**Costuming the everyday: Interview with James Keast**

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**Introduction**

The interview was undertaken as part of a broader research project that investigates both the creative and industry practices employed by costume designers and how the results of those practices are received and ‘decoded’ (Hall 1973, 1997) by audiences. The specific focus of the broader research is on ‘ordinary’ clothing viewed within the context of television drama. This is informed by a research degree currently being undertaken at the University of the Arts, the outcome of which will add to newly emerging literature around television costume (Warner 2013). The research considers and integrates both theory and creative practice and positions the subject of current clothed screen representations of the working class firmly within the field of cultural politics.

The interview has subsequently been thematically coded post transcription. Of particular relevance to the broader project already mentioned are the collaborative nature of the approach and method undertaken by costume designers, issues around ‘embodied’ screen costume, costume signifiers of class position and the audience’s relationship with and understanding of ideologies embedded within screen costume.

**Many of the themes highlighted here reoccur in the interview with Jürgen Doering published in this volume despite the fact that the designers work with very different forms of media.**

**To begin with, entry into this particular creative practice was discussed. It is clear that practitioners within this area come from very different disciplines and that the journey that leads them to the design of screen costume is rarely straightforward. What is evidenced and of interest here is that the skill set required to produce work that is both desirable and respected is not exclusively tied to the production of clothing. Many of the attributes highlighted as invaluable are concerned more with sociological and cultural understandings of the human experience rather than the management or manipulation of cloth.**

**<H1>Interview**

***Liza Betts (LB):*** *– Can you explain how you got in to costume design?*

**James Keast (JK):** Oh boy… when I was at art school, I wanted to do drawing and painting but I didn’t think I would be good enough to earn a living as a painter, so I decided that I would learn a craft – so that I could do something. I used to go to the theatre, I used to think that theatre was like a painting and I thought it was fantastic, so I thought I would do theatre design. So I did that, but I did textiles as well because I really am very interested in fabrics. And then when you graduate you think, what the hell am I going to do? I don’t want to be a teacher but I have to find something? And then a job came up where I had to cut out costume patterns and give them to people to make, I had about ten seamstresses and hand sewer’s and whatever. So I would cut it all out, and they would make it up and then it would get sent off to a production. But you never got to know the characters, it was just, an Edwardian evening dress or whatever, or an 1840’s or Victorian day dress. So I did that for a couple of years, which was great because I wasn’t very good at making stuff and I didn’t know very much about cutting. When I was in a cutting class the lecturer would give us a demonstration, or tell us what we should be doing and she would say, ‘stick your hand up anytime and ask if you are not sure’, and every two minutes my hand was going up because I hadn’t a clue what she was talking about, and eventually she just stopped talking to me because I was holding up the class and nobody else put their hand up. So we would all finish class and I’d say, what was all that about? And nobody would know, they were too nervous to put their hands up. She completely intimidated people.

In doing this year though, it got me to understand the human body more, or how you cut things to fit the body and that’s something that I thought was really interesting. And then I met a friend of mine who said, ‘I’m working at Berman’s and Nathan’s[[1]](#endnote-1), and he said do you fancy a job there? They are looking for a man, or a boy (which I was once) and they want somebody in the new production department, not the stock areas, somebody who has an interest in textiles and in making new costumes blah blah’. So I applied for the job and they said start next week. So I worked at Berman’s and Nathan’s and I worked on productions like *Mommie Dearest* (Perry, 1981), *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), loads of big things. And the more experienced I got the more I would do, I worked on the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Tuchner, 1982) with ummmm, Anthony, the Welsh actor……..

