Virtual Author Talk

Creating the Illusion
Jay Jorgensen

The co-author (with Donald L. Scoggins) of "Creating the Illusion: A Fashionable History of Hollywood Costume Designers" talks about their new book.

How did the book come about?

In the 1980's and 1990's, I received some original costume sketches from films as gifts. I was already collecting movie memorabilia, but didn't have a particular interest in film costume. In the 1990's, I attended two exhibitions that included costume sketches and a light bulb just went on inside my head. I realized that the sketches reflected the designer's mind at work on paper. I began appreciating the sketches for the works of art that they were, and set about acquiring more.

I found it odd that I was collecting works by artists that I knew very little about and wanted to rectify that, but there was very little information available at the time. Even at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library, sometimes the reference files on early costume designers contained only a list of their credited films. It was often impossible to find out if a designer had been married or why they may have left a studio.

I was living in Los Angeles, and met several people who had known designers or were designers themselves. I began collecting stories from them. In 2010, I wrote and photo-edited the book *Edith Head: The Fifty-Year Career of Hollywood's Greatest Costume Designer* (Running Press). In doing the research for that book, I came across more stories and saw a bigger picture of how the designers' lives intersected at the studios.
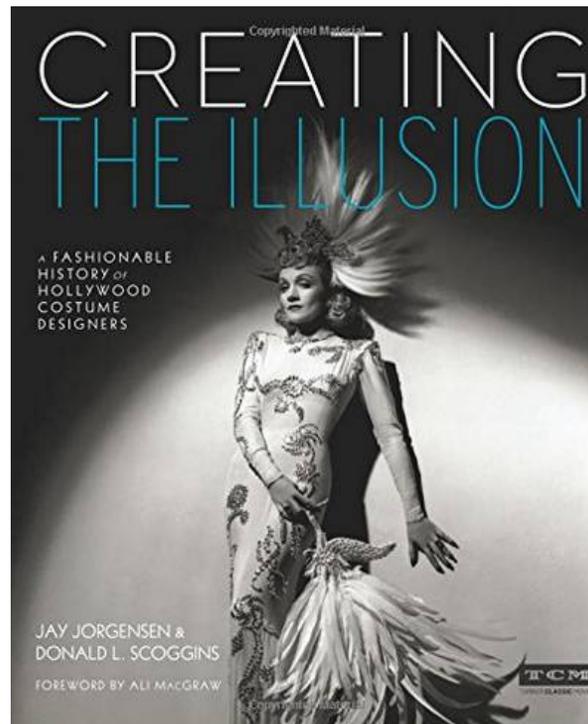
Finally, one afternoon I was having lunch with my friend, David Chierichetti, who has written extensively about costume design. I asked him when he was going to finally publish a book that told the whole history of Hollywood costume design. He told me he was never going to write another book, and that it if I wanted to see that book, I would have to write it myself.

What information is in the book?

Since I began collecting those sketches, thankfully there have been more books on costume design published. However, I found there was still a lot of information missing. I wanted to understand how the professional and personal lives of designers influenced what we saw on screen. Specifically, I was curious as to what brought them to design, how they broke into film, what professional relationships were like with the stars, why they left the business, and how they died.

Included in the book are profiles of designers that you would expect — ones with long careers and famous names, such as Paramount's Travis Banton and Edith Head; MGM's Gilbert Adrian and Helen Rose; and Warner Brothers' Orry-Kelly. But there will be names that will be new to some people, though their careers were sometimes just as lengthy, such as Marjorie Best, Leah Rhodes, Milo Anderson, Dolly Tree, Gwen Wakeling, Royer and Herschel McCoy.

Carole Lombard in *My Man Godfrey* (1936). Costume design by Travis Banton.

Many famous silent film designers such as Sophie Wachner and Ethel Painter Chaffin, who were revered in their day, are restored to their proper historical place. Recent interviews with some of the top designers currently working in the field such as Colleen Atwood and Ellen Mirojnick bring us up-to-date on the demands of the industry today.

What did you discover in your research?

Mainly that the designers led lives that were as colorful as the actors and actresses for whom they were designing. In the silent days, many seamstresses came west to make a better life for themselves. They often invented illustrious histories for themselves in couture design that didn't really exist, but that doesn't mean their real stories weren't fascinating.

By the late 1920's and into the 1930's, studios realized how much women were spending to come to a movie theatre to see what the stars were wearing and their budgets for clothes and designers reflected this. The designers they were hiring were much more accomplished and astute.

I was very fortunate to have Donald L. Scoggins as my co-author. Scoggins is an attorney and is very used to researching historical records such as census, military, and birth and death records, He was able to recreate the early lives of many of the designers and their families — information that has never before been compiled together, even when the designers were still alive.

Irene Sharaff designed Elizabeth Taylor's costumes for *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf* (1966).

Jane Russell in *The Revolt of Mamie Stover* (1956). Costume design by Charles Le Maire.

Claudette Colbert in *Midnight* (1939). Costume design by Irene (Lentz-Gibbons).

For instance, we had three big mysteries to solve. The first was the disappearance from public view of Clare West, who is cited as the movies' first credited costume designer. The second mystery was the odd coincidence of costume designer Robert Kalloch (*It Happened One Night*) and his partner Joseph Demarais dying on the same day from two different causes. And the third mystery was the odd drowning death of Vera West (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*). Scoggins was able to track down surviving relatives of Clare West and the court records relating to Kalloch. He was also able to find information about Vera West's first marriage, which may or may not explain her suicide.

There are also several tragic stories of designers who suffered from alcoholism, including Irene Lentz-Gibbons, who committed suicide by jumping to her death from the Knickerbocker Hotel.

What will interest costume designers, costumers and students of fashion?

It is a 400-page coffee table book with about 400 photos — some rare and some iconic. The photos include studio portraits of stars in costume, as well as behind-the-scenes photos the designers at work, never-before-seen costume sketches and rare wardrobe tests. This is the first book that shows the very human side of the designers, including both their struggles and triumphs.

I believe that a designer's personal life has a great influence on them as an artist, and we're finally able to see them as the three-dimensional creative forces that they truly are. I think also, for the first time, we can see the trajectory of how designers moved around in the studio system, or why they may have moved into designing for private clients. One reader described it to me as, "The book I didn't know I wanted to read," and I loved that.

Deborah Kerr in *The King and* I (1956). Costume design by Irene Sharaff.

Loretta Young in *He Stayed for Breakfast* (1940). Costume design by Irene (Lentz-Gibbons).

A costume sketch for Grace Kelly in *To Catch a* Thief (1955). Costume design by Edith Head.