

film

# THE CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

**COSTUME DESIGNER MARK BRIDGES FASHIONS CHARACTERS ONE GARMENT AT A TIME**

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

When Melissa Leo first saw her wardrobe for *The Fighter*—hangers of tight tops, short skirts, and flashy blazers with big shoulder pads circa the early 1990s—the veteran character actress was skeptical. But once they were on, Leo soon transformed into the gruff and ferocious mother of nine who would later earn her an Academy Award. “Suddenly it all came together and a third person emerged in the fitting room,” costume designer Mark Bridges (TSOA '87) recalls. “When we started, there had only been the two of us, and then her Alice Ward appeared.”

Tasked with bringing the people on the page to life, Bridges searches for a character nearly as deeply as the actor does, making his job as much about anthropology as it is about fashion. His detective work goes far beyond costume shops. Whether it's the 1927 Sears catalog, a faded photo album, or a vintage *GQ* spread, Bridges uses all manner of resources to illustrate the story for the director before shooting even begins. His specialty is period films and, having tackled nearly every decade of the past century, he's become an expert on bygone eras and their smallest details (a deco collar here, an aged campaign hat there).

So it's fitting that after more than 20 years of telling stories through clothing, Bridges won an Oscar earlier this year for Best Achievement in Costume Design on perhaps the most challenging period piece in decades—*The Artist*.

When Bridges took the stage and thanked the Academy “for making a lifelong dream come true,” he meant it literally. As a kid growing up in Niagara Falls, he spent a lot of time at the movies to

escape the long, icy winters of Western New York's snowbelt and fell in love with silent films at a local revival theater. “I just became really fascinated at an early age,” he says. “I still have a book report from seventh grade that I did on silent-movie actors [like] Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks.”

For a film fanatic who also loved drawing, painting, and fabrics, costuming proved a natural fit. He'd grown up watching his grand-

SKETCHES COURTESY MARK BRIDGES; PHOTO © MATT SAYLES/STAR



mother sew and began making his own Halloween costumes around age 9. “It’s really a job that combines everything I was naturally good at or drawn to,” he says. After earning an MFA in costume design from the Tisch School of the Arts, Bridges got his big break in 1988 on the Coen Brothers Prohibition-era drama *Miller’s Crossing*. He was hired for just a few days of sizing clothes, but his hard work prompted costume designer Richard Hornung to keep Bridges as his assistant for the duration of the shoot—as well as eight more films after that, including *The Grifters*, *Barton Fink*, and *Nixon*.

But it was Bridges’ love of classic cinema that helped land him the most important film of his career. In a preliminary meeting with director Michel Hazanavicius, the designer referenced the 1928

MARK BRIDGES (AT RIGHT) HAS DESIGNED COSTUMES FOR NEARLY EVERY DECADE OF THE 1900S—FROM VINTAGE '20S GOWNS IN *THE ARTIST* (FAR LEFT), TO '70S CHIC IN *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, AND TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY WORKWEAR IN *THERE WILL BE BLOOD*.

comedic gem *Show People*, which happened to be the very film that had inspired Hazanavicius to write *The Artist*—last year’s silent, black-and-white tribute to the Golden Age of Hollywood. The concept was a gamble, but Bridges believed in it from the start: “I thought, in this time when film so heavily relies on CGI and 3-D, maybe what we really need is to get back to basics, and to telling a *story* instead of whipping everybody into a frenzy with all these other gadgets.”

The old-fashioned format, however, came with some unusual filmmaking challenges. Most fabric patterns looked like mush in black and white, so Bridges used sequins, satins, brocades, and spangles to catch the light and compensate for the lack of color and definition. These adjustments were essential, Bridges says, on a film stripped of dialogue. “It’s like if a person loses their sight, their other senses become more acute,” he explains. “Once you didn’t have the language, then you became more aware of all the visuals. So between texture and contrast, that’s how we

told a story without any words.” The film opens with leading man George Valentin in stark black-and-white tails at the height of his fame, but the suits fade to a more gray value as his career plummets with the arrival of talkies. Meanwhile fresh-faced dancer Peppy Miller starts out simple and sweet in flat textured dresses that

put my hands on clothing, just trying to find actual garments to inspire me,” says Bridges, who then scours thrift shops once he’s on location. “You won’t even be looking for things or *know* that you’re looking—you’ll just stumble upon it and it will turn out to be one of the greatest finds.”