***LB:*** *Hopkins?*

**JK:** Yes Anthony Hopkins, I did loads of films like that, where I was actually cutting and making stuff as well. I did a film called *Krull* (Yates, 1983) with Bernard Bresslaw who had to play Cyclops, but his costume was designed and made out of black and white cow hide, now how are you going to get six of those identical? So I did the basic pattern and cut all the fur in a patchwork style that went together and then that was sent to the workrooms to be made up. So if you watch the film, it doesn’t look like he has different cow hides, they all look the same. That was very time consuming – so I quite liked that. But then I thought I want to get more involved in the design side, because having been at lots of fittings, you have to stand there with your arms folded and hand out pins – I wanted to have an opinion. But what you do learn is what not to do, which is good because some designers are really bad. For instance, I remember standing there with my notebook and my pins and an American actor was standing there in his black knickers. The costume designer wanted to fit this brand new white tuxedo on him, black trousers, 1940’s thing, and he was being pinned and it was all being fitted and it was quite interesting and then he stopped the fitting and he said to the costume designer ‘what’s everybody else wearing in this scene?’, and she said, ‘they are all wearing black dinner suits, we want you to wear a white dinner suit so you can stand out’, and he put his hands up to her and he took the jacket off and dropped it on the floor in front of me and said ‘I’ll have a black dinner jacket, I don’t need a white tuxedo to stand out’. At that time that was really important for me, because the dinner suit was all about a character that I didn’t really know much about because I hadn’t read the script, but it was interesting when he said, I don’t need that – I’ll give you a performance. So from then on, every time I was at a fitting I was much more aware of things. Another example, I won’t tell you the actor’s name, but I did this thing where he looked at his own face in the mirror throughout the whole of the fitting and had no input into his costume whatsoever. And so we just kept putting things on him and then at the end he said, ‘is that it? Thanks, I must phone my wife because I’m meeting her for lunch’, and he was off!

***LB:*** *So you get final say in that instance?*

**JK:** Yes, you get to do all the fine trimmings and decorate it how you want to, the costume designer didn’t really know and the actor wasn’t interested. So then I thought, I need to take this further. There was a costume designer at the BBC called Michael Burdel, who had been designing a big series of *The Borgias* (BBC, 1981). He was doing another thing and there was some politics going on at the BBC, where they needed some new assistants and they didn’t have any, and so he said to this head of department, ‘I know somebody who might be interested in coming to the BBC as an assistant – as three month holiday project’. So I got this job working for him for three months, which turned out to be six months and then I stayed on for a couple of years. In the end, they got rid of me because they thought I wasn’t a good assistant and they wanted all the assistants at that point to become designers, and the head of the department didn’t want me there because he didn’t think anyone would have any confidence in me. So I was asked to leave, and then I went off and worked on a couple of American films as an assistant and then eventually they got me back on different terms, on a six-week contract – everyone else gets a three month contract – I got six weeks. But then I got another contract and then when I applied for a permanent job it was like, ‘oh we can’t believe it’s the same person’, which annoyed me a little bit. Because by then I’d learnt how to play the game, all the people I’d assisted thought I was great because I’d had lots of other experience that they hadn’t had, and so that was the driving force, to be an assistant and not to be a designer.

When you are an assistant you work with lots of people that you think, this person isn’t very good, and then you end up taking over and doing the job for them. They are lazy or you are aware that they are phoning up the costumiers[[2]](#endnote-2) saying, ‘can you send out such and such?’. And you think, why can’t you do that yourself, that’s what you get paid for? So you then start to do more and you think, I could do what they are doing as badly as them and get paid more money, so that pushes you again to be a designer, and by then I had worked on lots of big BBC period productions, so rather than being made up to do the fifteenth series of *Allo Allo*, I got made up to design proper productions, period productions or little films like *Truly Madly Deeply*. So, the short answer is, kind of accidently.

***LB:*** *But there is a definite progression there*.

**JK:** Yes, I guess so.

***LB:*** *What’s interesting and what you have just been saying, is how you are interested in detail, so texture of fabric, or the lighting or the way clothing contours the body?*

**JK:** Yes and with gaining knowledge. The same things still interest me. I might still be shopping and see a piece of fabric and think, oh my god that’s fantastic I must buy it, and you think I’ve just spent £300 on a piece of fabric and I’m not working and it’s in a drawer at home! So yes there is an interest in that, but the interest became wider the more experienced I got. You suddenly have access to all sorts of things, period jewellery or real period fabrics which you buy from ‘Hopkin’s’ [[3]](#endnote-3)or wherever, or period lace – you get a piece of lace that maybe 40 years ago you would have thought, oh yeah, I really like that that’s nice but you chuck it in to bin because its damaged, now I’ve become more sophisticated about that kind of detail. However sometimes when you are doing a production that detail is too much, because it becomes too distracting, so you get a close-up of somebody’s head – it’s a Victorian thing - and all you find yourself doing is looking at the lace around the neck, you don’t know what they are saying or what’s going on, there might not be any dialogue, there might be a look that says something but you have missed it because you are too busy looking at this lace collar.

