

The Costume Designer

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The Power of
Contemporary
Costume

Allyson Fanger

Michelle Cole

21st Annual
Award Winners



THE POWER OF CONTEMPORARY COSTUME

Contemporary Costume Design is more than clothing, the way a Ferrari is more than a car.

Modern costumes look effortless—that is the danger, as if the actors rifled through their closet, tossed on a look, winked at themselves in the mirror, and wandered onto set. “Everyone dresses themselves ... most people have a sense of style ... and it’s really all about expensive clothes anyway,” are common fallacies which undermine the exquisite knowledge which informs every design choice in a modern television show or film.

By the Editors

Costume Design paints a picture of a person through clothing for the moment in time they are experiencing in the narrative. It subtly underscores the action, becoming a vital shorthand, when a story has to be told in a few minutes. Unlike futuristic or period design, modern costume doesn’t have the benefit of an unfamiliar environment to transport the viewer. Also, because the language of garments is so rich, specific, and widely understood, audiences know immediately if a character’s look rings true—from location to socioeconomic status, personality to mood, and from ego to age. All of these nuances are established in contemporary costumes. When a look is so precise that it strikes a chord in the audience, it can move them to participate and to emulate. Never has this genre been more powerful, since social media has given this conversation monetary value.

*We spoke with two Emmy-nominated members, Michelle Cole and Allyson Fanger, about their approach. Both designers have altered the visual landscape. Cole uses audacious color and injects energy and fun into her design for *Black-ish* and *Grown-ish* while still staying true to character. Fanger of *Grace and Frankie* has changed the way the middle-aged people look onscreen. By focusing the dialogue on personal style instead of age, she is captivating and influencing a broad demographic. What is unseen by viewers are years of study, both academic and personal, which inform the depiction of people and their varied and rich personalities in clothing.*

A Ferrari captures the imagination in a heartbeat as it skims past on Sunset Boulevard. Like the rarified vehicle, contemporary Costume Design may resonate and inspire, but it does so because it encapsulates so much thought, passion, and intention.

HOW DID YOU COME TO COSTUME DESIGN?

I studied social anthropology in college, which as the study of human society and culture, is not very far from Costume Design. I was taught how to look at people and understand all of the elements that merge together to make them who they are. So much of what I learned in that context is relevant to me daily now.

When I returned to my hometown of Minneapolis, I found myself immersed into the thriving art culture of the city. Around that time, many films were coming to Minneapolis to shoot and I thought, "That's what I want to do. I want to help to tell stories through creating rich characters visually." I was hired by Sharen Davis as a PA and that was that. It felt exactly right from day one. Sharen was my mentor. She encouraged me to make the move to Los Angeles, gave me

Alyson Fanger

my first LA job, and got me into the union. Then, when she knew I was ready to fly, she kicked me out of the nest.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PROCESS?

I am a visual learner, so I make sure to surround myself with visual inspiration daily. When conceiving a new character, I generally like most to find a relevant and real life muse to look to for character inspiration. I find that doing so ensures that my character will have a "realness" to them, and not a "fashion magazine" or overly styled look to them. I also find that realness and character, truth and uniqueness is in the details. I am extremely detail-oriented, and I always trust my intuition. The few times that I didn't, I really regretted it when I saw the final product or scene. So now, I just do not doubt myself.

WHY IS CONTEMPORARY COSTUME DESIGN IMPORTANT?

Culture and social media are becoming more integrated. The connection with audiences is strong and



Alyson Fanger photographed by Julia Johnson. Hair by Connie Kallos and makeup by Angela Nogaro. Jewelry by Syltrie Corbelin.

immediate. I feel like that we are influencers, because we're partnering with jewelry designers and clothing designers, just by virtue of tagging them. We're having a mutually beneficial relationship initiated by the character.

As a contemporary Costume Designer, I create luxe looks. I make pieces, but I also see trends before they happen and am able to bring that to my work. So, when my characters hit the screen, a year later, they are on point with what people want to wear. I think that's been really influential. I made that wedding dress for Allison and it was supposed to be a ridiculous dress and it turns out it was fashion. At first I thought, "Oops!" but it was actually very cool. That dress is everywhere now!

TELL ME ABOUT GRACE AND FRANKIE?

I wanted Frankie [Lily Tomlin] to be like no other character that has been seen on television before. I wanted it to look like everything Frankie has is something she created or found and personalized. Either she made it or she found it on her many travels. She's in her art

studio making dye out of rusty tin pans that she soaks in water for three weeks to get the color. Lily still doesn't totally understand it, but she has embraced it fully, and breathed life into like the true comic genius that she is.

Grace [Jane Fonda] is polished, neutral, and strong. Her color palate is white to black and everything in between—gray, cream, beige, and solid. We do a lot of monochromatic looks on her as well and she is utterly tasteful. We only started to bring color into Grace's look toward the end of season one to begin to show how Frankie was bringing color into her life. I couldn't find the right pieces for this in the stores so I began to make her colorful print shirts. The "Grace" shirts have become an essential and a staple in her look, and I still make them new, every season.

One of my best moments was when Jane put on her first look for her first day of shooting season six. She looked in the mirror and said, "Oh, hello Grace. It's been a while." It was a great moment for me because I was seeing the effect that my costume choices for her have on allowing her to embrace and to bring to life her character. Plus it was from Jane Fonda, so that felt fantastic!

When I first started *Grace and Frankie*, I never thought about their age. I just was thinking about who they were as people. I wanted everyone to know exactly who those ladies were before they

even opened their mouths. There was nothing on television prior to *Grace and Frankie*, which dressed characters in this age group in a relevant way, and so my work on the show has had a huge impact. In today's culture, women are no longer relegated to the rocking chair when they hit a certain age, they stay vibrant and vital well into their seventies, eighties, and beyond.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT COSTUME DESIGN?

I love everything. I get to be creative and to be visually stimulated and inspired every day. I am a natural storyteller and a lover of dissecting characters down to the smallest detail. In this job, I get to make artistic choices that inform character and tell a story. I love feeling fabrics, combining textures, and dreaming up the most unpredictable and impossible combinations of elements. I love to be unique in my choices as that is welcomed and rewarded in this creative environment. I thrive off change and difference and unpredictability and last-minute pressure. I love a challenge and I always feel challenged in this job, but thankfully, Netflix allows me the freedom to be creative. I love collaborating with other creative and talented people, especially our show co-creators Marta Kauffman and Howard Morris. I just feel lucky that I get to get up every day and do something I love so much.



Frankie (Lily Tomlin), Sol (Sam Waterston), and Robert (Martin Sheen), *Grace and Frankie*, Netflix