

# DESIGNING WOMAN



Deborah Nadoolman Landis has a knack for making something out of nothing. An accomplished Hollywood costume designer, president of the Costume Designers Guild and a 1972 Goddard alumna, Deborah has shown her ingenuity creating costumes for such films as *Animal House*, *The Blues Brothers*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Coming to America*, for which she earned an Academy Award nomination.

Born with a love of drawing, painting and especially history, she says “it was serendipitous that I actually found costume design—the one profession that met all of my interests.” I called Deborah at her home in Los Angeles to learn more about her career and the path that led her to Hollywood.

“I was always interested in costume design,” she says, “from birth.” Her nascent interest took root during her childhood experiences at Camp Laughton, a camp for the deaf her parents owned in the Catskill Mountains. Her mother, a well-known teacher and school principal for the deaf in New York City, ran the camp for over 30 years with Deborah’s father.

Among her many memories of camp are Tuesday night “bunk nights,” in which every cabin had to put on a show, complete with costumes, for the rest of the camp. Deborah would scour the campground—the cabins, bathhouse and dining hall—in search of costume materials.

“I always said I could make anything out of a paper place mat, a bath towel and sheets,” she says. “As the world saw in *Animal House* ... 20 years of bunk nights.”

She made all the togas for the film’s infamous toga party, a scene credited with introducing the toga party to popular college culture. “They weren’t couture, but they’re what the evening required.”

BY KELLY COLLAR

Recalling the film, which she made with her husband, director John Landis, Deborah says she had never been to a fraternity party, and her husband had never even been to college, having been expelled from high school in the 10th grade. “John had never been to a fraternity in his life, and we made the fraternity movie of all time.”

She collaborated with her husband, whom she met at 19 through her Goddard friends, on more than 10 films, including *An American Werewolf in London* and *Trading Places*. She also worked with Steven Spielberg on *Raiders* and *1941*, Louis Malle on *Crackers*, and Costa-Gavras on *Mad City*.

Deborah’s early passion for history formed the foundation for her work. She says historical research is one of the most important tools for making “credible and authentic characterizations.” During her film work, she would start the design process by learning everything about the film’s characters—where they were born, who their parents were, where they lived and their socioeconomic background.

“Every costume designer, whether they’re designing *Crash* or *Pride and Prejudice*, goes through the same process,” she says. “People tend to think that costume design is only for period and fantasy [films], when the best costume design is done every day



Photo: Deborah Landis Collection

on contemporary and modern films.”

Recent films like *Syriana* and *Brokeback Mountain*, she says, have done a “beautiful” job with costume design. Another good example, and one of her favorite recent movies, is *TransAmerica*.

“I cried,” she says. “And how much more of a hardened, sophisticated, jaded audience could I possibly be?”

But before becoming a “hardened” movie industry insider—before her career, two children and advanced degrees in costume design—Deborah was a Goddard student.

### Getting to Goddard

A sea voyage seems an unlikely place to begin a Goddard education, but that’s where Deborah’s started when she was just 15. She and her family were sailing home to New York after a visit to London when they met Jack Sheedy, a fellow passenger who happened to be a Goddard professor. Their acquaintance and his musings about the college made an indelible impression on her, one that stayed with her through high school.

“He had so impressed my family and had so impressed me with his warmth,” she says, that when it came time to look at colleges, she journeyed to Plainfield for a first-hand look. “When I went up to Goddard to visit, I felt at home there,” she says. “It was natural for me.”

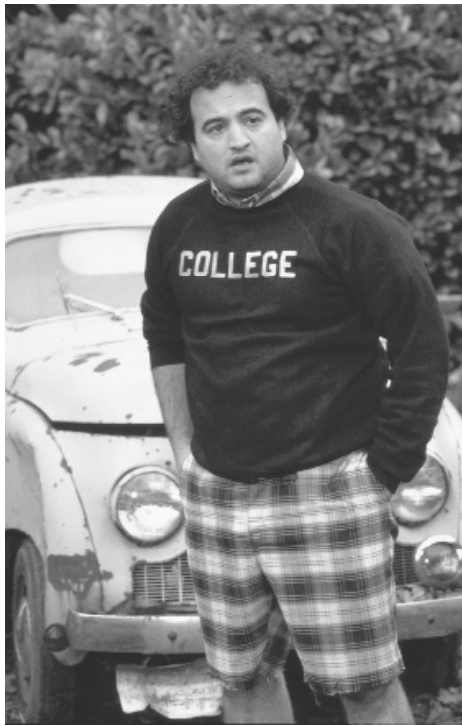
Even before her trip to Goddard, Deborah was already versed in the language of experimental education. As a child, she says she was “unidentified learning disabled, or ADD,” and she was kept back by her testing anxiety.

“I was desperate to get out of the New York City school system,” she says. “I knew that I had a lot more to offer than testing had shown.”

Her frustration led her to read *Summerhill*, by education pioneer A.S. Neill. She was so captivated by the book that she wrote to Neill and began a “wonderful correspondence” with him; she has kept his letters to this day.

Deborah describes her time at Goddard as an incubation period—a necessary rite of passage. “This was a place for special people who didn’t fit into other, more conventional settings,” she says. “It was filled with a creative, groundbreaking group of folks.”

Some of these folks were David Mamet, who was her theater T.A., and classmates William H. Macy and Howard Ashman, who later became a playwright and lyricist. Deborah also became involved with the Bread and Puppet



Photos: Deborah Landis Collection

Photos: a taste of Deborah Nadoolman Landis’ costume design. Left top, Deborah Nadoolman Landis; left bottom, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981); immediate left, *Animal House* (1978); bottom, *Coming to America* (1988).