***LB:*** *So I guess learning how to work with actors, how to read them as people and knowing when to give and when to step back is an important lesson?*

**JK:** Yes, that’s right because there can be two different things, the actor and the character, and they have to meet in the middle. As an actor you try to be something that you are not, or you try to put yourself in that position, but you can’t actually be somebody else, physically you are still yourself. So different actors react differently, Anthony Sher is all about the character and the detail and he will attempt to find that character within himself, or push himself to be somebody that he is not. Whereas other actors will say it’s just me experiencing what’s in the script, and that’s when you think, oh they are always themselves, but then they can’t be anybody else other than that – you have just got to believe them. The skill is for them to give that performance, for them to be who they can only be, and for you to believe it – and that’s as difficult as the Anthony Sher thing.

And, you have got to be in the middle of all that because, say for instance on a modern thing, and a modern working class thing, where the character being portrayed might not necessarily have any taste with regard to clothing – or rather the ‘taste’ they have in clothing is different to what we are led to believe or what is commonly understood as ‘good taste’, you have to give the actors the confidence to look like that, to know that that’s right. What they are wearing is right for the character but it looks ok on them too – it doesn’t look ridiculous. So you have to compromise from the beginning, and as well as that you have to think about the colour, the set, the palette, what the director wants and so on.

***LB:*** *I remember reading a quote saying that costume design is as much about psychology, timing and ego* (La Motte 2001) *as it is about anything else. Would you agree with that?*

**JK:** Yes, yes, absolutely. I did a thing years ago called *The Ice House* (1997) and we had this actress come in who was being incredibly difficult and we couldn’t quite work out why she was being so difficult, but I think it was because she didn’t ‘know’ the person she was going to be playing. So we started off, I had a whole rail of stuff, it was in the BBC costume store in North London, and I said to her ‘I’m going to put you in what I think is right and then we will explore it’. So I put her in something and she hated it, she said it’s all wrong, and I said, ‘no it’s right because of a, b, c, d and so on’. She said, ‘well I can’t get what you are doing – it doesn’t feel right for me – I’m not like that’, and I said ‘yeah, but your character is blah blah blah’. So we go right through all the rails, and some things she puts on and she says this is fantastic, it’s a perfect fit, it shows off my figure, blah blah and I said, ‘but it’s wrong isn’t it, because that’s not who she is’, and she agreed and so by the time we spent an hour and a half going through all these things, and we ended up back at the very beginning and I put the costumes on that we tried on first and she said, ‘I think this is right, it feels right’, because by then you have talked her through the character, the story and how she evolves in the story and off she goes. She was still quite difficult though, but anyway we get to day one, and I go to her trailer and I get her into an outfit that I think is right and we get to set and the writer of the novel that the piece is based on comes onto set at that moment, now they have never met because he hasn’t been at the read [[4]](#endnote-4)through or anything, and he walks straight up to the actress and says, ‘you must be so and so who’s playing this character’, and she says, ‘yes I am’, and the writer says ‘I thought you were because that’s perfect – that’s exactly right, that’s how I saw her’. So you have kind of proved yourself and from then on it’s a different job because she trusts you. She is also looking at the other actresses, there is a tall beautiful blonde girl who you could shove in an old sack and she would look fantastic, and she’s aware of that, but then her whole opinion becomes well, that’s her character and so it becomes easier. Also when you start filming you have the director behind you pushing and knowing because you have had a brief from him as well

***LB:*** *So do you have different approaches if you are working on a modern production as opposed to a period production?*

**JK:** Yes, on a period production, you are the expert, you are the one that has done the research in costume, and no-body else has done that. So you have that strength and when an actor comes – say if an actress comes and you put a corset on them, they love it immediately, because you have given them a waist! Or an actress came on *Mr Selfridge* (2013–16), and she said, ‘this is my favourite programme, I’m so please you are doing it because I love the costumes in it’. And this is now the forth series and so I say, you do realize that now we are in the late 1920’s so the clothes are straight up and down and it doesn’t give you a waist, and then behind my back she was getting the dresser who looked after her, to put tucks into everything to give her a waist and I said, now look at that in the mirror – it looks 1950’s now and we had to undo it all. She was paranoid about looking fat because this was her big chance to make good. You start off by thinking right, ok I’ve done my research, I know exactly what I’m going to do, but then it isn’t straightforward because of people like her. But then also when you are doing modern – an ordinary person in the street – you should look ordinary and they put it on and they feel frumpy or they feel old fashioned, they feel not special enough because they are not wearing designer gear or some £400 pair of jeans, rather than a pair from BHS[[5]](#endnote-5) or something.