Although the ladies’ silk gowns

Bridges searches for a character nearly as deeply as the actor does, making his job as much about anthropology as it is about fashion.

become more elaborate and luxurious with her rise as Hollywood’s hottest new starlet. By the end, Peppy dons an extraordinary black coat trimmed in monkey fur, a surviving piece from the 1920s that, along with the hats and background clothes, Bridges discovered in a Los Angeles costume shop. “One of the first things I do is go

and Bond-girl bikinis get most of the attention, Bridges relishes the challenge of menswear. The less-versatile medium forces him to be extra creative, such as with the bright-blue suit Adam Sandler wears throughout all of *Punch-Drunk Love*, and Johnny Depp’s white safari jacket and ribbed

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turtleneck ensemble in *Blow*. The latter film's 1970s chic earned Bridges praise from *Vogue*: "It's the clothes...that really make *Blow* worth watching."

But not all shoots can be glamour and vintage Yves Saint Laurent. The turn-of-the-century oil drama *There Will Be Blood* was filmed in the West Texas desert without any stores or FedEx on hand, so Bridges instructed his crew to "prepare like we're going to Gilligan's Island," because they would be limited to whatever supplies they had. The unforgiving set was hot, dusty, and crawling with rattlesnakes, but Bridges toughed it out with faith in his fearless leader, Paul Thomas Anderson. Over the past 17 years, Bridges has designed every one of the writer-director's

films, developing a relationship based on mutual trust. "I remember getting a phone call before *Blood* and he said, 'Mark, I need to know what my movie's gonna look like,'" Bridges says.

Their latest collaboration is the 1950s drama *The Master*, which stars Joaquin Phoenix as a World War II vet named Freddie, who is drawn to a charismatic thinker in the mold of L. Ron Hubbard, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman (TSOA '89). To prepare for it, Bridges searched for candid family photos from 1950 to, as he says, "get the feel of what regular people really looked like—not Hollywood's or Madison Avenue's version of America." The challenge is to make the clothes seem natural despite all the effort that goes into them. As Bridges puts it, "If you don't notice my work then I've done a good job, because I haven't taken you out of the moment, I've only enhanced your experience." ■

## CREDITS

### ALUMNI TAKE A BOW AT THE TONYs—THEN TAKE OVER FALL TV



NINA ARIANDA

At the 2012 Tony Awards, **NINA ARIANDA** (TSOA '09) won Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Play for the racy comedy *Venus in Fur*, while composer **ALAN MENKEN** (ARTS '72, HON '00) took home Best Original Score for Disney's *Newsies*... Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Musical went to **STEVE KAZEE** (TSOA '05), who stars alongside **CRISTIN MILIOTI** (TSOA '07) in *Once*, based on the Oscar-winning drama... **DONYALE WERLE** (TSOA '02) earned Best Scenic Design of a Play for the whimsical *Peter and the Starcatcher*, produced by **ADAM S. GORDON** (TSOA '89)... **GREGG BARNES** (TSOA '83) scored Best Costume Design of

a Musical for the revival of the Stephen Sondheim classic *Follies*... **NIC ROULEAU** (STEINHARDT '09) has taken the lead as missionary Elder Price in *The Book of Mormon*, which dominated last year's Tonys... Funnyman **JAMES RODAY** (TSOA '98) returns for the seventh season of the detective comedy *Psych*, making it the USA Network's longest-running series... **ZACH WOODS** (GAL '07) is back at *The Office* on NBC, while **SIMON HELBERG** (TSOA '02) reprises his geek role on CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*... **PETER FACINELLI** (GAL non-grad alum) plays the Cullen clan patriarch in next month's blockbuster *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn—Part 2*. —Renée Alfuso

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# View From the Driver's Seat

**BROADWAY PRODUCER BARBARA WHITMAN TALKS ABOUT STEERING SHOWS TO THE BIG STAGE**

by Justin Warner

**O**n the twisty, precarious road to Broadway, producer Barbara Whitman (GAL '88) has proven herself a deft driver. In her 10-year career, she's helped to steer many hits, including *Legally Blonde*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, the 2004 revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Broadway production of Donmar Warehouse's *Hamlet*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Next to*

*Normal*. So it's fitting that her current Broadway-bound vehicle features an actual vehicle: the hollow shell of a Nissan pickup truck, which anchors the set of the new musical *Hands on a Hardbody*.

*Hardbody's* subject matter isn't obvious fodder for a musical. It's based on a 1997 documentary film of the same name, which chronicled a competition still held every September sponsored by a radio station and auto dealership in Longview, Texas. The rules: Contestants must keep one hand

on a pickup truck at all times—no sitting, lying, squatting, or leaning allowed. (The only exceptions are a five-minute break every hour, and one 15-minute break every six hours.) The last person standing takes home the truck, and that took almost 93 hours in the longest contest. Originally staged at the La Jolla Playhouse in Southern California, the show features music by Trey Anastasio of the legendary jam band Phish and book by Pulitzer Prize-winner Doug Wright (TSOA '87).

IN HANDS ON A *HARDBODY*, BARBARA WHITMAN BRINGS A LONG-STANDING TEXAS COMPETITION TO THE BROADWAY STAGE.

