

50 Years Of History Of Dress At The Courtauld Alumni Interviews Part Seven: Camille Benda, MA (1999) ([Http://Blog.Courtauld.Ac.Uk/Documentingfashion/2015/07/31/50-Years-Of-History-Of-Dress-At-The-Courtauld-Alumni-Interviews-Part-Seven-Camille-Benda-Ma-1999/](http://Blog.Courtauld.Ac.Uk/Documentingfashion/2015/07/31/50-Years-Of-History-Of-Dress-At-The-Courtauld-Alumni-Interviews-Part-Seven-Camille-Benda-Ma-1999/))

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Each month in 2015, we will post an interview with one of our alumni, as part of our celebrations of this year's auspicious anniversary. The Courtauld's History of Dress students have gone on to forge careers in a diverse and exciting range of areas. We hope you enjoy reading about their work, and their memories of studying here.



<http://blog.courtauld.ac.uk/documentingfashion/files/2015/07/Screen-Shot-2015-07-29-at-08.31.24.png>

Camille dressing an actor, Daily Mirror, 2010

Camille Benda, MA (1999)

Camille Benda has recently designed costumes for the following films: *Lilting*, *Still*, *The Quiet Ones*, and *The Blood Stripe*, which is currently in post-production. As well as film, Camille has designed numerous theater productions, including regional theater at Yale Repertory Theater and Off-Broadway at Rattlestick Theatre. She also speaks about costume history at venues such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Costume Society and The Courtauld Institute of Art.

What led you to pursue graduate studies in the field of dress and fashion, and what attracted you to The Courtauld in particular?

The moment I heard about the Courtauld, I knew I had to go. I grew up in Seattle, Washington and was designing costumes for small theatre productions at the time. I was captivated by the chance to live in London, with its world-class museums, and the opportunity to combine history of dress studies with my fledgling costume design career.

Clothing was an early obsession for me, and it blossomed into a fascination with costumes, historical dress and fashion. I've always been interested in people and what makes humanity tick; so dress became a framework for understanding people – as we learnt at the Courtauld, clothing and fashion communicate economic and social status, moral values, human behavior and much more.



<http://blog.courtauld.ac.uk/documentingfashion/files/2015/07/02.jpg>

"Laura," Camille's sketch for the TV film "Belonging to Laura," RTE Ireland, 2009

You graduated in 1999. What was the topic and structure of your MA course? What was the subject of your dissertation?

Aileen Ribeiro was in her last few years of teaching at the Courtauld, and I feel so lucky to have been taught by her before she retired. It was the one-year course in the History of Dress, so we covered dress history through the ages in the first half. Our specialization was 18th century English and Scottish dress, with a trip to Glasgow and Edinburgh. My dissertation was on Moravian and Slovakian folk embroidery and the meanings woven within. Folk dress is a particular favourite of mine: it creates a tangible connection between the past and present, and is a perfect example of form and function working in harmony.

Research has always been my favourite part of the design process – that's where the characters described in a script come alive in images. I am always surprised when I am searching for the look of a character, and a drawing, painting or photo pops into my head as the perfect solution. It's usually an image I've seen in the very first days of doing research – my brain must set it aside somewhere on a shelf, to be brought out for the right moment. Always go back to your research when you are stuck!

After The Courtauld you went on to complete an MFA in Theatre Design at Yale University. Could you describe this transition and/or how the two courses of study worked together?

I was accepted to the Courtauld and Yale at the same time! So I asked Yale to defer my enrolment for a year so I could do the Courtauld course. I felt the Courtauld would provide me a unique viewpoint from which to look at costume design. The two courses meshed so well together. The Courtauld really provided me with the foundation of my approach to costume design, and at Yale I learnt the craft.

Could you discuss your career since completing your studies?

