

Sew must Go On

Television's costume designers hem and awe

By Todd Longwell

The 2002-03 TV season brought viewers a veritable parade of historical fashions, from 19th century French military (A&E's "Napoleon"), 17th century New England Puritan (CBS' "Salem Witch Trials") and '50s swingers chic (CBS' "Martin and Lewis") to early-'90s Middle East war correspondent (HBO's "Live From Baghdad"), contemporary mortuary (HBO's "Six Feet Under") and timeless outré pop star (NBC's "Cher: The Farewell Tour").

Some might assume that it's inherently more challenging to design costumes set in a distant era. But Maria Schicker, costume designer for the controversial CBS miniseries "Hitler: The Rise of Evil," disagrees.

"Period films have their margins," Schicker points out. "You know how people would be dressed in that time. But the closer we come to contemporary times — the '80s, the '70s and the '60s — everybody has feelings and stories attached to the times."

No matter what the period, costume designers are likely to alter those margins, eschewing documentary representation of the past for a stylistic interpretation of a period's fashions that reinforce the production's moods and themes.

Working on "Hitler," which covers the life of Adolf Hitler — played by Robert Carlyle wearing a prosthetic nose and colored contacts — from the turn of the century to 1934, Schicker was profoundly influenced by the work of Heinrich Hoffman, the Nazi leader's close friend and official photographer who accompanied the future Führer in 1920 until the end of Hitler's life in 1945. The photos not only showed the designer how things really were but also inspired her to make things a little bit unreal.

"When you see this documentation, all of it is in black and white," the German-born Schicker says. "So I chose the dark-textured woollens and the light-colored silk and so on to achieve that contrast — even though we shot on color. My design decisions with the civilian costumes were to keep things in muted tones, to give the red of the Nazi flags a powerful platform and gradually added yellow with the SA and SS uniforms."

On the NBC series "American Dreams," set in Philadelphia during the 1960s, costume designer Chrisi Karvonides takes similar artistic license with the clothes for the dancers on the show's re-creation of "American Bandstand," which is central to the program's ongoing story lines.

"When you look at 'Bandstand' in Philadelphia in '63 and '64, it looks extremely '50s," Karvonides says. "The skirts were very long — a lot of them were still wearing the saddle shoes with bobby socks. It didn't become sort of fashion forward until (the style) came to California. We've made the skirts shorter and tighter and the whole palette very bright; we've toned the palette down on the outside world. We've made it a Technicolor fantasy world."

The CBS telefilm "Gleason" covers four decades — the 1930s, '40s, '50s and '80s. Usually, costume rental houses such as Western Costume in Los Angeles and Angels Fancy Dress in London can furnish productions with clothing from almost any conceivable era, but they were of little help to costume designer Mariane Carter in her quest to transform 6-foot-8-inch actor Brad Garrett of CBS' "Everybody Loves Raymond" into 5-foot-11-inch TV legend Jackie Gleason for the production, which shot in Montreal.



USA Network's "Helen of Troy"

Fabricating History

The best dressed in primetime



CBS' "Hitler: The Rise of Evil"

American Dreams

For LeAnn Rimes' turn as Connie Francis, Chrisi Karvonides absorbed the romantic longing of the 1961 hit "Where the Boys Are." The costume designer tapped into Francis' propensity for big skirts, Rimes' Southwestern sensibility and found the key to the dress: bird's-eye blue. "I combined the paler blue with the imperial blue," Karvonides notes. "Then I tried on a bunch of vintage clothing to look at the silhouettes and take the best details from all those pieces, and we came up with the design."

Children of Dune

Of all the far-out designs he created for the miniseries, Jan Pistek's favorite costume is the outfit worn by ghola Duncan Idaho (Edward Atterton). "The combination of leather and materials used in the building industry (polyurethane and foam) was ideal for this character," Pistek says. "The only trouble with this experiment was convincing the master tailor that it was possible to sew from this unusual material."

Helen of Troy

The script called for Helen (Sienna Guillory) to wear a white dress, but costume designer

Van Broughton Ramsey convinced director John Kent Harrison to go with a little yellow number, made of China silk. Ramsey explains: "Even more so than red, your eye goes right to yellow. There were going to be so many people in this crowd scene — I wanted her to stand out. Then I had our dyer/painter come in and gold leaf all the designs by hand, which took her two weeks."

Hitler: The Rise of Evil

Adolf Hitler (Robert Carlyle) wears a tunic uniform to the funeral of Reich President Paul von Hindenburg (Peter O'Toole), which marks his ascendance to power. "I really think he looks scary in that," costume designer Maria Schicker says. "It was very stylish, and it had a power to it. Untouchable, in a way."

