

DRESSING THE PARTS

Costume designers detail the difficulties of making television look its best.

Viewers might think that all it takes to dress the cast of your average TV show is a few weekly trips to the Gap and an occasional foray to the Armani Boutique, but in truth, even the least adventurous contemporary sitcom requires the services of a costume designer who possesses equal amounts of artistry and discipline.

On Fox's "That '70s Show," costume designer Melina Root has the daunting — and some would say nauseating — task of re-creating the fashions of the bell-bottom decade. To prepare for the show's pilot in 1998, she scoured high-school yearbooks from Wisconsin (where the show is set) and its surrounding areas and created a specific look for each character. "When you do the pilot, it's like a little jewel," Root says. "But when we started the series itself, it was suddenly, OK, you now need to dress anywhere from 20 to 60 extras per week." The bulk of their start-up stock was purchased from a Sony Studios warehouse sale. "We bought 19 racks of clothes, a lot of which we use to dress atmosphere."

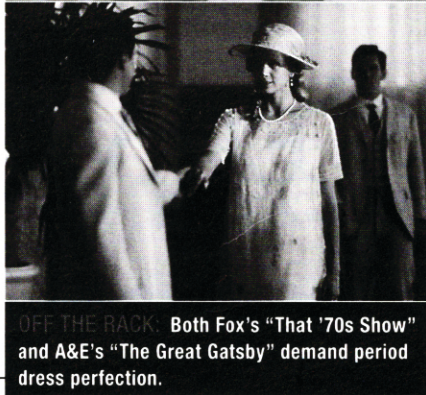
Having completed a third season, the show now has a warehouse filled with '70s-era clothes. "I've been buying up a lot of vintage fabric, so whatever we don't have in stock or we can't find, we can manufacture," Root says, who worked on 29 episodes of the show this season, along with several episodes of "3rd Rock From the Sun" and "Normal, Ohio."

Most of the boys' gear — which consists primarily of Levi's and T-shirts — can be purchased, but some of it is rare and irreplaceable. "I bemoan the loss of a Jimi Hendrix T-shirt that disappeared at the dry cleaners," Root says. "It was one of Hyde's (Danny Masterson) best shirts, and I'm convinced that they stole it, and some kid on Melrose is wearing it now."

Dressing the cast of Lifetime's "Any Day Now" is like working on two shows at once for costume designer Libby Palmer. The series focuses on two women in their 40s — one white (Annie Potts), the other African-American (Lorraine Toussaint) — who have been friends since childhood. The drama of their contemporary lives is intercut with flashbacks of their youth in racially charged Birmingham, Ala., in the '60s, which provides additional stylistic challenges for Palmer. "Each character is assigned a color, and nobody else can have that color on them," she explains, noting that this color changes from scene to scene. "Then everybody else in the background has to be clothed in period-neutral clothes — black, white, gray, brown, beige." Shot in color, the background and extras are further muted in post, while the main characters' colors are highlighted.

Palmer generally operates with a four-person crew and a \$12,500 budget for each eight-day shoot. Extra money and personnel are allotted for exceptionally large scenes such as the re-creations of a Ku Klux Klan rally (with robes rented from "O Brother, Where Art Thou?") and the 1963 civil-rights march on Birmingham.

"We do a combination of purchase, rental and build," Palmer says. "When it comes to the principals, there's more building involved. With the background, it's always pretty much purchased or rented. We've actually built up a pretty big stock."



OFF THE RACK: Both Fox's "That '70s Show" and A&E's "The Great Gatsby" demand period dress perfection.

Although next season's flashbacks will take its leads smack into the middle of the swinging psychedelic era (1967-68), the show is set in Birmingham, not San Francisco, so Day-Glo and paisley will generally be relegated to cameos. "I rely more on what the Sears catalog might show fashion to be as opposed to Vogue magazine." Still, she admits, "I'm going to have to get a whole lot of new stuff."

There are few catalogs to help costume designer Terry Ryan with his work on the Sci-Fi Channel series "Farscape." Working in conjunction with Jim Henson's Creature Shop on the show's Sydney, Australia, location, Ryan must create otherworldly outfits for actors portraying earthlings and aliens as well as for animatronic characters of all shapes and sizes. According to Ryan, the biggest challenge of designing for the mechanical characters is allowing for all the wires and cables used to control them.

Nicoletta Massone, the Italian-born, Montreal-based costume designer for A&E's "The Great Gatsby," which takes place in the early 1920s, also experienced challenges — but for a very different reason. "It was between epochs, and we don't have a lot of movies from this period," she says, adding that much of the finer clothing worn by the characters was made of silk, which does not age well.

Carol Ramsey's work on the miniseries "Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis" (CBS) centered on re-creating the specific reality of one of the 20th century's most-scrutinized women. "The producers wanted it to be very historically accurate, and that's always a challenge," Ramsey says. "I spent a lot of hours in the library, and I had a couple of people on my crew working with me on research. I compiled really extensive notebooks of

pictorial references, not just of Jackie, but of the whole Kennedy clan." She also researched other historical figures and military personnel.

"I really only had seven to eight weeks to prep," recalls Ramsey, who previously had a historical workout on the biopic "Surviving Picasso." "It was desperately short (time) for something so big, so we had to have a really big crew." On the set in Montreal, she had a core staff of 15 people that was regularly augmented by a large crew of fitters employed to dress the approximately 3,000 extras used.

"We rented a lot from Western Costume in Los Angeles," Ramsey says, as well as L.A.'s Palace Costumes and Repeat Performance. "We got a lot of military stuff from them and also a lot of the civilian clothes — men's suits. Usually, when I do a period film, I'll go from place to place and rent a lot from different places, but in this case I just didn't have time."

The task of ensuring that the costumes for "Jackie" reflected the period was made easier by the subject matter as well as a healthy budget. "It wasn't luxurious," says Ramsey, "but it wasn't impossible." "Clothes are a really big part of a show about Jackie Kennedy, and they really wanted to have it look opulent and spectacular." But too often TV costume budgets are painfully low.

"There's more money on the crafts service table than there is in costuming," Root laments. "It's remarkable what costume designers do with very little money." □