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A Career in Costume: What To Do and Where To Find It

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

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Taking Action: Social Media Groups and Accounts

Facebook/Meta, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn. For example:

- **Costume Guild Anybody?**
- **Costume Networking Group**
- **Dorothy Bulac-Eriksen specialty costume tips and hacks**
- **Emma Brassfield sewing tips and tricks**
- **The Costume Symposium**
- **Vinilla Burnham Costume Group**

Training Schemes

In the UK, the Production Guild, Creative Skillset and Screenskills have training schemes for production runners and other roles.

- <https://productionguild.com>
- <https://rts.org.uk/tags/creative-skillset>
- www.screenskills.com

RUKA JOHNSON, Costume Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 152 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E5.1 Ruka Johnson. © Ruka Johnson

You were making and now you're designing, can you still do both?

Of the jobs I've had, most of them have ended up being not so creative in terms of costume makes. ITV's *Red King* had a lot of makes, which was amazing, and I got to do lots of designing. But I don't get to make any more. I'm outsourcing. I haven't made anything myself in a long time, which is sad.

A lot of the jobs I was sent were council-estate dramas, kids growing up in London, all contemporary, which is fun, but there's no opportunity for making something weird and wonderful. I'd love it to go towards fantasies, supernatural, with lots of making, so that's what I'm manifesting!



◀ **How did you start your costume career?**

I apprenticed for the designer/stylist/maker Fee Doran aka Miss Ms. Jones, who made for Kylie (the white outfit for ‘Can’t Get You Out of My Head’) and the Scissor Sisters. She’s also self-taught and just knows how to put stuff together. It was really fun, all the making and creating something and shooting it on screen, and I thought, *Okay, I want to do this now.*

What was your biggest break in becoming a costume designer, and how did it happen?

I did a film called *Rocks*, which did very well at the box office, but it had a delayed release (it was around COVID time). By the time it came out and was getting positive attention, I had another film out called *Blue Story*, and it felt like a real shift in my career. It felt very tangible. Things changed quite a lot: I got an agent just after getting *Rocks*. The jobs coming in were significantly different, and opportunities started increasing.

Then I got selected for BAFTA Breakthrough in 2020. It was the first time they’d picked a costume designer, and I was like, ‘Oh, that’s quite exciting!’ They pick something like twenty people who are having a breakthrough year and give you access to mentoring. I had a really good conversation with Michele Clapton, who was so open, really helpful. That whole time period, changed things for me a lot.

You got *Rocks* yourself. Was that through contacts you had with directors or producers?

For *Rocks*, someone passed on my name, and then I met with them. I hadn’t done a film that size before. They said I had to do it with a more experienced co-designer, but I thought, *No, this is my job. I have to do it myself.* I was bluffing; if they’d said, no, I was going to say, ‘Okay, I’ll be the co-designer.’ It was a coming-of-age film about young black girls growing up in London. I was, like, ‘Listen, I’m the source material. I won’t steer you wrong.’ They took a chance, and they let me do it.

And then came *Blue Story*, when I had an agent, but it was for people I’d worked with before on smaller projects coming back to me.

What is your preferred genre and why?

It’s between film and TV. I’m gonna say film currently because I haven’t done a film in a few years now. I’ve

been doing TV projects back to back. But I wonder if I do a film, I might say I miss TV. The type of films that I’ve done have just been between me, the director and possibly a creative producer. I really miss that small creative team.

TV was hard to begin with, but now I’ve had more experiences where the execs have been really supportive, and it’s been absolutely fine, fun even. Especially the last job I had was a very positive experience, and my next job is with the same production company, so right now I’m loving TV. I like having more resources and more budget to create bigger things. And I like the pace of it. It’s faster and more exciting.

I’ve had some really exciting, creative and fun music videos, but it’s the least money and the most pressure. Everyone’s tearing their hair out, trying to make a film in a week and a half, but they’ve been so creative and people take more risks and more chances with them. It’s nice to have a mental break, a different kind of mental challenge and do quick, creative projects. I love having the freedom to move between film, TV and promos. That is ideal for me. That’s why this career suits me so much. I love to do a TV show, then a TV commercial. I feel lucky to be able to do it. When I started, people told me you can’t do that, you have to pick: you need to either be a maker or a designer, and then you need to pick film or TV or commercials. You cannot do everything. And I’m thinking, *That’s so boring.*

Does costume design and styling cross over?

That’s such a good question. I guess styling is more about presenting a version of the person, and their ego or alter ego, and to me, costume design is more storytelling and using the clothes to fit in with the narrative of the whole world and creating a language, using different elements to push the story forward for the viewer.

What should those starting out know if they want to be a costume designer?

In terms of trying to break in, I would say to just keep hacking at it ’cause it can take a while if you don’t know anyone in the industry. Be persistent. There’s so much available technology-wise to build up a portfolio of images like iPhones, TikTok and Facebook you can

◀ create stuff with. Be a DoP and shoot content you can post online.

People message me sometimes about how to get in. I say just keep messaging people, keep making stuff and eventually you'll message someone at the right time when they need help and they'll call you. It's good to have your stuff on Instagram so that you have a profile that people can see. Mine wasn't costume design, but people could see that I was creative. I was styling photo shoots and making really elaborate underwear, and it was sort of costumey.

At the end of the day, it's images of what you've styled and made that look good. People can see what you can turn your hand to. Even when I was getting into college to do the make-up degree, I showed them all my fine art, my oil paintings and stuff like that.

That's how I got in, my portfolio at the time. There are online portfolios everywhere, and you can connect with people on the other side of the world. I think it's a really exciting time.

Are you a natural leader?

I don't know about natural, but I've worked really hard to be good at it, and I'm still working at it all the time. A natural leader probably loves the responsibility, and I don't. I often think it's quite overwhelming. But I take it really seriously. My team tell me that I'm good at it and they like working for me, so I hope that is the case.

Visit Ruka's website.



Figure E5.2 Top left to right: Gabe Robinson, Tienne Simon and Shanu Hazzan. Bottom left to right: Juwon Adedokun and Yus Jamal Crookes. The school-leavers' uniforms circa 2001 were fun to do, replicating the UK's school tradition of writing phone numbers, swear words and goodbye messages all over their uniform shirts on the last day. Before my team could start the customization, much research was required to make sure we got it right: the type of slang used in that year, old dialling codes and phone numbers and even current events we could reference or make cheeky jokes about. Costume designer: Ruka Johnson (*Grime Kids*, BBC, 2023). © BBC/Mammoth Screen/Ryan O'Donoghue

GABRIELA YIAXIS, Costume Designer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 156 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E5.3 Gabriela filming on location with a young cast member. Children have restricted hours when filming, to allow for education and rest time, and they are accompanied on and off set by a parent or chaperone. © Laura Radford

Your views on self-education?

The way your career evolves and the paths you choose along the way are more impactful than the subject you studied. ‘Studying’ doesn’t have to happen in a classroom: reading, learning skills, gaining knowledge, discussing with other professionals, observing and practising happens anywhere. You will get more and

more work in the areas you excel in, and that repetition will develop into your signature. The key is to put what you learn into practice, to be learning constantly and keeping yourself up to date. Never think you know everything or you will stop improving.

Visit Gabriela’s website.

AMY TAPPER, Key Costume Buyer

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 169 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E5.4 As a costume buyer and supervisor, Amy uses SyncOnSet, the mobile and web app that streamlines costume production across the whole department. © Screenshot created using SyncOnSet software owned by DISC Intellectual Properties, LLC dba Entertainment Partners

Tell us about using SyncOnSet

Communication is everything in this job so having software that helps keep everyone up to date is invaluable with one master set of notes to focus on. To effectively have real-time photos from set, along with continuity notes can be incredibly helpful while doing a line-up for the following day. It removes the need for additional folders on the trucks, printing and more notes for the standby. It can also help the wider costume team such as fitters and buyers by giving immediate access to costume photos, continuity or fitting photos, even when out of the office. It makes less work for the costume standbys, and it's useful for

other members of the team to have all the continuity photos at their fingertips. It's not a perfect solution, but there are always workarounds for issues that arise. I'd love to see the software expand for different set-ups and more options to customize in the future.

Learn more about SyncOnSet.

What is your advice to newcomers?

Persevere, be nice and use your common sense! If you want to come straight into this job from school, then learn to drive and be persistent yet polite with email and phone enquiries. Persistence really is key! ▶

◀ You need to prove to yourself as well as your potential employers that you have that tenacity and drive for what is a ultimately still quite a closed-shop, competitive industry.

People skills are essential in this work. When you work so closely for twelve or fourteen hours a day, it's important to get on with your team. You won't always get on with everyone, and that's okay, but learn

from it and move on. Making a TV series or a feature film is one enormous team effort, from costumes, to caterers to cast. Remember that everyone has a role to play. Even if you can't see it as important to you, it doesn't mean they don't deserve an equal amount of respect.

Visit Amy's IMDb profile.

EMILIA HARRIS, Costume Maker

Continuation of Close-Up interview (p. 178 of *Get into Costume* book)



Figure E5.5 Costume maker Emilia Harris loves stitching in fine detail whether by hand or machine. Photographer: Hannah Springall

Your tips for aspiring costume makers?

Don't be afraid to ask for advice on how to improve. There are many ways of doing anything, and some will work better for you than others. I love looking at any garments or costumes I can get my hands on to see how they've been put together, as there is always something to learn from them.

Being adaptable and a team player is also very important, because costume requirements can change very quickly, and there are a lot of deadlines to hit. If you can think quickly and calmly under pressure, it will serve you well. Being part of a team that keeps things optimistic and fun during the tougher times can make what would be a difficult job a pleasant experience. Film/TV work can be hard at times, but setting your own personal goals can keep you going. It's also very easy to get sucked in and lose track of the outside world; the longer I work, the more I realize the importance of having a work/life balance.

Find Emilia on Instagram.



Figure E5.6 Detailed trapunto work (a form of padded appliqué) for puppet costumes designed by Brian, Wendy and Toby Froud, cut by Debbie Phipps and hand-stitched by Emilia. *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance* (2019). Photo: Emilia Harris. Courtesy of The Jim Henson Company

Helpful Character Traits for Working in Costume

- ability to listen and remember
- adaptability
- a 'can do' attitude
- a collaborator and team player
- common sense
- communicative and responsive
- confidence
- curiosity
- eagerness to learn
- focused
- going the extra mile
- healthy ambition

- honest and trustworthy
- humility
- kindness
- a lateral thinker
- not afraid of hard work
- optimistic (glass half full)
- passion for your subject
- patience
- a people person
- resilience, ability to 'bounce back'
- resourceful, a problem solver
- respectful of others
- taking initiative
- willingness