

On intuiting vulnerability



Costume designer Sarah Gregg Millman discusses going deep in research mode, wanting to make the people she works with happy, and playing the role of ad hoc psychologist.

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As told to Sara Black McCulloch, 2509 words.

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How did you get into costume design?

It was never really my intention to work in film or in costume design. I didn't study it. I will say that I had worked in retail and had an obsession with film, particularly New Wave. I was living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which is really big on thrifting and vintage, so I had a crash course. My boyfriend at the time was a musician, and he had a friend who wrote a screenplay about a fictional '70s country star, and they were going to be shooting here in Toronto. I volunteered on the costume truck even though I had no experience. Luckily, the costume designer was incredible, and she put me to work helping out dressing the background characters. By the end of the shoot, she was like, if you ever move here, call me. And I did. There was a show she wasn't able to return to, but she had already preset the looks, so I just had to go in and maintain everything. I met a hair stylist on that set who asked me to work on an indie with her starring Don McKellar and Reginald Harkema. There was no budget, and I had to shop their closets. Once I got in with that crew, they just brought me along for all of their indie films. All of a sudden, I was a costume designer.

Would you say you developed a lot of these skills working in retail?

Being in the change room with someone is valuable because trying clothing on is such a vulnerable thing. It's about intuiting that vulnerability, picking up on cues, backing off, gently suggesting, and trying to make people feel comfortable. You're also around clothes all day—studying cuts, fabrics, draping, and fit. There was even this vintage store [that I didn't work at] called Junk & Foibles, and the manager [artist Rebecca Kratz] was so cool and had such an extensive knowledge of vintage. She'd write whimsical descriptions and make funny little drawings on the hangtags of each piece. I would just go in and be like, "What does Rebecca think of this 1940s piece?" I would look at these fabrics and geek out over quality, or a metal zipper—that kind of thing.

What does your process look like?

I usually get the script for the job interview and read it over, trying to get a spark or idea. And then I read it again, and ask myself what the budget is for the film. If they've told me the budget, then what's the vibe? Is there a lot of blood? Uniforms? Are the characters wealthy? How much flesh am I giving to this production and on what budget? Who's the director? I usually make mood boards, which take me about a week. I go deep into research mode, compiling thousands of images and following different paths of the characters. When I walk into the interview or the call, I have a visual pitch. Or I send it ahead of time so the director can sit with it and ask questions. At that point, it's about seeing whether my vision and theirs is congruent.

If I get the job, I start in the office and the team comes on. The mood boards are great because they get everyone on the same page and your buyer immediately knows what you're looking for. They do change quite a bit.

Still, they help us brainstorm together, so we can plan for shopping, talk with the [pattern] cutters, think about rental houses... You start amassing all that with casting; you can start looking at the actors online to get a look at their bodies and what their stylists typically put them in, and you keep this at the back of your mind.

I'm maybe a bit more acquiescent than some designers because I want the actors to be happy. I'm very aware that when actors land in the costume department, that's usually their first touchpoint. They fly and come directly to the fitting. They've possibly seen hair and makeup. Maybe that night they're going out to dinner with the director, but usually we're the first place, so I want them to feel good. I want them to feel like they've discovered that character with me in the fitting room.

We'll usually have six times as many options as we'll need. There's nothing worse than being in a fitting and being like, "Holy shit, nothing fits. Nothing's working. They gave us this size, or their agent gave us that size from ten years ago..." And that's when you get frantic. Instead, I want to focus on creating a space where the actor feels safe, just like back in that changing room at the store. Like, they're getting naked! And taking their clothes off in front of a complete stranger in a country they've never been to, and there you are pinning things to them.

I always try to book two or three hours after a fitting for silence because you're also playing psychologist. You're trying to get your vision, the director's vision, and the actor's vision to all line up. It's your vision because that's what you're there for, but you're also trying to keep a conversation going at the same time. Running a fitting room and a fitting is a real art.

What does collaboration look like for you, working with a team? Was learning how to delegate challenging?

You're only as good as the team you're working with because there is so much work that goes unseen. A really good assistant costume designer and supervisor are the ones managing the office, so that you can sit in your corner and think without interruption. That entire team is there to help bring your vision to life. And they're most often women.

The costume supervisor, for example, is important because they have to deal with the numbers. They have to act like a steady ship that can run upstairs when something comes up at the last minute, or comes up in the script, or if there are budgetary flags. What I mean is that this person has to convey information or push back. They have to manage how that message lands with a line producer or director. I'm too bubbly and jokey to handle that. I need that person to act as a reality check. They also have to put up with me, someone who is scattered and creative. They have to manage all these puzzle pieces and put them together, so they need to be super steady.

Do you ever work with people who don't value or understand what costume designers do?

One year, I was on the jury for the Canadian Screen Awards. I was in a room with other creatives. One of the films that I wanted to be recognized was a contemporary costuming film that was French Québécois. And people were saying that it was just clothes from now. And I was trying to explain how it's so hard to convey in such a crystalline way the social status of a character. It's the restraint that is such an art. I really fought for it because people see a poofy skirt from the turn of the century, and they're amazed. But if you're pouring all your time and energy into what people deem a "jeans and t-shirt kind of film," you are not going to be part of that conversation.

I'm interested in hearing your thoughts on *Love Story*, the Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and John F. Kennedy Jr. show. People heavily criticized the costuming seen in early paparazzi photos. Though CBK was a "jeans and t-shirt" kind of girl, some people are realizing that nuance and details actually do matter.