Theater, which was in-residence at the time at the Cate Farm. It was her involvement with other creative spirits and her artistic work as a student that led her to consider costume design as a career.

She remembers having a conversation in the cafeteria with Mamet and Paul Vela, head of the theater department, about the viability of costume design as a life’s vocation. “That was the turning point,” she says.

After graduating from Goddard, she gathered experience as an assistant in the Champlain Shakespeare Festival and in summer stock before enrolling in UCLA’s master’s program in costume design. After she’d received her M.F.A., she worked at NBC television as

a costume wardrobe stock girl. While she was cleaning and sorting costumes, she developed her own costuming skills thanks to her supervisor and mentor, Angie Jones, who made sure she had a full apprenticeship in costume design.

“By the time I got to design a movie, I was totally prepared,” she says. “I always considered myself as one of the most resourceful people on the planet.”

### Promoting the Profession

Today, with a full career as a working designer to her credit and a Ph.D. in the history of design from the Royal College of Art in London, Deborah spends her energies raising awareness of the profession, both in and out of Hollywood, and reaching out to other designers.

“Costume design is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week endeavor, with no time to do anything,” she says. “You’re lucky if you

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Photos: Deborah Landis Collection

*Sky*, a literary journal featuring the work of MFAW faculty and alumni/ae. [www.tarpaulinsky.com](http://www.tarpaulinsky.com)

**Kelsey (Rogers) Perchinski (IBA '01)** of Portland, Maine, produces artwork for nonprofit fundraising and hosts a children's radio show on WMPG (online streaming at [www.wmpg.org](http://www.wmpg.org)). She is beginning to produce independent radio productions and hopes to do more voiceover work.

**Joan Peters (IBA '04)** of Candler, N.C., works as a mental health professional at a state agency that provides assistance for persons with mental illness, substance abuse challenges and developmental disabilities. Her newest hobby is creating stained glass pieces featuring lesbian and gay themes.

**Jan Quackenbush (MFAW '05)** of Binghamton, N.Y., had a one-act play, *Strawdog*, produced by the Know Theatre Company as part of its third annual Local Playwrights and Artists Festival in Binghamton.

**David Robson (MFAW '06)** of Wilmington, Del., had a short play, *You Rang*, produced in the Acme Theater Production's New Works Winter Festival in Maynard, Mass. He also

received a \$5,000 fellowship from the Delaware Division of the Arts.

**Forrest Roth (MFAW '04)** of Buffalo, N.Y., is a "flash fiction" writer who was featured in a *Buffalo News* article on the genre, which features super-short stories that stand on their own as works of art. He organized a reading series devoted to flash fiction at the Big Orbit Gallery.

**Kristan Ryan (MFAW '02)** of Brooklyn, N.Y., will publish a novel, *The Hair Princess and the Hog Temple Incident*, this fall (Behler Publications). She was recently promoted to assistant vice president of student affairs at the Interboro Institute, a business-centered college in New York.

**Robert Sheely (PSY '05)** of Coralville, Iowa, works as an addictions therapist in the department of psychiatry at the Iowa City VA Medical Center.

**Jessamyn Smyth (MFAW '04)** of Gill, Mass., had a short story, *A More Perfect Union*, nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her play, *Jenny Haniver*, opened at The Shea Theatre as part of the second annual Playwright's Festival of New Works. Her theater company in Western Massachusetts is called

Basilisk Productions.

**Margaret Konwawennontion (Kelly) Stacey (IBA '01)** of Kahnawake Mohawk Territory, Quebec, credits Goddard for helping her to recognize aspects of her curiosity that traditional universities don't allow or value.

**Mark Thellman (MFAIA '05)** of Merchantville, N.J., provided photographic illustration for a book by Marianne Hieb, *Inner Journeying through Art Journaling: Learning to See and Record Your Life as a Work of Art* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005).

**Nagueyalti Warren (MFAW '05)** of Lithonia, Ga., published a poem, "Grandma's Girl," in the April issue of *Essence Magazine*.

**Sarah Wash (MFAW '05)** of Minneapolis, Minn., had an article, "The Healing Power of Flowers," in *Utne* magazine's March/April issue.

**Lowell Williams (MFAW '06)** of Nashua, N.H., writes to say that the original version of *The Warmth of the Cold* won best original new play at the New Hampshire Theatre Awards in Manchester, an award based on writing, not the production itself.

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can get to the ladies' room."

She is in her fifth year as president of the Costume Designers Guild (Local 892), the union representing working Hollywood costume designers. She also teaches at the University of Southern California and at the American Film Institute and earlier this year gave a class at the Women Directors Workshop.

She has turned to her first love—history—to pen a number of books chronicling the work of Hollywood designers, including *Screencraft: Costume Design* (Focal Press, 2003) and *50 Costumes/50 Designers* (University of California Press, 2005).

This fall, Regan Books/Harper Collins will publish her coffee table book, *Dressed: A Century of Hollywood Costume Design*. The University of California Press will also be publishing her doctorate in two volumes; the first, *Deconstructing Glamour*, will be ready in 2007.

Her books help shed light on the costume designer's role in storytelling, in making fictional characters come to life. When I mention that costume designers also seem to influence popular fashion, Deborah says she has never been interested in fashion. "What I'm interested in is culture and how the stories on screen move us."

She says that when fashion comes from film, it's because a character has "touched" the viewer. She points to the costume she designed for Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, which became a cultural icon. "It's because people loved his character."

Deborah feels people would understand more fully what costume designers do if they would think of them as cultural anthropologists instead of designers.

"It's so much more than a jacket and a hat," she says. "It really becomes a thread in the culture; it becomes part of the zeitgeist." ■