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.

When 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 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 extra that I’ll then steal back for a period costume.

So the research process is a collaboration between the director and 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 costume, 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.

To the director about the kind of film he wants to see. I would pay to see. Only on the kind of films I choose. I've always liked clothes. People often ask me why I chose costume design over painting. I've always liked clothes. People often ask me why I chose costume design over painting. 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 own personality to it.

Then we do a first fitting. That doesn't get any easier, but what does get easier is making decisions. You learn more about your instincts. Having sourced my fabric and an initial idea, I'll do a scribble of sorts to give 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.'

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 choice of costume is crucial to the look of the film, but it's never the kind of decision 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.'

Once the costume has been made, I go back to him to enhance. The process is called 'ageing', but you wouldn’t necessarily make 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.

As a textile painter, I know how to fix paint to fabric, so I 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 more about your instincts. Having sourced my fabric and an initial idea, I'll do a scribble of sorts to give 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.'

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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