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Tom Jacobs

How ‘Clueless’ used costumes to create its characters

Have we run out of things to say about “Clueless,” the effervescent 1995 comedy about wealthy Beverly Hills high schoolers? As if!

Although it’s now 30 years old, Amy Heckerling’s film retains its youthful allure, particularly to young women. A rare Hollywood hit in which the guys are of secondary importance, it is “a beautiful mix — empowering while also being fun and funny,” according to Kelsey Moore, a doctoral candidate in film and media studies at UC Santa Barbara.

There are many reasons for its continuing appeal, including the clever dialogue and solid story, which was adapted from Jane Austen’s novel “Emma.” But the film’s most memorable element is, arguably, its clothes, and the witty way they define its characters as they grow and evolve.

“Each character’s journey, and how they view the world, is reflected in the outfits Mona puts them in,” Moore said. “Mona” is the film’s costume designer, Mona May, author of the book “The Fashion of Clueless.” Moore will speak with May after a free screening of the film Jan. 31 in the Pollock Theater on the UCSB campus.

“‘Clueless’ was an incredible opportunity for a young designer,” May said in an interview from her Los Angeles home. “I met Amy Heckerling on another project, a television pilot we did together about two young girls in New York City. We really

connected creatively. We found we had the same sensibility.

“She wanted to make this film very California — very bright, very colorful. We created a color palate reflecting what she wanted. We used very little brown or black.”

But the director, who had previously directed a very different teen comedy, “Fast Times at Ridgemont High,” asked for far more than that. Her lead characters, all teenage girls born into wealth, were fashionistas — and they could indulge their whims thanks to their parents’ credit cards. Their outfits had to be stylish but not suggestive.

“I borrowed from what’s happening in the high-fashion world and translated it to the world of 16-year-olds — made age-appropriate,” May recalled. “It was not easy. I did not have a big budget. When Amy started shopping the script around town, she found nobody wanted to make a movie about girls. It wasn’t until she came to Paramount, where Sherry Lansing was in charge, that she got the green light. But even there, we were a bit of a stepchild.

“So I had to be inventive. For the most part, I had to create the looks from thrift shops and mall stores. I had to come up with fresh, new looks — a lot of them! Alicia Silverstone’s character had 63 changes.”

The outfits she came up with are still eye-popping three decades later.

“The film’s look is true to its time and brings a ‘90s flair, but it’s also unique,” Moore said. “They embraced a beautifully loud color palate with tailored fits.”

Of course, “Clueless” is a narrative film, not a fashion show. May’s other job was to help show who the characters are, and how they evolve, through their outfits. “The clothes allow you to identify that each character is unique in their own way,” Moore said. “You then follow their individual journeys through that visual cue.”

As an example, May points to the character of Tai, who transfers from an East Coast school and is initially quite awkward — a bit of an ugly duckling. “The late Brittany Murphy (who played the role) was 17 at the time, but she was a very old soul,” May recalled. “I remember her telling me ‘Mona, I don’t want to look good when I first arrive at the school.’”

As Cher, Alicia Silverstone's character, mentors her, and she starts to fit in with the cool girls, Tai "becomes a mini-me Cher, wearing lower-level designer plaids and things," May noted. "But her look changes as she becomes more sure of herself."

By film's end, Tai is wearing an outfit that shows Cher's influence but also incorporates elements of her earlier look. The outfit becomes a visual metaphor for the fact she is becoming her own person. As she excitedly watches her boyfriend do skateboarding tricks, she is clearly comfortable in her clothes — and in her skin.

Like a form-fitting outfit, 'The film is very tight,' Moore noted. "It doesn't slow down at any point. There's a really well-set rhythm and pace. Because the visuals are complementary to the story, it all works together seamlessly. It's a beautiful orchestration of screenwriting and design."

Moore missed seeing "Clueless" in its initial run. But then, she was only 4 years old.

"I remember watching it with my friends at sleepovers at a very young age — around 12 or 13," she said. Although they were definitely not in the characters' income bracket, "We found it really relatable. You really feel Cher's innocence and optimism, as well as her growth. This was particularly inspiring as preteen girls trying to figure out our own sense of style, and how to move through the world."

The film inspired many spin-offs, including numerous books and a television series. It was also a clear influence on fashion-forward films such as "The Devil Wears Prada" and "Legally Blonde."

"Margo Robbie has credited 'Clueless' as an inspiration for how the clothes were used in 'Barbie,'" Moore reported. "I think it's a movie filmmakers go back to and try to emulate, especially if you're trying to make a feel-good film with both substance and heart."

Admission to [the screening](#), which starts at 2 p.m., is free, but reservations are suggested to guarantee a seat.

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