

The Art of Storytelling through Costume Designing with Amy Stofsky

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino society with Owen Shapiro. Today on Kino Society, we have Amy Stofsky, one of the most sought after costume designers of the industry who has participated in movies such as Mulholland Drive and Lone Survivor. So before getting deep into your work as a costume designer, I would like to know how you got started in this business was being a custom designer a dream of yours since you were a little kid are the specialists developed over two years?

Amy Stofsky 00:37

Well, I was in the fashion industry in New York for many years. And when I came out here, I was fortunate enough to meet a costume designer who took me under her wing. And then step by step by step, you know, here I am. But it was I was more interested in fashion, but then I kind of liked costumes, because it didn't have to be so pristine people were real, you know, you could have you could have dirt on your shirt, you know, you could have pizza dripping that you Ah, you know, like real people, it was easier, it was more interesting and more creative to dress real equal than it was to just, you know, set up models. So that was really how I made the transition.

Owen Shapiro 01:26

So in Yeah, yeah, it's more variety with film than you would just do making fancy dresses or whatever.

Amy Stofsky 01:32

It's a different world. And it's always different. Because you meet a lot of different people, and you go through so many different stages. It's not just you, you learn how the set works, how hammer works, you learn how different departments work, you're you you have to work with the producer, well, with the producer, with a production designer, with the set designer, you know, it's more, more fun, and it's more collaborative, then it's more interesting. And it's, and yeah, since you do different shows, each show was different. You could be on a period show, or contemporary show, or Cowboys, and Indians are cops or, you know, whatever. So it makes it makes it more fun. Yeah, just the change makes it more fun when doing something different. Oh,

Owen Shapiro 02:22

yeah, I see. That makes a lot of sense.

Amy Stofsky 02:24

You meet so many different people, you know, and then they're your lifelong friends. They're your family.

Owen Shapiro 02:30

Yeah. So yeah, it film takes a lot of connections in general, that you need to get in the industry? Well,

Amy Stofsky 02:37

you know, yeah, it takes a long time. It takes a long time. I have an agent, I've had an agent for a while on it now 20 something years, you know, in the beginning of your career, you don't need it. But when you get to a certain point, you need an agent.

Owen Shapiro 02:55

So now let's focus on your work. Being a custom designer does sound like a lot of work. Could you describe your typical day as a costume designer goes by when shooting a movie?

Amy Stofsky 03:05

Well, we start very early. And usually if there are, the background is usually unless we're fortunate enough to dress the background. Yeah, with free fits, which isn't always the case, because then you have to pay everybody. You start with dressing background, and then you know, that could be five people or it could be 500 people, it depends. But even if you have three fittings, it's a lot of work. And with the military movie, you know, wherever each star is, and each thing, it's a whole thing of baseball, movie cleats, the pants, drop straps, you know, each thing entail so many pieces. So you have to be very prepared, that that's the main thing. So we dress people, and then you know, so it was nice to go eat. And usually, usually we're just a day or two ahead of the production. So it's basically following a shooting schedule and seeing what we, you know, what's next, or if there's fittings or what you have to get, or you're now in the time of COVID everything will be different, of course, you know, but hopefully, yeah, hopefully this will pass sooner rather than later. But it's a big day. You know, you have fittings, you have shopping, you have meetings. It's a long day. It's a long day.

Owen Shapiro 04:33

So you're already mentioned that you like the different diverse kinds of costumes that you get with film, but do you have any specific kind of garment that you'd like to design the most? No,

Amy Stofsky 04:43

is it you know, it's always easier to do men's wear?

04:47

Yeah,

Amy Stofsky 04:48

so maybe I do prefer men's wear because it's easier. You know, all in so much depends on your budget. So much depends on your time restraints. You know, a lot of studios don't even have costume departments anymore. You You know, it's not like it was in the day, not every studio has, you know, there was a point where the hat makers there was this there was that it's, it's slimmed down in this millennium. So you just really, you know, you make certain things and you, you have to buy a lot, you know, you have to buy a lot. But if you're making something, you know, you look for tone, you look for texture, you think about the character, you see, you know, you usually have to age things, so you bring in an age or die, or just so it looks, you know, it doesn't look like a bad theatrical production of some high school. You know, there's like, so many different stages, but each one is different. Each show is different. So you have to prepare for it in a different way. You know, sometimes you have a crew of 10, or 15. And sometimes you have a crew of five. And each gig is different, which, again, is the diversity

that I like, you know, it's it's really the diversity that I like, and you have to really, you know, you have to study history, and you have to know about fabrics, you have to know how to get things done. It's, you know, it's a juggling act.