***LB:*** *So do you think it is harder for some actors and actresses to distance themselves from the character or from themselves, when it is contemporary clothing?*

**JK:** Much, much harder. You come in here for example, and you are wearing all black and I say to you, ‘well actually I think it should all be puce that you are wearing’, and you are looking at me thinking, I look terrible in puce, and I have to say well it’s not for you it’s for the character, and superficially the actor will say yes, yes, it’s for the character. And you put them in puce and its perfect for the character and perfect for the scene, perfect for the set, for everything but they won’t like it, so you have to compromise to fit in all those things, the set, the director, blah blah blah, the script, the character and make them feel comfortable wearing that.

***LB:*** *Does that get easier as you get more experienced?*

**JK:** In a way yes, but I’d say on every job there is always one actor that has got issues. You know that famous thing, does my bum look big in that? Well yes it does, because you’ve got a big bum but does that matter? Because what is wrong with the character having a big bum? What’s wrong with you having a big bum? But they think that whole television thing, television puts a stone [[6]](#endnote-6)on you, and I’ve got a big bum in this and I’m going to look even bigger on television. So you have to be aware of that and then you have to say well ok, let’s do this or let’s do that, let’s make it this length, let’s have this coming out of it – so there are ways and tricks that you go through to make them feel confident and once you have won them over it is easier but up until then…. And there is an actress called Katherine Kelly who I’ve worked with – she used to be one of the characters in *Coronation Street* (1960–present), and she was ‘Lady May’ in *Mr Selfridge*, and I’ve just worked with her again on a modern thing and we only had time to go shopping for about two hours and she eventually said, ‘look I’ve got to go, but you know what you are doing, I trust you, you know what I look good in, you know what I look bad in blah blah blah, and so just you go and get it’. So on the day when I was trying to put something on her that she had never seen before, she just wore it without question. But that’s only because I’ve worked with her on four different productions.

***LB:*** *So would that be the exception rather than the rule?*

**JK:** Yes – although some actors are like that. When you take them out for an initial fitting, you do the basics, for instance if you have to buy a pair of jeans. Now how many pairs of jeans do you try on before you think, oh god, I still look awful in them, but I look less awful in these than the others. I wish they made them higher or whatever. So sometimes when I take an actor out, that is the first thing I will buy them, is a pair of jeans and I’ll spend that extra money buying a pair of jeans that they feel comfortable in, because then they get the gist of me, and they trust me, and I don’t want them to look ridiculous, I do want them to look good and then it is easier from then on.

***LB:*** *You mentioned a while ago about your agent, how do you go about selecting what productions you are going to work on?*

**JK:** You don’t always have a choice. I don’t think I’m the best costume designer in the whole world and everything should come to me first. For big Hollywood films they want a big name designer to do that – that’s fine for me because I don’t long to be in Hollywood –although you do get paid very well. I don’t want to do a medium budget film because in this country they are not very good – the good ones are the low budget films, but then you get tired of low budget work. What I prefer to do is work in television because I feel I get more interesting things to work on. If you look at my CV – I’ve covered everything from dressing Jesus to whatever, but I take each project at a time and I have to think enthusiastically about them. So my agent will say a certain production has contacted me to check your availability – are you interested and I’ll say no, not in a million years but I’ll meet the director at a later date and he will say, we checked your availability but you weren’t free, and I’ll say – yes I’m kicking myself (not). I’ll sometimes say to my agent, such and such is coming up will you put me up for it and she will say ok and then she will get back to me and say – they are not interested – not because they don’t want me but because they have someone else. For example, last year there was a big series called *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016), about the early life of the Queen. The designer, Michelle Clapton was on it, but she had been offered a film in Azerbaijan that she really wanted to do, so she told them and they interviewed me for the job – just in case she couldn’t do it then they had me lined up. When I heard this, I phoned her up – I said Michelle what are you playing at? She said I’m doing both, I said, why are they interviewing me? She said, they don’t think I can do both. I said, are you telling me you can? She said, yes. So these people wanted another meeting, so I phoned my agent and asked her to tell them that I’ve been offered something else and I’ve accepted it.

Then I thought I would quite like to do the second series of that – it’s for Netflix – will run for five or six years and it’s at the same time as *Victoria* (2016), so I thought maybe I need something like that to take my mind off my experiences on *Victoria*, then I got a message back from my agent to say that they had already offered it to someone else. I asked who is was, and then I thought that’s really annoying because I didn’t think that the person they choose was very good. Then I got a message to say that the production I’m working with now had contacted my agent had checked my availability – they had interviewed the person who was doing *The Crown*, and I got the job and she didn’t – they might have been nervous about *Victoria* – it’s interesting because we both wanted to do each other’s thing.

