Coinciding with this month's Academy Awards, BAZAAR *examines cinema's legendary costume designers and their iconic creations that deserve, finally, to take centre stage*

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Photography: *Archive Photos/Getty Images* (Grease *and* My Fair Lady); *courtesy Disney* (Moulin Rouge!); *Screen Archives/Getty Images* (Bonnie and Clyde); *courtesy See Saw Films* (The King's Speech).

Behind The Seams

"I'm a storyteller," reflects Jenny Beavan of her chosen discipline. Over the course of an illustrious career, the British costume designer has won three Academy Awards and four BAFTAs, and designed for *A Room with a View* (1985), *The King's Speech* (2010), *Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris* (2022) and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* (2024), to name but a few of her projects. "My job is to tell the stories through clothes and support the actors so they can then tell the stories in the film.

"When I [receive] a script, I can often see [the costumes] in my mind," she shares. Which was the case in her most recent project, 2025's *The Choral*, written by Alan Bennett and starring Ralph Fiennes. "It's set in 1916 in a mill town – it had to be grey, blue and heathery browns."

Many cinematic ensembles have become synonymous with their film, even eclipsing in fame the production itself. "All of Marlene Dietrich's costumes, especially the menswear by Travis Banton – like the white trouser suit in *Blonde Venus* [1932]," cites Valerie Steele, director and chief curator at The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, of cinema's most iconic costumes. "Audrey Hepburn's white and black dress by Cecil Beaton in *My Fair Lady* [1964] [and] Deborah Nadoolman [Landis'] costumes for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* [1981]."

"There are cultish films that are unimaginable without their costumes: *Grease* [1978], *Liquid Sky* [1982], *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [1975], *A Clockwork Orange* [1971], *The Hunger* [1983] and *Barbarella* [1968]," says Marketa Uhlirova, director of the Fashion in Film Festival and reader at Central Saint Martins.

The professional status of costume designers rose in the '30s, when costume became established as a specialised discipline within the film industry. "Costumes were a practical necessity from the beginning of cinema, but costume design took some time to emerge as a distinct creative art form – and it wasn't until 1949 that we get the first Oscars [including] a category for costume design," offers Uhlirova.

"Costume was increasingly viewed as integral to character development, rather than as a vehicle for visual display," she continues. "Ideas began to circulate around costumes reflecting the

OPPOSITE PAGE **Grease (1978).** *THIS PAGE, FROM TOP* **Moulin Rouge! (2001); *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); *My Fair Lady* (1964); *The King's Speech* (2010).**

psychological and social dimensions of [a] character: their tastes, habits, moods and histories. Costume on screen was to 'model' far more than just clothing; it had to mould character, emotion and identity and form into an instrument of cinematic storytelling."

While both fundamentally pertain to clothing, fashion and costume design were widely regarded as discrete disciplines. "Since the '30s, the increasingly dominant idea was that film demanded a uniquely 'cinematic' approach to clothing that had to take into consideration things like the interaction between fabric and light, the way proportions transformed under the lens and the need for visual coherence within the mise-en-scène," explains Uhlirova.

"Costume designers began to assert their independence from the world of fashion," she continues. "While the couturière [Coco] Chanel (who was recruited by Hollywood in the early '30s) claimed to be creating a distinct 'film style' that interpreted contemporary fashion, others wanted to look away from fashion entirely, arguing that costume should have nothing to do with it."

In 1931, in a lesser-known chapter of her career, Chanel was invited by legendary film producer Samuel Goldwyn to dream up the costumes for United Artists Studio, where she outfitted the casts of 1931 film *Tonight or Never* and *The Greeks Had a Word for Them* (1932).

The relationship between cinematic costume design and fashion trends more generally has frequently been bidirectional. "*Bonnie and Clyde* set fashions in the real world," Steele notes of the 1967 film, whose costumes were designed by Theadora Van Runkle.

Audiences were besotted with the titular outlaw Bonnie Parker, played by Faye Dunaway clad in jaunty berets, sleek neck-scarves and bias-cut skirts and dresses in a palette of tweeds, black, white and tawny browns – '30s chic inflected with a tomboyish allure, amplified by Dunaway's sultry beauty.

Other films echo the fashions of the era in which they were made. "Think of *Barbarella* – futuristic or '60s?" Steele reflects of the 1968 film, in which the eponymous saviour of the galaxy, made famous by Jane Fonda, presents as a sex kitten with a sci-fiction flavour, via her ultra-voluminous bouffant, defined lashes and cat-eye. "And Elizabeth Taylor's makeup in *Cleopatra* was entirely '60s modern."

