

# Dressed to thrill

Great costumes should disappear into the fabric of a film but, behind the scenes, the creative process is painstaking, as award-winning designer SANDY POWELL explains

Generally I gravitate towards projects that are, for me, artistically more interesting and towards directors for whom the visuals are really important. I'd prefer a low-budget art-house film to a mega-budget blockbuster with no style. I like to work only on the kind of films I would pay to see.

So the script arrives. I talk to the director about the kind of vision he has for the film, and then comes the research. If it's a period film, as well as taking references directly from the period, I like to broaden my research and look more laterally at contemporary photography. I might flick through fashion magazines. They're always inspirational for finding a colour, shape or fabric. Sometimes there are silhouettes that have been adapted from a period shape and turned into a modern fashion look, perhaps with an additional extra that I'll then steal back for a period costume.



In *Young Victoria*, Emily Blunt played a historical character for whom we have visual references. Rather than trying to make her look like the real person, I designed the kind of clothes Queen Victoria might have worn but which fitted Emily Blunt's proportions and hopefully made her believable. Queen Victoria was absolutely minute – just 4ft 11in – while Emily Blunt is petite but certainly not as small as the Queen, whose dresses were

like dolls' clothes, they were so tiny. Apart from the wedding dress, I didn't copy any of her real clothes exactly. On the other hand, in *The Aviator*, Leonardo DiCaprio wasn't that physically dissimilar to Howard Hughes – Leo is 6ft and Hughes was 6ft 4in – so it was much easier to make Leo look like the character he was portraying. I always have the same problem getting started. The fabric might excite me but it can take days before I put

anything down on paper. That doesn't get any easier, but what does get easier is making decisions. You learn to trust your instincts. Having sourced my fabric and an initial idea, I'll do a scribble of sorts to give to the cutter who will cut a shape. Then we do a first fitting. I might work out proportions for myself in a drawing or use it to communicate with a cutter, but it's never the kind of drawing I would present to a director because costumes



develop in the fittings and, for me, that's where the design process happens. You might put something on an actor that you had thought would look good and realise, 'That's not right – it would look much better with a shorter sleeve or a lower or higher waist or hem.' Footwear comes a bit further down the line. In *Shakespeare In Love* we made shoes in the same fabrics as the dresses so they would match. For lots of actors – and directors – the footwear is really important. Martin Scorsese likes a good shoe. He always does a shoe close-up, which is great, because I love making shoes. With colour, I do what is most aesthetically pleasing to



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me, what I feel is right both for the costume and the actor. I might read a script and have an instinctive idea for the colour, but that could change once I see the actor. And if I can't find the right colour, we dye the fabric to get the shade I want. John Cowell has worked with me as a textile painter for many years. His job is a crucial part of the process. At the beginning of making a costume, he might dye, print or even create the fabric. Once the costume has been made, it goes back to him to enhance. The process is called 'ageing' but he is not necessarily making a costume look old, just making it look worn, making it look believable. He might simply spray it a darker tone of the same colour so that it's not totally flat. Most people would not even recognise that it has had anything done to it. John can also make an actor look slimmer. If you have someone who is a bit wide, he can shade him, a

Opposite from bottom left: Emily Blunt as Queen Victoria in the 1840s in *Young Victoria*; Judy Dench as Queen Elizabeth I in the 1590s in *Shakespeare in Love*. This page, clockwise from left: Gwen Stefani and Leonardo DiCaprio in Thirties dress as Jean Harlow and Howard Hughes in *The Aviator*; Jonathan Rhys Meyers rocks Seventies style in *Velvet Goldmine*; Cate Blanchett as Katherine Hepburn with Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Aviator*

bit like make-up artists do when they're painting in an actor's muscles or defining his jaw line. If it's a scene in which a character has had new clothes made or bought, then it has to appear new, but on the whole, Elizabethan costumes aside, none of the clothes we make look as if they have just come off the hanger. I'm always envious of people who look like they're wearing brand-new clothes. They probably hang them up every night, not pile them on a chair in the bedroom like I do. John makes clothes seem as if they've come from a pile on a chair in the bedroom. I've always liked clothes. People often ask me why I chose costume design over fashion. It's because there's more variety. You never know what the next period is going to be. Every film is different. Costumes are about characters, while fashion designers are creating items of clothing that go together differently on different people, who then add their



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*Clockwise from above:*  
 Gangs of New York stars  
 Leonardo DiCaprio and Daniel  
 Day-Lewis wearing Powell's  
 imaginative 1860s costumes;  
 Julianne Moore in Fifties-set *Far  
 From Heaven*

own individuality, mixing them up and making them even better.

Sometimes, fashion influences what I do in a different period. For instance, I had a Yohji Yamamoto skirt that I loved, with seams on the outside. I used the skirt as a starting point for the gangster girls in *Gangs of New York*. Even though it was set in the 1840s, I didn't put them into crinolines or normal skirts. Annie, my cutter at the time, worked with me on various versions of that skirt to create a deconstructed look. We put them through the washing machine so they became frayed and then we developed an entire collection of clothes for most of the gang members and their girlfriends.

After that, I noticed that the same sort of shapes became fashionable. I have no idea whether *Gangs of New York* inspired a bunch of fashion designers or whether I just got a whiff of the zeitgeist with the Yohji skirt.

The designers I've been inspired by most over the years have distinctive styles that are bold and individual, such as Barbara Hulanicki, John Galliano, Yohji Yamamoto, Rei Kawakubo (Comme des Garçons), Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen, as well as vintage Dior, Balenciaga and the original Vionnet clothes from the Thirties. Some, like the Japanese designers, are avant garde. The designers who interest me are not bound by



convention. They take risks. They push the boundaries in terms of silhouette, shape and colour. They don't design for the timid. *Q*

*Interview by Naomi Gryn*

**SANDY POWELL, three-time Oscar winner, has designed costumes for more than 40 films, often in collaboration with directors such as Derek Jarman, Mike Figgis, Neil Jordan, Todd Haynes and Martin Scorsese. An interview with Powell and Martin Scorsese, together with some of her costumes, is featured in the *Hollywood Costume* exhibition at the V&A Museum, which is sponsored by Harry Winston; tickets from [vam.ac.uk/hollywoodcostume](http://vam.ac.uk/hollywoodcostume)**