***LB:*** *Do you find you gravitate toward the same directors or you work for directors you have already worked with before?*

**JK:** A director has phoned me, but the production contacts my agent – sometimes you don’t want to work with a director who contacts you and you play the game of saying you are busy, but contact me next time. On this production, I know the executive producer and she got the production to contact my agent which they did and I was interviewed and got the job. She was there and I said, what are you doing here? And then I said who else is directing and they told me who, and so I knew they all vaguely wanted me but it was up to the new director to see if he could work with me, but then when I got offered it, it was like I was always going to get it. Then other times you get offered things and you walk in and you know you haven’t got the job because the director has someone else in mind you might know the producer but it doesn’t matter. So you have to say – ok – but it is humiliating – and I think well don’t drag me in then if you already know – but that happens quite a lot.

**This section outlines the approaches used throughout the costume design process. Again the reality often differs from the perceived notion of ‘design’ as a creative practice. The convention of costume design is, more often than not, to be responsive. The financial restrictions placed on productions can have far reaching effects with regard to the process and creative practice of design. This is not only with regard to working within the confines of a set costume budget but also for example, the employment of actors within a specific role often happens at a very late stage as a result of financial issues. This will have an impact on preparation timescales and availability for meetings and fittings, this situation can ‘compromise’ the design process.**

**What is the first thing you do when you get a job?**

***LB:*** *When you get a script – how do go about working it out, breaking it down and deciding what people will wear?*

**JK:** I read it all. I break it down, I break it into characters and story days. I’ll know for instance on the production I’m working on now (*Guerrilla* [2017]), character 1 is in a prison outfit (Wormwood Scrubs[[7]](#endnote-7)), his conspirators break him out by giving him something to put up his back passage – the little bits of glass break and cut him and cause him to bleed so he is bleeding on his jeans – they rush him to hospital – next door to the scrubs. It is from there that they break him out. So I need however many prison outfits, that need to be covered in blood. Then I think, does he change into a hospital gown? Or does he change into something else? The woman that helps him escape is a nurse so she might bring him clothes, but is there time in the script for him to change? If there isn’t then you have a meeting with the director and say, you don’t want him escaping with his backside hanging out of a hospital gown and no shoes, so you have to write something in where he can change – and you bring up all these points for all the different characters – that you have discovered whilst breaking the script down.

***LB:*** *So how long would that process take you?*

**JK:** Well, I’ve got six episodes so that might take me three days, because I have to do it accurately. So for instance, as the budget is not huge, you know one of the characters in Episode 6 is involved in an explosion and gets his arm blown off, you think, if I’ve got to make three costumes for him then they can only have two explosions, but I’d better make those costumes now and then he can wear them from the beginning, and I don’t have to hire other costumes for him, and that will save me money. Where can I go to get some late 60’s early 70’s shirts? Because I’m going to have to get him three shirts, where can I go to buy three ties that will look right for the period so that I don’t have to spend money making ties and so on and so on? And then I read in the script that he still has his overcoat on, so do I have to make three overcoats as well and if I do where do I go to get 60’s overcoat fabric and how much will it be?

***LB:*** *Do you find this process challenging or interesting?*

**JK:** I find it interesting because it gets things set in your head and if I have to go to a meeting tomorrow and someone asks me something then I will know the answer straight away. It’s something you have to do. But also when you read things for the second time – you pick out things you haven’t seen before – so I’ll continue to read the script, and then when we sit down and have a read through and you get different voices reading the part and you focus on the voices and the characters, and it can suddenly become something else.

***LB:*** *So when you have production meetings who is present?*

**JK:** Executive producers, writers, producers, directors, set, make up and costume design, there might be a DOP[[8]](#endnote-8) or sound recordist. Everyone says what point they are at. So at our production meeting, the set designer might show pictures of what he is working on, there might be models of sets, wall paper samples – so I’ll get more of an idea of the colours. So for instance, you know that in the hospital you are going to have a lot of white, blue, navy for nurses, dark blue for porters, white for patients, so you know the set will be pale blues and greys so your colours will fit in with that. There is a lot of burnt oranges and browns, but he doesn’t want it to look all brown, so use these as highlights against beige or something. At a nightclub scene there are greens and so on and then at a scene at the Rhodesian[[9]](#endnote-9) Embassy in London you look at the colours you might need for that – colours that you want. So for example, I fitted one of the policeman – the one that gets his arm blown off, and he is in a navy blue and grey – both of which are the chosen colours – but what I’ve done is highlighted the burnt orange in a tie or the pale orange in a shirt or the lilac in the tie. It will be mainly the exteriors or the police station, so you have to build up a colour palette of what you want to use in certain areas to make it look stylish.

