capital of opera-going acquired new value.

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