I have focused on costume design for film since graduating, first in London as an assistant costume designer on films shot in England, like *The Golden Compass*, then designing costumes for art house films like *Pelican Blood* and *Weekender*. In between projects, I enjoyed giving the occasional history of dress talk, at the V&A, the Costume Society and my favourite one, a talk at the annual CHODA symposium about the representation of Elizabeth I in film throughout the 20th century, and the effect contemporary fashion design had on how the designs were approached. Now I'm based in Los Angeles, and enjoying learning the ropes in the ultimate movie town.

You've moved around for your education and career, notably between the USA and UK. How has your residence in various locations affected your approach to dress (personally and/or professionally)?

I live in Los Angeles now, and moved there from London, where I lived for 12 years, so climate is the biggest factor in my approach to dress now. I admired London women and their masterful layering techniques: it is a true fashion achievement to stay warm and rainproof while remaining stylish! The exact opposite is Los Angeles style – too hot for layers, but still a big effort to add style to any simple and light look. Perhaps just a linen dress, but with amazing shoes or jewelry. And of course the ubiquitous LA sunglasses, which are an ethnography essay in themselves.



<http://blog.courtauld.ac.uk/documentingfashion/files/2015/07/Screen-Shot-2015-07-29-at-08.31.47.png>

Actors Bess Wohl and Bill Thompson in "The Master and Margarita," Yale School of

You've worked on fascinating film and theatre projects, are there any that stand out for you?

The Master and Margarita, which I designed at Yale for director Will Frears- talk about a perfect creative opportunity! The play was adapted from Mikhail Bulgakov's book about 1920's Russia (with flashbacks to ancient Rome) and the absurdity of oppression. I enjoyed designing costumes for constructivist Russian artists, six-foot tall cats, Roman emperors, a naked witch and a masked ball hosted by the devil. (See photo)

Does your creative approach differ for historic films, such as *Cheerful Weather for a Wedding*, as opposed to ones set in the present time?

Not at all! Once I discovered costume design, I was blissfully able to convey my curiosity for people-watching into a curiosity for characters in a script, and then a passion for helping actors, directors and writers express those characters with their costumes. So I always start with that. Costume design is not just putting people in clothes. It's finding the driving force behind the characters and the script, and then bringing that to the screen, whether that means shopping for modern clothes, building period costumes from scratch (see photo) or digging through a costume rental house for the perfect glove. I always try to shop where the character would shop.



<http://blog.courtauld.ac.uk/documentingfashion/files/2015/07/Screen-Shot-2015-07-29-at-08.31.57.png>

Actress Felicity Jones dressed for "Cheerful Weather for a Wedding," 2011 (Photo: Camille Benda)

I just watched one of your most recent film projects, *Lilting*, and was mesmerised by its beauty and visual cohesiveness, from the interiors to the lighting and costumes. It shows how the creation of a film depends on a huge network. Could you discuss a particular collaboration that you felt worked well?

Lilting was a very special project to work on, since everyone did it for the love of the craft, not the money. The budget for the film was tiny, but it proves that money is not the driving force, it should always be a focus on creating the world and telling the story. I often work with the director Karl Golden – he is a master at connecting all the creative departments

hair and makeup department to ensure that I am helping to support a cohesive vision for the film.

Advice for hopeful costume designers, as well as any shifts in the field of costume design that you've witnessed?

Collaborate and contribute. Talent is necessary, but the next level is to be able to collaborate and support your team, other departments and the director. You can help your director and producers by showing them how much costume design can contribute to a project, be it film, television, theatre, music video, dance. It's magical when you can infect other people with your own enthusiasm for design. But I'm not biased or anything....

The industry is changing. I learned from amazing costume designers like Ruth Meyers and Jane Greenwood who have been working for 50 years in the industry. Everyone knew how to draw by hand, and many designers still do, however now eye-catching computer drawing is becoming very popular. There are many more stylists joining the industry, starting out dressing celebrities and doing music videos and then moving into film and television. It will be interesting to see where costume design goes next!

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