***LB:*** *So is this cast already?*

**JK:** Not completely, but nearly. One of the actors is in America so I only see him when he comes over, there is another actress from America – she was over a couple of weeks ago, but was more interested in finding an apartment than being fitted. Another actor – character number 1 has just finished a play and gone to Italy for a holiday so I won’t see him for a while.

***LB:*** *So when is filming set to begin?*

**JK:** Beginning of August – I think we are quite far advanced compared to other productions.

***LB:*** *So normally how early or when before filming do you get to meet principle actresses?*

**JK:** Anything from three weeks up until the day before – it depends when they are available and when they are confirmed.

***LB:*** *So you have to do all these things and manage all these situations but the timing constraints are a real issue as well?*

**JK:** Yes absolutely – and budgetary constraints as well. If you have the money and the time you can make anything, but if you get and actress the day before and she is in at 7a.m., you have to fit on her what you can in the time. Normally, if you get an inkling as to who she is – if you have done a bit of research so you know her measurements, you will have found stuff that will work – because by then you have the sets so you know what will work and then you sit down and explain the look of it and what is trying to be achieved, because if they have been cast late they might not know any of this, so you meet them and very often you are the first person they meet, and you will explain what they are part of.

***LB:*** *So all this preparation before filming starts and then do things often change during filming?*

**JK:** Yep – for various reasons, they might lose a location, they might change something from an exterior to an interior – they might not be able to paint the new interior and it might be puce so your actor walks into a room and gets lost in the wall paper. But part of my team Jane, my supervisor, she is there every day to take care of that. I line up the costumes for the next day so that she can prep them all and make sure they are washed and clean and so on and with my other assistant, Sarah I’m working on the next set of extras, and the next block of filming, so we are prepped as much as possible and then by that time we will have the rest of the cast.

**This section discussed the difficulties of working with clothing to recreate or represent the complexity of everyday existence. In theoretical terms,** **Lefebvre’s (in Lefebvre and Elliott 2005) overarching hypothesis of the everyday explores the notion of manipulation versus notions of choice that exist within the complex relationship between lived experience, daily life and reality. He describes the everyday as a site where micro decisions and adaptations take place within the macro thus resulting in a micro sociology or psychology (Lefebvre in Lefebvre and Elliott 2005: 4). The point at which an individual decides on a course of action or resolves or adapts to a situation or makes a clothing choice is influenced by the social, local and global or macro landscape of which they are a part. However the decision, action, resolution or conclusion often happens within arguably the most local or private space of the mind; the micro. The result is then played out often in a very subtle way through bodily practice such as dress choice, thus becoming part of the macro once more.**

**These resolutions form part of the macro which we can think of as society. When creating a character via clothing the requirement is to ‘represent’ such resolutions via ordinary items of clothing which are used as components of a screen ‘costume’ with the desired result that such items become naturalized as clothing again (Baert 1994), or rather clothing that is not obviously identified as a ‘costume’ but rather appears to be ‘natural’ dress.**

***LB:*** *I’ve been looking back at some of the work you have done. One of the things I’ve been looking at is* White Girl *(2008) about a family that move to Bradford wasn’t it? [[10]](#endnote-10)*

**JK:** Yes, they moved to Bradford because the mother had separated from the father and she wanted to get away from him. To find somewhere she could bring their children up safely, they moved to Bradford. They were surrounded by Muslims there.

***LB:*** *So they were in the minority?*

**JK:** Yep, they were now the minority and the young girl was looking for something, she was looking for love or whatever and she found it in the Muslim religion and she wanted to become a Muslim. So that was real ordinary people in that area. Most of the stuff I bought was in Oxford Street [[11]](#endnote-11) – the South part – where you find all those cheap shops that have permanent sales on. And then second hand clothes shops, and then market stalls up in Bradford. I would say, this is what you are wearing for this… although there was a wedding so she could have something for the wedding – but that was from a market stall. I think it was her cousin that got married – a big white sticky meringue thing. Melanie Hill the actress who played the mother, her outfit came from the market stall. I know her quite well, so I said ‘Melanie, I think it would be good if it was too tight because if it fits you very well, even though it is from a market stall, on camera it will look very good – to make it look tacky we make it too tight’, so that it didn’t quite fit. It was a skirt and a jacket so we got a bit of a belly hanging over the top of the skirt which you could see. I said, ‘I like that I think that’s real’ and she said, ‘I don’t care’. So she was prepared to look bad because it looked right.

