

## Being a costume designer is one half design and the other exploring the psychology of the characters, says Qumra Master Jacqueline West

**Doha, Qatar; March 14, 2023:** Four-time Academy Award nominee for Best Achievement in Costume Design **Qumra Master Jacqueline West** described her creative process to emerging filmmakers at Qumra 2023, underlining the importance of studying the characters in-depth, engaging in extensive research and reading every possible material.

“Once you learn all about the film, the characters, you dress them to reveal the onion skins, the multiple layers, and get the actors to the crux of the character,” she says, adding that “costume design is 50 per cent design and 50 per cent psychology.”

Nominated for the Academy Award for *Quills* (2000), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *The Revenant* (2015) and *Dune: Part One* (2021), West says she first seeks the approval of her design concepts from the director and only then approaches the actors. There has been little resistance from any directors or actors to her creative approach, which is akin to “being a special shopper for the characters.”

With an outstanding oeuvre of works including *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003), *State of Play* (2009), *The Tree of Life* (2011), and *Seventh Son* (2014), among others, West owned her own clothing store and was a sought-after fashion designer in Berkeley, California. That, in turn, was inspired by her mother, also a designer. “I had a mannequin in my room that I dressed instead of dolls,” laughs West, “and I always loved that.”

Though she was strong in science, she changed her major to Art History at college, which in hindsight brings that exceptional attention to detail in West’s designs for films. Her knowledge of art history was also a reason director Philip Kaufman asked her to design the costumes for *Henry & June* (1990) starring Fred Ward and Uma Thurman.

She says she used a lot of artbooks and looked at paintings, “and I was reading, reading and reading” – a process that West continues to this day for her projects. Kaufman’s advice to West, which is relevant for any aspiring costume designer, is that “when you have an idea for a costume, just make it!”

For independent spirited film that she earlier worked on as well as big budget studio movies, West has the same creative approach. “You must know your characters and dress them inside out. Every character has these onion skins, and you have to know these layers,” says West, who also leaves behind “one talisman for every character that brings out his or her inner richness that tells a story in a quick read. You must also consider the comfort of actors – as they have to do stunts and action. Drawing is conceptual, real clothes have to be alive.”

Known to be a stickler for designing under budget, West does not have a permanent team, although she admits that her daughter, who also joined her in Doha, “has been my secret weapon on many films.”

As a costume designer, West says the most important aspect in her work is “having the right fabric, as it guides the look and feel.” She elaborated on her work for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a seminal movie that allowed her to design costumes over a period spanning a hundred years.

For *The Revenant*, the costume design task was equally daunting, having to design ten sets of the same costume for the first scene they shot. She had to use special techniques, including mixing black wax into every dress to make them look dirty. There was little reference material she could bank on for the film as the costumes of the trappers are not documented.

When it came to *Dune*, which has a cult following, West looked into the ancient past to design the futuristic costumes as the film’s director Denis Villeneuve, who had already tried out many other designers, did not want a typical sci-fi look. She created what she calls the ‘Mod-ieval’ style – where she sought inspiration from the Templars and the medieval world and looked into the future. West is now looking forward to her work with Martin Scorsese for his upcoming film *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

-END-

#### About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

#### About Qumra

Directors and Producers attached to DFI supported projects in development and post-production are selected to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.

The event is organised in three main sections: The **Qumra Master Classes** are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity. The **Qumra Meetings** are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts. The **Qumra Screenings** are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives.