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# Sophie de Rakoff

What to wear? Hollywood looks to a cutting-edge costume designer to answer that age-old question.

INTERVIEW BY KELLY BORGESON

Photograph by Jacqueline Bohnert



I GOT INTO THIS BUSINESS purely by accident. Well, my father was an AD and a producer, and I grew up being very comfortable with the film business. When I lived in New York, I was a writer, and then when I moved to Los Angeles [in 1994], I couldn't get a job at a magazine, so I ended up working for a friend as a stylist—as an assistant—instead of, you know, having to waitress.

I've always loved clothes. When I lived in New York, all my friends were very fashionable. We all worked in nightclubs. And I'm from London, which is a very fashionable city. So it's something that came really naturally to me—aesthetics and images. But I think because of the writing as much as anything else... the reason I'm in film and not in fashion is because of character.

The most important thing people should know about costume designers is you're involved in creating a bigger picture. It's about creating a character. It's not about dressing somebody to go to the Oscars. You have to understand who the characters are immediately, because until you understand who they are, you don't understand what they look like and how they dress and why they dress a certain way. It's not just about what pair of shoes somebody wears. You have to understand what's going on inside of the script and the aim of the movie—what the tone is and what the theme is and what it's meant to be when it's finished. You help tell the story through the character's appearance.

*Legally Blonde* was my first time working with Reese [Witherspoon, with whom de Rakoff has since worked on three films]. It was also my first

studio movie. I think they just wanted someone young and unestablished to do it, because no one knew it was going to be a big movie. [Elle Woods's wardrobe] was based on the fact that sorority girls love pink, and they do. We went to a sorority house, and we went to the meetings, and everyone was wearing pink and black.

Reese is a really easy person to work with. If she thinks something's ridiculous, she's the first person to say it, but she's very open. I obviously have a really good idea of what fits her and what doesn't, what colors look good, what she likes and what she doesn't. The nice thing about it is that you get into a rhythm. It's not like starting all over again with somebody. That first fitting is always nerve-wracking because you're like, "What if I'm completely wrong?"

[In the *Legally Blonde* sequel, Elle gets involved in animal rights, and de Rakoff outfitted her in animal-free clothing.] When you start conceptualizing the movie, you just make these decisions, for better or for worse, and whether people get it or notice it, it doesn't really matter. It's a tool for you to work with. But, yes, it was a pain in the ass not being able to have leather shoes. But, you know, we're like, "Okay, we'll get people to take the shape of a leather shoe and make it in satin."

[In *September's* *Just Like Heaven*, Witherspoon plays a medical resident whose spirit wanders after she falls into a coma.] She basically has one outfit. It can't be a throwaway outfit. It's got to look really good. It's got to be, you know, relatively comfortable to wear. Everybody has to agree on it: the star, the director, the producers. We had one outfit set, and we camera-tested it, and it turned out that it wasn't what everybody hoped it would be. What you see with the eye and what actually ends up photographing are two very different things, especially when you get into the world of film stocks and lighting.

Curtis Hanson [director of October's *In Her Shoes*], I think because of *Legally Blonde*, was not interested in meeting me. You can get type-

cast by your work as a designer as much as you can by being an actor. If you look at my résumé, the first thing that stands out is *Legally Blonde*, and then there's a bunch of romantic comedies. I worked really hard for the interview, and put together a lot of visual references. And I saw it. I mean, I saw it immediately. As soon as I read that script, I knew exactly who the lead characters were. I had this burned-in impression in my brain of what they would look like and who they were.

We all have friends like Maggie [Cameron Diaz], the very attractive, slightly screwed-up party girl who you've known for years and who maybe hasn't moved on quite as much as you have. And I think a lot of women can identify with the Rose [Toni Collette] character, the smart girl who isn't as attractive as everyone else around her. They just made perfect sense to me. You think, well, obviously Maggie's always going to wear jeans, and she's going to want to show as much skin as possible. (Cameron has a fantastic body, so everything she wears

looks great on her.) And Rose has to dress a certain way to fit in her work world, and then obviously things start changing when her life changes. You just go with the circumstance and build from there.

The shoes [Rose collects, but does not wear, all sorts of fabulous footwear] are who Rose wants to be—who Rose would love to be physically and probably emotionally, too. There are all kinds of designer shoes in [her closet]. I mean, if you're going to spend over \$500 on a pair of shoes, who would you buy? You'd go look at Jimmy Choo and Christian Louboutin and Chanel. They're so expensive for a reason. It's because they're beautiful.



**REGALLY BLOND:** De Rakoff clothed Witherspoon for *Legally Blonde* and Cameron Diaz for *In Her Shoes*.

[As a costume designer] you only have a certain amount of money, so you can't go and buy a hundred pairs of shoes, because that's phenomenally expensive. So you work with certain designers who give you things, but within that, you also choose... The thing about Curtis is he's involved in every single decision. It's not like you turn up the day of the shoot and go, "Here's the shoe!" It didn't matter that the characters were women. He was totally tuned in to everything. He had a very specific color scheme for Philadelphia and a very specific color scheme for Florida, and he was very diligent about this. You really weren't allowed to waver from it. And it was not just me. The production designer and the prop people, and the sets and the DP, you know—we all work within these parameters of this palette.

My favorite designer, for me personally—whom I never use in movies because not a lot of people like him—is Dries van Noten. I love stuff with really bright, colorful prints and interesting silhouettes. (I would love to do a musical—kaleidoscopic, crazy, colorful, you know, with hundreds of people, preferably period or fantasy. Something that is pure imagination and pure color.) I also really love my shoes. I don't wear them that often—I live in California, you know, so I'm always in jeans and flip-flops and tank tops—but I have them. I've got a shelf full of them. It's definitely not like Rose's closet, but, you know. ■

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