Owen Shapiro 06:09

So does that mean for the characters only based on your criteria are the director of the movie is the one who chooses how to dress them?

Amy Stofsky 06:17

Well, you have to start, you know, you start with a template of sorts, you know, you have your ideas, and then things have to get approved by the director. And, of course, the actor has a lot of input now. Tremendous amount of input put, usually an actor, when they come to a costume fitting, it's like, if they put on the costume. It's like, they find themselves so they find who their character is, you know, so you study the actor, you know, you when their sizes, what they're doing, if there's action, if there's not action, if they're shot, if you squibs, if you need multiples, it just really depends. But you know, you're the first person that an actor meets when they come to a show, because the first thing they do is get fit. So, um, you know, changes a lot, too. I mean, it's not always a home run, you know, sometimes, you know, an African have, you know, 3040 changes in the show, so, you might not get them all you do it? Well, on TV, it's episodic, so you can't dress an entire season in a costume pairing. But, um, you know, on a movie, depending on what it was, sometimes you you can, it just depends, you know, that there's usually, you know, this ensemble cast this day players this, you know, you try to work it out with the production designer, and with the director, you try to work out your colors, you know, it's really collaborative.

Owen Shapiro 07:46

So how do you manage to match the clothing of the character with its personality, though? How does that process go about?

Amy Stofsky 07:53

Well, it's primarily based on what they're doing in the show, as opposed to their personality, you know, but let's say that, if there's an older man, let's say, you know, you sort of think of when he might have bought the clothing that you're putting him in, you know, the shirt could be 25 years old, so maybe the button is popping, because he's a little chubbier than he was. So you, you know, you do that with a clothing, you just try to make it real, like how it would look if how it would look, if a real character came in, like what they're doing. Are they bobbing? Bang, so then you wouldn't put him in bright colors? You put him in something more subdued? You know, is it a love scene? You know, you put him in something sexier? Is it an old guy? Is it an old lady? Is she Russian? Does she ever know the thing on her head? You don't I mean, you just try to find the key piece that will pop her character, so that they're memorable. Because if you're doing something with so many people, like Have you even remember who anybody is after a while, you know, you have to have something that differentiates them. You know, maybe a prop would be a cigar and or costumes, maybe it would be a pork pie hat or maybe it would be you know, some kind of scar or, you know, it could be a hero jacket, or a belt. It could be you know, it could be anything that you want to put that the director You know what, what they want to see it's input on all you know, if they're going to do a shot on somebody's shoes, if they're getting out of the

car, pop the shoes, make them read, it's kind of like that, you know, but you you share ideas to see what what an actor would be comfortable in, you know, you get if they don't like, you know, tight jeans, you're not going to put them in tight, tight jeans, you know, if they don't like a cat, you're not going to put them in that, you know, sometimes if their comfort level is almost more important, you know, that is if they're not comfortable, your life isn't good. You know, their shoes aren't comfortable. Your Life isn't good. If they're climbing a mountain and their boots, you know, we get used You know, it's smart to give them their boots first. So that they recommend so that they used to standing in them all day because you know, an average date would be 16 hours, and to be in something uncomfortable for 16 hours, and you want to shoot yourself. So so it's it's, you know, it's all part of the gig. You know, it's like, if I was dressing you Oh, and I'm like, Okay, what does this guy do? What would he be comfortable? In? What? What would look best on him? What color are his eyes? What tone is his skin? What? That's how we do it, we look at the big picture. And then we think we anticipate what your needs might be. He gets cold, wet, let's have a down jacket for him, he gets hot, let's, let's have multiples in case he sweats. You know, you try to think of you know, all the variables so that when you're, you know, standing in the middle of a mountain, somebody isn't not enjoying what they're doing. They're thinking about issues hurting rather than their character.