***LB:*** *So fit is equally important? It’s not about something fitting right, it’s about something fitting wrong if it needs to?*

**JK:** Yes absolutely. And also it’s about knowing what the camera will do. A piece of cheap polyester could look like silk on camera and a piece of silk could look like an old rag. So it’s about understanding how the camera reads things and how it is going to be lit.

***LB:*** *When you look online for images from* White Girl*, there are really only two that appear – one is of the young girl in the headscarf and one is of the girl and her mum and they are both in denim jackets. They are wearing different types of denim jackets and I wondered whether you purposefully used denim because of the location, the class, the environment or whether it was something that evolved or you happened across?*

**JK:** I think I deliberately chose that. You look at all these young girls, and they are very influenced by their mothers, they are quite similar in some ways because the characters were very similar – they were both searching for love. So there was an element that she would dress like her mum, but her mum would dress a bit more grown up or whatever. Then when she starts to move away from that and beings to wear the headscarf, that is her moving away from her mother and looking for something else. So I think we got rid of the jacket at times to show this transition. The mother still had it – because they were poor. The script says the child is moving away from the mother and the mother doesn’t understand that, so they started off very similar in the way they dressed and then that changes as the story progresses and she starts to find other things like the headscarf. There is a scene in it where they have a big row, and the mother shouts ‘get rid of that scarf – who do you think you are?’ And the girl says, ‘no I’m wearing it’, because she needs to feel wanted or part of something and she doesn’t get that from the life her mother leads.

***LB:*** *The other thing I’ve been looking at is* Our Friends in the North *(1996)[[12]](#endnote-12)*.

**JK:** Yes, yes.

***LB:*** *– I remember the first time I met you actually, you were working on it at the BBC and I was on work experience and you asked me to go and find a donkey jacket[[13]](#endnote-13)! Can you tell me a bit about what it was like to work on that, as it covered several periods and the way characters evolve over time?*

**JK:** That’s my kind of thing that. Well, we started off, well the scriptwriter and the producer had wanted it to look real. What happened was that Danny Boyle was going to direct it – but he had done this film called *Shallow Grave* (1994) with Christopher Eccleston, and this was hugely successful and on the strength of that, he was given this three picture deal and he went off to do *Trainspotting* (1996). So the BBC had to find another director. Now, just before that I had been working on a two part thing about the press man who committed suicide – he threw himself in the water – umm.

***LB:*** *Robert Maxwell?*

**JK:** Yep, Maxwell, it was about him, and the director and I were working really closely, we looked through hundreds of clips of him to see what he was wearing and pulled out anything that was interesting. It was quite interesting but at the same time I was thinking, I’m not sure I can do six months of this! Anyway, it was cancelled for legal reasons and I had to go onto another production and I’d heard about this but at that time Danny Boyle was still set to direct, and they had Susannah Buxton for the costumes as she worked with Danny Boyle all the time. But Susanna had had a baby and she wanted to take the summer off to be with her little boy and the producer didn’t want to wait for her, so they got me to do it. So I sat there and I wondered, who was going to direct it now that Danny Boyle was off. The director who was doing the Maxwell thing – his agent was going to sue the BBC because they wanted full pay – it wasn’t his fault it got cancelled- so rather than go through the courts they gave him *Our Friends in the North*.

So I had started off by making it all very normal. So the character played by Chris Ecclestone – we were talking about him wearing very working class fabrics, not silk shirts or whatever, but real rough working class. So I thought let’s try a donkey jacket on and we will see if that works as something he could wear while he is canvassing, but it actually turned out that it was too ‘old working class’ – but the colour was good. So I found some fabric and dyed it navy blue, when it was dyed the fabric thickened it-self up like the material of a donkey jacket. So I made him a more fashionable young lads jackets in this working class fabric. Then he wanted to wear the jacket for two or three weeks before filming began to wear it in – then he left it on the tube!

The jacket was gone – a waste of money. So anyway we then went back to having the donkey jacket which was fine for a couple of scenes. But the look of this needed to be northern working class – they are all from Newcastle[[14]](#endnote-14) and that was my brief and that’s what I did. When the new director started he didn’t want it to look like that he wanted a 1960’s mod film. So he wanted me to change everything.

