

Stitches in time

Oscar-winning costume designer **Sandy Powell** has dressed everyone from Elizabeth I to Shakespeare, from lovelorn housewives to gangster dandies. As her work goes on show, she explains the tricks of the trade

Julianne Moore's costumes were designed to go with everything - even autumn

The result of intensive research - and pure fantasy



This 'Elizabethan' ruff was actually a piece of art deco lace from the 1920s

Bill the Butcher had his top hat extended, his trousers narrowed and his shoes elongated

The first film I did with Martin Scorsese was 2002's *Gangs of New York*. Marty's a director who really cares about the look of a film.

He likes to talk about clothes and look at them close-up. Every time an actor comes on set wearing a new costume, the first thing Marty does is touch the cloth. I like that.

In my career, I've gravitated towards directors who care about the visuals: Derek Jarman, Mike Figgis, Neil Jordan, Todd Haynes. Marty's just like them, really: an arthouse film-maker, but with much bigger budgets. For the V&A's new Hollywood Costume exhibition, I was asked to choose one outfit from the five films I've done with Marty - something that would sum up our relationship. I chose what Daniel Day-Lewis wore as Bill the Butcher in *Gangs of New York*. His character was a gang-leader, terrifying and intimidating. Marty wanted him to look like a dandy, like one of those sharply dressed gangsters in a 1930s movie. Expensive clothing can make a character look pretty scary, more so than someone who looks rough around the edges.

The period was the 1860s, a rather attractive time for men, all frock coats

and top hats. Narrow-leg trousers and checks were fashionable. I accentuated Daniel's height and slenderness by extending his top hat, making his trousers thinner and his shoes longer. The other members of his gang were dressed along the same lines but not so finely: no one had the same presence as Bill the Butcher.

Three of my costumes from 1998's *Shakespeare in Love* are also in the show. There's the one Joseph Fiennes, as Shakespeare, wore all the way through - a green leather jacket, the Elizabethan equivalent of a denim jacket today. Another is the dress Gwyneth Paltrow's character Viola de Lesseps wears when she goes to see the queen. Nowadays, people might be bigger and taller than in Shakespeare's time, but what really determines the shape of a costume is the corset and underpinnings. The corset builds the shape, on top of which you create the dress. But even if the silhouette and cut are historically correct, no period costume can ever be 100% accurate, because fabrics and techniques have changed. Clothes would have had tiny hand-stitching instead of machine-work. And the collar on Gwyneth's dress was made from art deco silver

Perfect fits ... from left, Judi Dench in *Shakespeare in Love*; Julianne Moore in *Far from Heaven*; Daniel Day-Lewis in *Gangs of New York*; Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shakespeare in Love*; and Powell

The dancer Lindsay Kemp was my first teacher. He introduced me to blow-torches

lace from the 1920s, because there was no way I was going to find a piece of Elizabethan lace. Besides, I thought it looked good on the costume.

The third outfit is the one Judi Dench wore as Queen Elizabeth I. It's not an exact copy of a real dress, though. I looked at portraits of Elizabeth, and at other paintings from the period, then designed my own version by imagining what I would have come up with if I'd been transported back to the 16th century and asked to make a dress for the queen. The film is a fantasy, after all.

It was the dancer Lindsay Kemp who got me into this line of work. His company used to put on extraordinarily visual productions that were part-dance, part-mime and part-musical. In 1974, I saw his show *Flowers* and thought: "This is what I want to do." I didn't at that point mean costumes - only that I wanted to do something involving visuals and performance.

Some years later, when I was studying theatre design, Lindsay was teaching dance near my college. I attended a class and it was mad. We had to pretend to be cherry blossoms. At the end, I said: "I've seen your work and it's inspired me. I'm an art student

texture, weight. If I love a fabric and I don't know why I love it, I'll buy it anyway. Then I'll sit and stare at it and the costume will come to me.

I usually stay in close contact with the production designer, to exchange ideas about what colours are prominent in each scene. The combination of people, how they look together, how they look against the setting - it's all important. Not that I would match a costume to furnishings or walls, but if you're aware of what the setting will be, you can avoid having anyone disappear into the curtains.

On 2002's *Far from Heaven*, Todd Haynes was almost obsessively well-prepared. The production designer, the director of photography, Todd and I had meetings for days on end. We broke the script down scene by scene, and Todd had visual references for everything. The film was inspired by Douglas Sirk's 1955 film *All That Heaven Allows*, which starred Jane Wyman as the lady of the house and Rock Hudson as her gardener. They have an affair and her children reject her. Todd updated this, making the gardener black.

Todd allocated different Pantone colour charts to each scene. We all had to work with these, which gave the film a unified look. It's not that he said, "That's the colour of the carpet", or "That's the colour of the dress" - but by knowing the kind of palette he wanted, I could design the costumes and chose colours accordingly. Most people remember one scene in particular, featuring a group of ladies standing outside a house after having lunch, and how their dresses match the fantastic autumnal trees. I've always been drawn to the theatrical, to designs that have a heightened reality. It beats being pale and timid.

I always enjoy the challenge of dressing an actor in something that's ugly or in bad taste; what's difficult is persuading them it's right for the part - because even the best actors, with the highest integrity, will always be a bit vain. They might try to get out of it by saying "This doesn't quite fit" or "It doesn't suit me". But how many people do you see day-to-day who are dressed perfectly in well-fitting clothes?

The eureka moment, when you know a costume is just right, is the best part of the job. It usually comes during a fitting when you put everything together and suddenly there's your character. The actor will say: "Right, I know exactly who I am now." Or I'll say: "This is it! We've done it!"

i Interview by Naomi Gryn. Hollywood Costume is at the V&A, London SW7, from Saturday to 27 January. Tickets: 020-7907 7073; vam.ac.uk



A month in Ambridge

Nancy Banks-Smith

Money is skintight in Ambridge. Even at stately Lower Loxley, bookings are down ("We'll have to say 'No' to jam sponges!"). Someone who would not say no to a jam sponge is Ed Grundy, who is subsisting on chickpea soup and butter bean casserole, very much like the cowboys in *Blazing Saddles*.

Em Grundy, though evidently a bit of a corker having made mincemeat of both Grundy brothers, is no cook. Her cupboard is bare except for some own-brand biscuits that even the guinea pig rejects. Ed, with a hint of wist, said they eat guinea pigs in Peru. Really, this could be the siege of Rouen: "They ate doggy's, they ate cattys, they ate mysse, horse and rattys." And their spelling suffered terribly, too.

I would advise Em to watch Nigel Slater, who works wonders with butter beans on TV; but Nigel, I notice, tends to find a half-forgotten duck's breast in the cupboard. Personally, I have never found a half-forgotten duck's breast in the cupboard, although I have looked and looked. Nigel and Nigella must be hell for the hungry Grundys. Particularly Nigella.

I am aghast. Ambridge is flowing with milk and honey and the occasional roadkill. Surely Ed could go pick/poach/shoot/scrup or strangle something? How's about badger en croute? And aren't the Masai said to survive on mingled blood and milk from their cows? I would greatly enjoy the episode where Ed explains this option to Em.

Like a dream in slow motion, everything takes a month to happen in Ambridge. You must have been holding your breath waiting for Joyce and her hip to fall down a hole. You can breathe out now. She has plummeted as per. Matt, the demon developer, had arranged for all her floorboards to be loosened. You can't help loving that man.

Nancy Banks-Smith's A Month in Ambridge returns on 15 November.