Owen Shapiro 10:57

So how accommodating do actors tend to be in terms of costume design?

Amy Stofsky 11:02

Most actors really like their fittings, because like I said, it's the first place they go. So it's the first thing it gives them a visual idea, you know, more often than not, you know, more often than not it usually inaccurate moves of fitting in, it's like, thank you so much. This gave me the script, I know where to go. Now. This gives me an idea. You know, I once got in trouble with a producer, you know, and it was so mind boggling to me. Because actors were asking me, I had just started the show. And they were like, me, Where am I from? What did I do? And I'm like, Well, on the script that says that you you were, you know, in the, in the, in the military at one point, I said, so maybe let's let's make you favor all of like you used to all of us color. That's what you've been wearing for four years, and maybe that's your color. Anyway, I went to the showrunner. And I said, you know, these, these actors are asking me like, what their background is what they did. And he's like, what do you need to know that for you just get the clothes. And I was really dumbfounded. And I my jaw drop? Because I said, you know, we try to think of get where they're from, what they do, where they went where they come, you know, and like, it just didn't make any sense to him? Well, that's what we do this the first thing we do, you know, from where, from, you know, where did you come here? You know, are you musician, this, you know, you were like, give him a leather jacket? Is he an old Russian or like, give him the leather jacket? You know, you try to think of each you know, like, where they're from what they did, and I was at the time, I was just like, so taken aback and my jaw dropped. Because that's what we do. And that's what makes it fun for me, you know, to give the background story or to put myself in their shoes. Like, what would I do? If I was doing that? How would I get out before?

Owen Shapiro 12:51

Yeah, that's it's definitely a lot of sense. I don't know why the actor would be so I'm so confused as to why would be asking him those questions. Oh, producer.

Amy Stofsky 13:03

Yeah. Oh, and for some people, you know, some producers really like the fact that, you know, you're thinking like that, you know, you're thinking of the big picture. But you're not, you know, you're telling a story. And it's visual, you know, it's visual, and that's what makes it so impactful. You know, when you see something as opposed to hearing it, it doesn't always you know, the the visual the image that you see is Oh, yeah, of course, the visuals are have the part of the movie, you know, captures you and stays with you. It's all the movie, love the story, of course, but you know, what you what you see in the storytelling is what you remember, you know, I mean, you'll remember lines from the Godfather.

Owen Shapiro 13:43

So I know that your expertise is on custom design, construction, script interpretation, color usage, textiles, structure, distinguishing character, acid and research. Could you briefly walk us through what each of these terms refer to?

Amy Stofsky 13:57

Well, research is research, you know, you you research a, you know, you research everything, just so you have an idea of, you know, where the person was from, you know, what, what elements of their space or their socio economic group, what they do for a living where they grew up. So, you know, it gives you that idea of fabrics, it's like, you know, when you kind of know how to make a garment, you could choose what fabric it is, what's the lining of the jacket, if you don't put a lining and your arms of get caught if you don't, you know, it's basically just understanding construction. You know, like if you know how things fit,

Owen Shapiro 14:38

or custom design, construction, script interpretation, color usage, textile structure, distinguishing characteristics.

Amy Stofsky 14:45

It's really everything. It's really everything we've spoken about. You know, like you take all of this and comes into consideration of what colors look good on somebody or is it winter? Is it summer, if it's winter, I should give a texture does he look veteran earthtones Should I get fabric that a more earthtones is when he looked better and like blackened charcoal. You know, it's just really being able to look at somebody, and to think on your feet. And really, you got to think on your feet a lot, you got to go into action mode, it's a lot of step. And also constant is a lot of physical work. It's heavy, loving is heavy, you know, we have 40 foot trailers, we have 52 foot trailers, you know, we could have 250 foot trailer, 52 foot trailers, one with the principal clothes and one with the extra clothes, you know, like this, many clothes, and whatever you need, you know, you'll get that 36 short, and who's a 36? Short, you know, like, you It's so you need a lot of stuff to keep the customer satisfied. You know, like I said, when when, when people design movies, you know, they look for texture, really in everything, you know, even in like wallpaper, you know, because it gives this depth to it. And then you have to think of the lighting to like what will you know, like, I can't put somebody in a pink suit if the couch is pink. And that's happened to me, where it's like, suddenly, they decided to make half pink. And it's like, oh, my God who has a pink couch, and we put him in a pink jacket, you know, it's so you really have to coordinate things in

