

# LIGHTS, CAMERA, COSTUMES

Two leading ladies of the costume world reveal the secrets behind designing and making clothes for the dazzling world of television

Written by Rachel Avery



Clockwise from left: Susannah Buxton's moodboards for American fantasy TV show *Galavant* and the smash hit *Downton Abbey*; the cast of *Downton Abbey* in all their finery; costume designer Susannah has also worked on *Poldark* and for the film industry.

"Designing for *Downton Abbey* was a dream job," says Susannah. "These were new scripts not taken from a classic novel so, in the beginning, nobody recognised or knew the characters. Part of the pleasure is helping to create the personality of each character, alongside the director and the actors."

After hours of meticulous dedication, there's nothing quite like the sense of achievement you get when you've finished a project and take a step back to admire your own handiwork. Imagine that proud moment and then imagine it tenfold – this is the feeling that comes with seeing your own creation take centre stage. For costume designer, Susannah Buxton and costume maker, Faye Clements, it's all part of the job.

## THE DESIGNER

Settling down on a Sunday evening for a night in front of the television is a regular weekly occurrence for most of us, but it was a little different for Susannah Buxton while *Downton Abbey* was gracing our screens. The hit show, capturing life in the early 20th century, captivated audiences from 2010-2015, with six series. And, more recently, this British drama has been turned into a film.

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There are not many costume designers that can add Emmy award-winning and BAFTA award-winning to their CV, but costume designer Susannah can proudly claim both. "Winning a BAFTA was more exciting than I expected, it's recognition by your contemporaries of the standard of your work and it's a career highlight for me." But, although having your work displayed on prime time TV may sound like a dream, Susannah remains objective: "When I see my designs on the screen I am usually critical and always feel I could improve."

## MOODBOARDS AND MARKETS

Susannah is keen to point out that costume design is very different from fashion design because the garments are created to help reflect the characters' personality. The first steps to crafting a costume are: "Reading and understanding the script, analysing each principal character and researching the period in which they lived," she says. Next, attention turns to paintings and portraits in galleries and, with *Downton Abbey*, Susannah used photographic records to study the era. "I then put my visual research together and make a moodboard for each principal actor."

Where possible, period dramas use original vintage pieces to add to the authenticity of the character's wardrobe and Susannah often trawls vintage markets and shops, searching for antique trimmings. And in the name of sustainability, Susannah explains that, at *Downton Abbey*, they often work with costume houses, re-shaping, dying and re-styling pieces where necessary, instead of starting from scratch.

## A BALANCING ACT

Period dramas in particular require a rigorous level of research. The costume design is under scrutiny; it must stay true to the time





Costume maker Faye Clements creates a test garment made from calico first, from which alterations and adjustments are made. Then the final fabric is cut for the actual costume, which is mounted onto the calico piece for extra endurance and robustness.

period and to the character. "Even if you have experience of working in that era, it's so important to immerse yourself and understand the silhouettes and colours of the time, before you can put your own interpretation into the design."

Susannah also has to work around the actors' needs. "I would never make someone wear something they felt unhappy with, because it would distract them from their work in front of the camera," says Susannah. Which is why the two-way process between designer and actor is so important. The costume designer is actually the first person an actor will meet, after the director, which shows how much of an integral part the costumes play. Susannah's role spans not



only the concept of the garments, but also involves considering the practicalities and potential limitations. Physical craftsmanship is the next stage in the process...

### THE MAKER

Costume maker Faye Clements often works 12 hour days. "You might find yourself working long into the night to finish something in time," but that doesn't deter her. "When you enjoy something, you're not even aware of the time that has passed, you're only aware of the pleasure it gives you," says Faye. "Sewing isn't a talent, it's a skill. Anyone can get better through repetition." Faye enjoyed needlework in school, opting to take a textiles GCSE, but it wasn't until her late twenties that she decided to pursue it as a career. "I returned to education to study fashion design and then did a specialist theatre costume-making course, where I learned all the basic skills I would need to enter the industry at trainee

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level." Fast forward to today and Faye's creations have featured on many TV shows across the BBC and ITV and, more recently, on the Amazon Prime series *Outlander*.

*Outlander* was a large production and working on it made Faye recognise the importance of being surrounded by a dedicated team. "Everybody pulls together to make the costumes the best they can possibly be." It's Faye's job to ensure costumes are crafted to perfection. Every last detail of the fabric and needlework

will be captured on camera, so it has to be of the highest possible calibre. A meticulous crafting process is part of what ensures impeccable quality for on-screen garments.

### STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

Faye mainly worked on menswear for *Outlander*, but due to the time period (18th century) the male clothes were flamboyant and intricate – think cravats, kilts and bell sleeves. The heavily embroidered, silk frock

coats were among Faye's favourite pieces. She reveals what it takes to get from idea to fully-crafted, camera-ready costume. "It starts with the design brief, which may include a meeting to discuss what the designer wants. Then the design is handed over to the cutter, who is responsible for creating and bringing the costume to life. At this point they may delegate the sewing to a costume maker," says Faye. At this stage, the garment is a test piece made from calico. "After the first fitting, alterations and adjustments are made and the garment is cut from the final fabric." Faye reveals an insider secret – the test piece is often not discarded: "The final fabric is mounted onto the calico pieces to give the garment the strength and robustness it needs to endure regular use and washing." The costume may not even have sleeves at this stage, as they are pinned during a second fitting. A third fitting is scheduled for any tweaks and to ensure the garment is perfect. "Three fittings are usually a minimum, but this may be a luxury for some makers," she says.

**Period dramas try to use original vintage pieces to add authenticity to characters' wardrobes and to get the specifics just right, so costume designers will trawl vintage markets and shops on the hunt for antique trimmings and embellishments.**



### WORK VS PLAY

You may think Faye's talent means that she has a wardrobe bulging with handcrafted clothes, but you would be sorely mistaken. "I get asked about making my own clothes a lot, but the truth is I don't really make a lot of things for myself. I'm always crafting for other people so I often forget that I could make some nice garments for myself!" says Faye. Instead, she opts for extracurricular activities that don't require too much attention such as listening to audio books. Similarly to Susannah, Faye's dedication to her work prevents her from relishing in her own success too much. "When I see my work on screen, I find myself sometimes overthinking what I've done and going over ways I could have made it better." Faye says. "The thing to keep in mind is that finishing is more important than perfection. It's important to pat yourself on the back and acknowledge the good work you have done."

And that's probably a lesson we can all take away for our own crafting.



## SEAMSTRESS SECRETS

Faye Clements' ultimate top tips for budding costume makers

- 1 When fitting a garment, start at the top of the body and work your way down.
- 2 Pad out your mannequin using wadding and cling film to match the size and body shape of the wearer.
- 3 Use carbon paper and a tracing wheel to mark your seam lines where possible. You can also thread trace them by using long hand stitches on the stitch lines. It makes them much easier to see and you can remove them later.
- 4 Leave yourself plenty of seam allowance – an inch on straight seams and half an inch on curves.
- 5 If you're sewing with thick, bulky fabrics and the machine keeps sewing on the spot, place a folded piece of card behind the needle before dropping the foot. This will balance things and take some of the pressure off the feed dogs.
- 6 When attaching buttons without a shank, wrap the thread around tightly in circles on the underside to create one, this will help the button to sit correctly. A well sewn button shouldn't droop, it should stand nicely to attention.
- 7 When sewing towards the point of a dart, make the stitch very small as you approach so that you hit your mark. Never back tack the point of a dart as it will create bulk and prevent it pressing neatly.

