



How one of the world's most expensive film costumes went from Hollywood musical set to London exhibition... via a packing crate in Bradford

Behind the seams

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A

real Tutankhamun moment,' says Professor Deborah Nadoolman Landis, curator of the blockbuster *Hollywood Costume* exhibition that opens at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London this month.

Deborah is recalling the day, three years ago, when she had driven from London to Bradford with her friend the actress Jenny Agutter to have a riffle through the British Film Institute archive.

Back in the Eighties, the BFI had bought numerous film costumes for the Museum of the Moving Image, many of which were just lying in boxes. 'They store paper there, movie posters, films and memorabilia,' says Deborah, who is both a designer (she created the costumes for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, among many others) and the Director of the David C. Copley Center for Costume Design at UCLA in Los Angeles. 'But they have neither the experience nor the facilities for storing costumes.'

Deborah, a former President of the Costume Designer's Guild, had been asked up by the BFI to see whether there was anything of interest for the *Hollywood Costume* exhibition. So there she was, white gloves on, standing over a large wooden crate, a bit like a sarcophagus. Beside her was Jenny with a camera waiting to record the contents. A BFI curator jemmied open the lid.

Inside, carefully wrapped in folds of white, acid-free tissue paper, was the glittering red sequined dress that Ginger Rogers wore in the 1944 film *Lady in the Dark* (left). It was perfectly preserved and looked much younger than its 68 years.

'My mouth fell open,' she recounts. 'Coming from LA, I was thinking, "What on earth is this incredibly famous piece of Hollywood costume doing buried in Bradford?"'

Until today Deborah had never told this story to anybody. 'There are 62 lenders for 130 costumes in this exhibition,' she adds, 'and all the stories behind them are incredible. They all come out of back



POWER DRESSING
Designed in 1943 by Edith Head of Paramount Pictures for *Lady in the Dark*, the gown cost \$35,000, making it one of the most expensive costumes ever

INVISIBLE CHARMS
The décolletage contains a nude sheer mesh fabric in accordance with the infamous Hays Code (1930), which censored any showing or shadow of a cleavage



◀ rooms and closets. Only the newer ones are from studio archives.' Why? 'Because studios have always felt that once the film is over, their job is done.'

It costs money to store costumes, so unless a garment could be used again and again and again – adapted with a nip and tuck here, with a collar removed or the skirt shortened there, and then rented – it was usually sold or discarded.

'Costumes must earn their keep – they work for a living. A costume as famous as this,' says Deborah, 'could only be used once.'

How ironic it seems, looking back on its story, that the gown's very beauty and uniqueness should have been its near downfall.

It seems extraordinary that such garments were not treasured. Or indeed that (for a price) anyone could have rented the glorious white lace Ascot dress designed by Cecil Beaton and worn by Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964) and turned up in it at a fancy dress party. But back in the Seventies, together with Beaton's unforgettable white hats and gowns, it was just

A REAL SHOW STOPPER

The glamorous dress worn by Ginger Rogers in the circus fantasy sequence from *Lady in the Dark* – seen here with the later adaptation of a collar – was finished with four-inch heels. When it came to filming the dance routine, Ginger recalled the set designers laid down, at the last minute, a hemp rug. This made it impossible to move, with the mink alone – unthinkable today! – weighing 15lbs. With no time to change dress or set, new shoes were hurriedly dyed red to match.



another part of the rental stock belonging to Burbank Studios.

Like Hepburn's iconic dress, the Rogers gown designed by Edith Head (Hitchcock's favourite designer) was so famous it could never be used in a film again. At the time, the papers were full of articles about its extraordinary lavishness and huge price tag of \$35,000. Studio hype at the time touted it as the most expensive costume in Hollywood history. Rumours of an earlier glass-beaded dress have dogged it ever since but, says Prof Landis, 'these have never been substantiated'.

'You have to remember,' she says, 'the film was made during the war and the gown was designed when everything was in short supply.'

Rogers played Liza Elliot, editor of a fashion magazine and, like many in those Forties cinema audiences, Liza wore short-skirted business suits. Edith Head designed the costumes just as the US Government issued Regulation L85, restricting the amount of fabric clothing manufacturers and designers could use. Nylons were impossible to get hold of, while voluminous party dresses were out of the question for the public.

The sequined dress was for the film's big number, a fantasy scene where Liza appears in what at first seems to be a dull brown fur gown, but as the song begins the skirt swings open 360° to reveal its magnificently rich and sequined red interior. Even today you can almost hear the envious gasps from the film's female audience who could only dream of such glamour.

And yet, here it was waiting to be rediscovered in Bradford. Which makes it all the more wonderful that the gown has been finally rescued, like a Hollywood screen idol, to be once again admired and wondered at by an appreciative audience.

Hollywood Costume, sponsored by Harry Winston, opens at the V&A on October 20, 2012. Tickets are now available from vam.ac.uk/hollywoodcostume, 020 7907 7073

To watch *Ginger Rogers dancing in this famous sequined dress*, go to youtube.com/watch?v=N11FL-T19fU

A contemporary costume designer's story

Consolata Boyle's credits include *The Iron Lady* and *The Queen*

'The thing about film is that it's a collaboration,' says Consolata Boyle (below) from her home near Dublin, where she is enjoying rare downtime following the wrap of Neil Jordan's film *Byzantium*. 'You have to look after everyone, from the star to the extras. And it all happens on the day so everything has to be ready beforehand.' Success depends on a team of assistants, buyers, costumiers and dressers.

Months are spent on research. 'You go from the wide to the specific.' Gloves have to be just right for the period. 'If I can use an original pair as a sample, I have them made from scratch. We'll do a hand-stitched version, which will be very different from one made by machine.' Hand-stitching affects the fall and flow of fabric.

For *The Iron Lady*, Consolata homed in on Mrs Thatcher's pearls.



LEADING LADIES

Consolata's original sketches for *The Iron Lady* and *The Queen*, as Meryl Streep captures Margaret Thatcher's pearls and smart-suit look, while Helen Mirren is the Queen

'They were given to her by Denis after the twins were born. At first the pearls were longer and smaller and worn under the bow of her blouse.' By the time of her leaving No 10 the pearls are shorter and bigger. 'I followed what Margaret did – the pearls were so important I couldn't change that.'

She did, however, make a play with the suits. At the beginning of the film Margaret Thatcher wears pale blue and, as her power increases, the blue deepens. This didn't happen in real life any more than the suits designed for the film are exact replicas of what she wore. 'People think it is about accuracy,' says

Consolata. 'But really it is all interpretation. This was a small woman in a sea of grey suits. With a splash of colour she knew she would be recognisable.'

Weeks were spent sourcing fabrics and identical labels were sewn into skirt bands. When it came to footwear she went to Ferragamo, Mrs T's favourite shoemaker, which matched the classic designs from its archive.

As for dressing Helen Mirren as the Queen, she consulted previous employees. 'Hardy Amies was wonderful. I was allowed round the studios and into the archives. But you have to be incredibly careful. Some people are very protective.'