advance. You can't think of everything. And I think a lot about fabric basically, because you know, I like rich fabrics. I like things that move. Like it's nice to see Ray on it moves as opposed to stiff, hot and it doesn't, you know, you'd like to see the flow of a barn. You know, a lot of times you're doing winter. And it's not like I was structured moves. But you know, said like, that's where you want to see the colors and the texture. And, you know, it's all about everything happened so quickly. So it's like that first impression that you're going to get is what's going to stay like, Oh, yeah, that jacket was really nice. It had some other No, it had some rust and green in it. I remember that. You know, it's it's just trying to find that piece or that memory for whoever's looking at it. And it's always about the director too, because you might think something is, you know, fantastic. You have to get things approved. Now, you have to go through an approval stage. And you know, in this age of zoom conversations, and and you know that everything is incident, you know, we need to take fitting pictures, and then they go to the masses. Yeah, it's challenging, because everybody, you know, everybody gets dressed, but it doesn't mean that everybody can dress a character. So you were up against that to where, you know, but no one would ever question the cameraman because people don't know how to use the camera, or they know how to put on pair of hands. So that's what happens with us. Oh, and you know, where we're visual storytellers. And we try to find pieces and items that stand out or that gives you a memory. And it's really the same on every show, you go through the same routine, the differences is the subject matter. But the process is always the same. The research, the shopping, the fitting the dyeing, the aging, the tailor, you know, the, it's like that process is always the same. You know, when we did when I did that Lone Survivor movie, we had to have 38 uniforms, or Mark Wahlberg. And it was the different stages of his haircut. And they were cookie cutter because in a camouflage app, called a camouflage hat match. And we don't make that hand collage anymore in the United States. So at Western costume, they were kind enough to target for us in the Dominican Republic. So then we had to bring in old camouflage from the Dominican Republic, to make American uniforms. And because of everything his character goes through, we need 38 he needed 38 costumes, you know, the different aspects of his of everything he went through,

Owen Shapiro 19:14

and that I have not seen that movie yet. But I've heard that it was definitely a I think I heard it was a good movie. Lone Survivor, right?

Amy Stofsky 19:24

It was a great movie. The horror movie. Yeah, what what does but you know, wars more. I mean, these guys go through these thinking. Think of this. In this day and age, we find a better way than to blow each other up.

Owen Shapiro 19:39

Definitely a more complicated question. Doesn't seem Sunday outside that works. But what I'm particularly interested in personally is you've actually worked on one of my all time favorite movies, Mulholland Drive. So what was it like on that set in particular? Well,

Amy Stofsky 19:53

David Swann and David's an interesting director. I've worked on a couple of his projects and You know, he makes things very interesting and very spur of the moment and he'll be like, you know, do you have

a Louis the 14th dress? Like why would I have a Louis the 14th dresses contemporary movie, but I ran out and got a Louis the 14th dress. You know, David, you can't be prepared enough, but it's always a fun set. It's always a very alive set. And he makes up a lot of things as he goes, Mulholland Drive started off as a TV show. It was gonna be a TV series, and then it progressed into a movie. It was a huge movie for Naomi Watts. It was really the beginning of her career here in America. You know, it's been interesting to watch her become a superstar, that any movie that you're doing with David Lynch is really, you know, it's it's fascinating. Yeah, the process is fascinating. There's always really good quality to the man likes his coffee. I did the Twin Peaks movie to a fire walk with me. And I work I've done I've worked on a couple of David's shows. You know, he's, he's finding really talented, smart, interesting, a fascinating personality. You know, he's he's a combination of Jimmy Stewart and Diane Arbus. I always say, you know, the boy next door and the horror story.