Like the *Hardbody* characters, Whitman has always been a "hands-on" producer, and likes to be a part of a show's earliest development. Perhaps that's because she understands evolution. As a singer and actress in New York in the 1980s, Whitman mostly landed traveling shows while dance-heavy productions such as *Cats*, *A Chorus Line*, and *42nd Street* dominated Broadway. Motherhood prompted her to transition into a less itinerant, more lucrative position at M.J. Whitman, a family-owned brokerage firm, where she became a managing director. Still, her passion for theater eventually led her to pursue a master's in theatrical production, where one of her mentors, David Stone, invited her to be a producer on *A Raisin in the Sun* before she even graduated.

NYU Alumni Magazine spoke

PHOTO © KEVIN BERNIE

with Whitman about what inspires her to get behind the wheel of a show, and what it takes to drive one all the way to Broadway in the digital age.

**WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO *HARDBODY* WHEN YOU FIRST SAW IT IN THE NEW YORK WORKSHOP?**

It was a world I'd never seen before in a Broadway musical, with characters I'd never seen before in a Broadway musical. They're blue-collar Texans, and they're treated with such respect and love and care. And it's fascinating to me that for these people, to win a \$22,000 truck would truly change the circumstances of their lives.

**IT'S ALSO A SHOW IN WHICH PEOPLE SING AND DANCE WHILE KEEPING ONE HAND ON A TRUCK. WAS THAT THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE?**

Certainly, the tricky part for me is *explaining* what it is, because people say, "Really? They just hold the truck?" And I say, "No,

**TO THE ONES YOU HAVE PRODUCED?**

Well, marketability. I think you have to say: Who's going to buy tickets to this show? But if I look for me, personally, it's a story I'm interested in hearing. *Next to Normal* is a bipolar mom, and *Legally Blonde* is a Valley girl who went to Harvard. And on the surface, there's nothing in common with those two shows, but to me, they're people I wanted to spend an evening with.

**DO YOU INVEST IN YOUR SHOWS OR JUST RAISE THE MONEY?**

I've always invested in my shows. I don't think it would be fair to say, "You can put your money at risk, but I won't put mine." There's certainly no obligation to do it, but I do.

**YOU'VE BEEN PRODUCING ON BROADWAY FOR 10 YEARS.**

**WHAT HAS CHANGED THE MOST?**

The Internet. Every show has a website, every show has Face-

"It was a world I'd never seen before in a Broadway musical, with characters I'd never seen before in a Broadway musical."

they really do move." It's kind of like saying, "What do they do in *A Chorus Line*?" Well, they stand in this line and talk about their lives. It doesn't sound so interesting.

What I love about the show now is that the audience is so caught up in the story, that when the contestants start falling, you'll hear gasps, because they don't see it coming, and they like these people.

**WHAT MAKES YOU WANT TO GET BEHIND A SHOW? IS THERE A COMMON THEME**

book, every show makes video content that they can post. It's definitely changed what we do.

*Next to Normal* was a perfect show for [the Internet]. We had a Twitter campaign where we tweeted the plot [line by line for several weeks]. Like for the first scene, it would be the thoughts in their heads: The mother would say, "Oh, I'd better make the sandwiches." And then you could click to hear the opening number. We had over a million followers, for a long time. That's unusual for Broadway. ■

playlist

## WHAT'S ON COMPOSER JULIA WOLFE'S IPOD?

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11

**F**or Julia Wolfe, co-founder of the genre-busting, experimental-music organization Bang On a Can, no instrument or musical style is off-limits. She's written for everything from drum sets to bagpipes to string orchestras, and her chamber work *Steel Hammer*—based on the Appalachian folk legend of John Henry—was a finalist for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize.

But where does Wolfe, an assistant professor in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, turn for inspiration? To James Brown, for one ("an amazingly expressive musician," she says), and to minimalist composer Steve Reich, whose *Music for 18 Musicians* anchors her list of "music that has rocked my world." John Adams' *Shaker Loops* also makes the cut, along with works by contemporary composers Terry Riley, Meredith Monk, and—of course—Wolfe's husband, Michael Gordon.

She's also a "huge fan" of Led Zeppelin and has been known to rock out to Aretha Franklin while doing the dishes. As part of her research for *Steel Hammer* and other folk-influenced compositions, Wolfe devoured the old-time music of fiddler Bruce Molsky. And lately, as inspiration for a percussion concerto she's writing, she's been scouring YouTube for videos of people using their bodies as instruments.

Wolfe occasionally breaks out a well-worn recording of Glenn Gould playing Bach, though she says the classics aren't usually part of her "daily meal." Rounding out her omnivorous musical diet are a few top-40 selections from her 16-year-old daughter's iPod. Mom's favorite? Adele, though she also concedes that Rihanna is a "great performer." ■



PHOTO © PETER SERLING