— Todd Longwell



NBC's "American Dreams"

"Nothing existing in any costume shop in Hollywood or Canada was in his size in those periods and in that Gleason style," Carter says. "The authentic pieces — you don't find them in that size. Palace Costume (in Los Angeles), where I did some rentals for the extras and the other roles have a 'big' section, but it's more big in the other way."

Viewers generally understand the challenge that a costume designer faces in trying to capture the essence of an era, but when Van Broughton Ramsey tells people about his work on the USA Network miniseries "Helen of Troy," they sometimes act like he simply bought a truckload of bed sheets at Macy's and tossed them over the actors' shoulders.

"They say, 'Oh, that's just a tunic,'" Ramsey laments. "And I think, Oh, if only they knew!"

Although the historical epic is set circa 1200 B.C., the fashions that are featured in the miniseries are actually from about 750 B.C.

Ramsey explains: "In the true period of Helen of Troy, women wore a very tight, corseted girdle that was very stiff and came up to right under their breasts, leaving them completely exposed. And the soldiers were also pretty much nude. They wore a cape and shin guards—that was it. They had nothing to protect their, you know, crotch area."

Sometimes, historically-accurate fashions just aren't believable to modern audiences, such as the quaint and nonthreatening cutaway jacket that Hitler wore as he led the dramatic Munich Beer Hall Putsch.

"That would've looked so out of place, so I chose just to put him in a normal trench coat," says Schicker, who dressed about 15,000 extras for "Hitler," which shot primarily in Prague. "It's not about the costume in that moment, it's about supporting the story and the actor."

Historical fashions often travel well — even into far-off galaxies, as Jan Pistek found with his designs for the futuristic Sci Fi Channel miniseries "Children of Dune."

"In some cases (with dignitaries, commanders and aristocrats), I took inspiration in certain periods of Japanese history, Babylonian culture and the culture of Mesopotamia or Persia," says Pistek, who collaborated with his Oscar-winning father, Theodor Pistek (1984's "Amadeus"), on the project.

Pistek enjoys working on period projects, whether they're set in the past or future, because "one has to take a trip to untutored areas that one cannot know from (their) own experience." But he finds working on contemporary projects a "bit of a bore." Ramsey disagrees: "The design process is the same no matter what you're doing. They're all hard. You have to go in and research it."

Karvonides relishes the time when research comes up empty-handed on "Dreams."

"My favorite part of the job is when (creator/executive producer) Jonathan Prince will say to me, 'Well, there are no photographs, no footage, so it's ladies' choice,'" she says. "That's when I love my job. That's such a thrill."



Sci Fi Channel's "Children of Dune"



Cheat Sheet

BY SHEIGH CRABTREE

In a race rich with master craftspeople, we shine a light on a handful of new shows that may strike a chord with the TV academy

Show	Coverage	Show	Coverage
Cher: The Farewell Tour (NBC)	 Dizzying stage lights, snappy choreography and Bob Mackie all helped to make us believe 57-year-old diva Cherilyn Sarkisian	Children of Dune (Sci Fi)	 Composer Brian Tyler's score is much-lauded and the CD's ranking has gone through the roof on Amazon.com.
Door to Door (TNT)	 Special makeup effects artist Charles Porlier augmented William H. Macy's gift and amplified Bill Porter's stoicism.	Kingpin (NBC)	 Conrad Gonzalez brings his engrossing "Sopranos" editing style to this mini and cranks it up to 11 with virtuoso pacing.
Napoleon (A&E)	 If Emmy shows French productions any love, Pierre-Jean Larroque's costumes and Richard Cunin's production design could capture leurs coeurs.	Oliver Beene (Fox)	 Production designer Randy Ser and costume designer Emily Draper bring natty Camelot-era style to this single-camera comedy.
Rudy: The Rudy Giuliani Story (USA)	 James Woods thrust into Sept. 11 archival video footage looked eerily authentic thanks to Big Bang FX Animation and Muse Entertainment.	Out of the Ashes (Showtime)	 Donald M. Morgan's lensing has garnered advance praise from the camera crowd, but does it have the latitude to capture Emmy's attention?
Taken (Sci Fi)	 A clear shot at sound editing with its recent Golden Reels win; Emmy fave sons status of Richard Taylor and Victor Iorilla can't hurt.	Without a Trace (CBS)	 The "Bruck" tapped into the Peter principle by hiring Politanoff (production design) and Levy (DP) to beautify the bureau.