Owen Shapiro 21:12

It's definitely very, very interesting to for me to hear, especially since I'm pretty big fan of David Lynch.

Amy Stofsky 21:18

Yeah, he's terrific. He's terrific. And and his longevity says everything. Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, David's been around a lot. Gotta be around almost 3540 years. I mean, that's, that's a big deal. Yeah, he's made his mark. He's a legend.

Owen Shapiro 21:33

I mean, he did. I think Eraserhead was his first movie back in 1970. made early 77. So now that was definitely quite a while ago.

Amy Stofsky 21:43

Yeah, before you were born

Owen Shapiro 21:45

way before I was born. Over 30 years before I was born, you moving on to another field of your work. You actually specialize in designing for series and TV, right?

21:55

Yeah,

Owen Shapiro 21:56

I do. So you've won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Individual Achievement and costuming for a miniseries your special series, which is very impressive. So how is designing for TV and series different from designing for movies,

Amy Stofsky 22:10

you have much more time with a movie with TV let you know an average season? Well, now, first of all, are now there's so much competition, you know, you have all the cable stations, you have all the streaming stations, you know, but what always stays the same is that you're basically doing a movie a week. So you're shooting, you're also prepping and you're wrapping. So you're basically doing three

separate things at the same time. And you know, nothing changes. I mean, actors still need to be like, everything needs to be done. But you got to move faster. I like it because I like to move. Well, I do primarily TV now. And so does everybody else. You know, TV is the new medium is well, especially this year, I hope everybody survives. Because this year is such a hit. I mean, it is such a hit. But TV is you know, it's fast. Like I said, you're doing a movie a week, you know, you really got to get things done. And so much of the time, they don't cast an actor until the night before. And so much of the time you're waiting to get an actor size is sometimes you just want out. Sometimes I just went out with a suitcase and just guess everybody sizes, throw it in like a maniac because it's already you know, eight o'clock at night and everything's gonna close in an hour and you have nothing, you know, it requires you to just really anticipate, sometimes you get lucky and sometimes you know, you don't.

Owen Shapiro 23:34

So going back to when you were not as successful custom designer, what were some of the movies that inspired you to pursue a career in this industry? Well, I

Amy Stofsky 23:43

loved you know, my favorite movies were like, West Side Story. I mean, it's like, when I grew up, everything was about the musical. You know, it's like I'm in New York, where we used to go to plays, you know, so it's like, when I would see you know, even something like the King and I, you know, it was my dream to do something like that. Of course I never have. But movies are so different now. I like action movies. I like pop dramas. I mean, even something like serpo what the time was. And of course the Godfather. I mean, it made everybody's I loved Danny Hall. I loved the way she looked. I love the way she dress.

Owen Shapiro 24:22

So now that you build a steady career in the film industry as a costume designer, what's next for you? Do you have any projects coming up?

Amy Stofsky 24:30

Yes. I'm doing a Netflix series in Pittsburgh starting in January.

Owen Shapiro 24:35

So any information on that one?

Amy Stofsky 24:37

Well, it's, it's called the chair and Amanda Peet wrote it. She's an actress that I worked with a couple of months ago on a series called dirty Jon the Betty Broderick story. So Amanda wrote it. Sandra Oh is going to be in it. Now a couple of other people take place on a college campus. It's in temporary, it's a drama it I like drama at respawn. So that's something to look forward to, in fact, I hired some people today or it. Yeah, I'm excited about it. It'd be nice to be on the east coast. Not the Pittsburgh is near New York. But you know, being in New York or just being on the other side of country is close. So I'm happy about that. It's been a long stretch. You know, everybody's been having a really hard time this year.

Owen Shapiro 25:18

Finally, where can my listeners find and connect with you

25:21

when they connect with me? On my website, amystofsky.com Alright, well, thank

Owen Shapiro 25:27

you so much for your time. Maybe.

25:29

Thank you, darlin. Bye bye.

Owen Shapiro 25:30

That's all for today. Don't forget, you can subscribe to Kino Society on iTunes and Spotify.