I was alive during that time, and younger than Carolyn, but I studied her during my formative years. Those initial costumes were really wrong. And I feel so badly for that costume designer because it wasn't necessarily their fault.

Whose fault would you say it was?

It was whoever *hired* that costume designer, because that person did not have the Carolyn Bessette Kennedy mindset. They did not have the taste, nor the eye for detail to hire that costume designer. I'm sure that the initial costume designer wanted to die because they were set up for failure. They likely did not have the time, resources, guidance, or support... Remember, this was before Botox was used on faces. It was before phones and social media. No one was documenting their daily lives like they do now. She was mysterious and so was everyone else. Pre-internet style required a sense of self, and this was a woman who was the most beautiful woman in every room and part of that was because of her charisma—a big part, I would argue. And that allowed her to eschew things like jewelry.

How would you approach the fictionalization of a real person like Carolyn?

We are people first and foremost, and my penchant is for natural dressing. But when you are looking at characters, you have to override your own impulses a little bit. There's no way to completely do that, but you're trying really hard to see the character as you think the character is. To go back a little bit to that first costume designer, they were probably told, like, "Okay, just go buy that CBK style." But then you ask yourself why it still looked so cheap... Well, because the hair was a wig, and if the wig isn't right, then everything will look cheap. It's devastating when you've worked really hard and then they come out in a bad wig, or the lighting is bad, or the clothes were not tailored. TV usually demands broad strokes from as many people as possible—not creative, fine-tuned, nitpicky approaches like, "The cut of this jean is *not right*."

What is the difference between TV and film?

TV is such a beast. One of my favorite shows is *My Brilliant Friend*. And you can tell that with the costuming, because they're Italian and cinematic, they were much more particular. The fabric had to be a certain weight and broken down properly. And it had to look real. They trust the audience to go into the world really deeply, in a way. An audience in North America is broad strokes usually, because it has to reach more people. But then you see a production like that take a bit more risk, and when it's done right, people respond beautifully.

I wanted to talk about your line, Local Woman. What prompted you to start it?

I was coming off of a show in 2018, maybe 2019, and I said to myself, "When I'm done with this show again, I want to get back into art." I had started in art, and was already making these short films, but they didn't have any narrative.

Over the years I would read scripts, and I would be like, "Wow, another pregnant woman with an alien baby written by a man?! I can do better than this!" I thought, once my show finishes, I'm gonna hire a life coach and keep myself accountable, and I'm going to work on a narrative film. In the film, there are three pregnant dancers in the woods at night. They needed to wear things with movement that could fit over their bellies, and catch the light at night. They also weren't really pregnant; they had pillows they had to pull out from under their dresses at the end. I sketched everything and sent it to the sewer, who made them. And I made a short film.

By the end, there was nothing there. But when I would show it to people, they would point out the dresses. One day, I came across this beautiful roll of organza and I texted it to a friend, asking her if I should buy it. I wasn't designing clothes at this point, but it just stood out to me. She told me to buy it. And then, I started making the dresses from the film in sheer organza. And then it kept happening: I'd walk into a fabric store, spot another gorgeous roll of organza, and make dresses. Before the pandemic hit, I hosted a little pop-up where I sold just that dress, but in two different lengths and fabrics. It instantly went well.

By the time we were in lockdown, I ran into someone from a local consignment store. She was wearing one of the dresses from the pop-up and suggested I use Shopify, who was offering free websites during the pandemic, so I could start selling those dresses, and turn that into a business. It was very lucky timing... I'll never release that film I directed but at least it was a channel into Local Woman.

Sarah Gregg Millman recommends:

Vintage anoraks/windbreakers. Preferably from a dusty old mud room in Nova Scotia, from a retired doctor who took up running in the 1980s. Hunter green/orange/true red. LL Bean or even army-issued or Patagonia. I recently found a cotton one I love from the Royal Newfoundland Yacht Club made in the 1990s. I like to wear them very oversized and with short shorts so it looks like a dress.

Keeping the mud room theme: a beeswax lip balm I made with Ontario beeswax, Wild Nova Scotia wintergreen essential oil, tiny flecks of Ontario Chamomile flowers, vanilla bean sun-infused olive oil, and benzoin resin. I poured it into silver sliding tins which I click open and closed in my pocket when I need to fidget - very satisfying. I have perpetually dry lips plus texture/feel/sensory issues - and worked very hard to make something that wouldn't make me want to wipe it off every 5 seconds - plus smelled nice and was natural. I am considering selling-but only in Canada-and calling it "Heavens." I'd like it to feel like you found it in the pocket of the anorak of the aforementioned retired sporty doc (who is also a mom of 3 & practical but whimsical & a bit into homeopathy)

Light Years by James Salter. Read this while deeply in love with my toddler (at the time) but also overwhelmed with the identity shift that comes with motherhood and the expectations of what a good life is meant to look like. The prose is so pure and sparse but effective. Wept and wept and over-identified with it all.

Swimming in lakes that look like tea with my daughter Viva, my husband Robbie, my mother Paula, my friend Erinn Langille. People who love to swim in lakes are a special breed.

Seafood towers. To me, the epitome of decadence. Fresh, briny, summery, romantic, sensual, rare. You must be close to the ocean to do this though, otherwise the seafood has traveled too far and loses its magical properties.

Name

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Vocation

costume and fashion designer

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