Among the greats of the artform, Beavan cites Piero Tosi as a particular inspiration, the Italian costume designer behind *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), helmed by Sophia Loren and the Palme d'Or-scoring *The Leopard* from the same year, a veritable feast for the eyes for which he crafted sumptuous outfits that summon up Sicilian high society during the unification of Italy in the 1860s. "He was someone who was incredibly influential," enthuses Beavan. "[*The Leopard*] is still one of the most astonishing pieces."

To this day, Edith Head holds the record as the most decorated woman in the history of the Academy Awards across any category, famed for her dazzling and elegant designs – think Grace Kelly in 1954's *Rear Window* and *To Catch a Thief* (1955) and Audrey Hepburn in 1953's *Roman Holiday*. Hepburn would later collaborate extensively with couturier Hubert de Givenchy, a lifelong friendship that produced the iconic 'little black dress', immortalised in 1961's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

NSW-born Orry-Kelly moved to the States in 1921, where he blazed a trail through Hollywood's Golden Age, designing chic suits for Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca* (1942) and Marilyn Monroe's va-va-voom gold-spangled dress in *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

Photography: courtesy of Jenny Beavan (this page, top); Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images (this page, bottom); Sunset Boulevard/Getty Images (opposite page).

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–Marketa Uhlirova

Orry-Kelly's achievement as the most Oscar-decorated Australian costume designer was surpassed only in 2014 by Catherine Martin, whose arrestingly more-is-more creations have scored four Academy Awards across both costume and production design for 2001's *Moulin Rouge!* and 2013's *The Great Gatsby*.

In 2018's *Black Panther* and its 2022 sequel, Ruth E. Carter redefined the typical superhero getup with her Afrofuturistic aesthetic, which blended traditional African beadwork and prints with sci-fi elements characteristic of a Marvel blockbuster, work that made her the first-ever Black winner of the Oscar for Costume Design.

In the sphere of period dramas, Beavan aside, giants of the genre include Italian designer Milena Canonero, who exquisitely costumed Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), and Sandy Powell, whose era-spanning work, from the Tudors via 1998's *Shakespeare in Love* to the '40s in *The Aviator* (2004), has earned her four Academy Awards.

Some projects require a straight-down-the-line approach to historical accuracy, like Beavan's work for *The King's Speech* (2010). "We had a lot of experts who knew royalty – the different badges, medals and the [symbols] on the sashes," she recalls. "We were desperate not to make a mistake."

But a more elastic approach to period dramas can pay dividends creatively. "It doesn't necessarily have to be bang on the period," muses Beavan. She cites New Zealand costume designer Kate Hawley's creations in 2025's *Frankenstein*: "Interesting use of a period, but making it hugely more fantastical".

The broad contours of the artform have radically transformed over time. "In the past, each studio had its own costume designer [or designers], whereas once independent films dominated, costume designers became freelancers," notes Steele.

"In the past, a drawing was done and that's what the actor would look like," explains Beavan. Nowadays, things are less top-down and more fluid. "What I enjoy now is the collaboration with the actor. They know the part better. And it's really in the fitting [that] it all happens."

Is the art of costume design sufficiently appreciated, both by viewers and the industry at large? "I would slightly suggest, probably not, unless it is something showy like *Mrs. Harris*,"

muses Beavan. "Sometimes [with] period films, [people] just think they look pretty."

Indeed, a slogan of the union of which Beavan is a part, the Costume Designers Guild, is "naked without us". Steele is of a similar sentiment. "Unfortunately, despite their importance for films, costume designers are still not given the respect and pay that they deserve," she says.

"The trajectory of the costume designer has been uneven," notes Uhlirova. "There are a number of household names, but it is probably fair to say that the majority of costume designers remain known to industry insiders only. And there is a whole army of them."

Although frequently unsung, the power of brilliant costume design can be transformative in bringing the whole production together. "[Actors] find their character very often in the fitting room," Beavan explains. "It's where they almost say, 'I know who I am'. Then you really know you're doing a good job and it's wonderful. [It's] a very exciting moment." HB

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP Jenny Beavan costume from *Mrs. Harris Goes to Paris* (2022); *To Catch a Thief* (1955).
THIS PAGE *The Leopard* (1963).