We had an actor called Malcom McDowell [[15]](#endnote-15)– a British actor who lived in America. He could only come over and work for so many days, otherwise he would have to pay tax. So his scenes were from all six episodes. We had to do all his scenes first, which was jumping about in periods etc. But the bottom line was, that everybody was working class – so even though the nightclubs become grander and bigger as the action moves to London and as porn becomes more successful, and you reflect that in what people wear it’s still coming from a working class background. So I had endless arguments with the director because he wanted everything stylized. So many arguments, in fact, I had let this First assistant director (AD) [[16]](#endnote-16)stay with me in my house because we were filming in London and she was from Newcastle, and I said to her one evening, ‘Charlie the producer is going to phone me tonight and sack me because I’ve got this thing all wrong’ – although I knew in my heart that I had it right. So the phone rings and she picks it up and says, ‘it’s Charlie’, I got on the phone and said, ‘hi Charlie, how are you?’ He said ‘I’m ok but how are you?’, I said ‘well I’m a bit depressed actually’, he said ‘why?’, I said ‘it’s just been really hard’ and I asked, ‘have I got it wrong, because my brief from you was such and such. Anyway is that what you phoning me up for to sack me?’ ‘No I’m phoning you up to say that the director has left – we parted company for artistic reasons – what he was doing is not what was written – he was making it into something else’. So he said, ‘no, you keep doing what you are doing – it’s good. The writer likes it – that’s what he wrote’ – as he was working class himself and from Newcastle.

One of the central characters is a woman called Mary – I loosely based her on a woman called Baroness Kennedy – a Scottish women – you’ll know who she is – she is from a really working class background. She was bright, went to university, moved through the system and is now on all those political programmes. When the writer asked me about Mary and I said I’d loosely based her on Baroness Kennedy – he said she is one of my best friends and that’s who I based the character on – so I had been getting it right – and that made me feel a whole lot better about it.

It’s really important to not make it look like someone’s version of the 60’s or 70’s but to make it look real. There are times when you can push it, like in Soho nightclubs – but keep it real. So when they had strippers it should be a young girl of 16 who is completely embarrassed and struggles to get her knickers off around the heel of her stiletto shoe, and is about to fall over, aware that all these men are watching her and making her more nervous, instead of these choreographed 4 × space age lesbians with huge bazookas – that’s what that other director wanted.

***LB:*** *Have you ever worked on a contemporary production where the budgetary constraints force you to ask extras to bring their own clothes?*

**JK:** Yes – *Luther* (2010–16) – and I’ve done four series. When we started that it was also about the colour palette and the way it was shot. When we started I put the money into what the principles were wearing because you can control more. What I did for extras was I went to charity shops, and I think the main colour was grey but I used highlight colours, lilac, purple, navy, pale blue, red. So I’d go round the charity shops and get half a dozen men’s and women’s suits, coats, shirts, ties, blouses, shoes ext. So you phone all the extras and you say, we a filming in the police station – so can you come wearing predominantly grey or black and they say, I’ve only got a brown suit and you say, is it chocolate brown? And they say yes, and you say – wear your suit. Then I’ll maybe put a lilac shirt or a blue tie with it. So we have three choices, so they come and I’ll look at it – and in *Luther* there is no pattern, it’s all blocks of colour, so you say – no pattern – no primary colours and they turn up with a bright blue and red printed frock. Then they say no body phoned me, and I say, what’s your name? And then I check my list and say, you were called yesterday at 8.05, and they say, oh yes I think someone did call, and you say yes, that someone was me, and I told you not to wear prints, and they say but I’m going to a party after. So you check what we have and say ok, size 10, put that on and then you know they will blend in. So for example a man’s dark grey suit you could fit on 27 different extras and no one would know it was the same suit – especially if it’s is with a different shirt and tie.

***LB:*** *Does the fit come into it though?*

**JK:** Well yes, but you then put the jacket on the back of a chair and give them a belt for the trousers as long as they don’t stand up and walk past camera.

***LB:*** *So generally speaking are the budgets bigger for period rather than contemporary?*

**JK:** Yes, because you have to hire all the extras stuff. On a modern thing you spend more on the principles because you take them shopping. The other problem is that you have to be aware of what’s fashionable – there are certain colours that are now and certain fabrics and you don’t want those as they will date something instantly, you want to keep it simple. You don’t want to make too much of a statement, so when it comes out in a year’s time it still looks ok and not dated.

***LB:*** *So with your budges do you chop it up into makes hires buys and so on?*

**JK:** Yes depending what is needed in the script. I discuss the budget with the line producer – I’ll say I’ve budgeted for one costume per person for one week’s hire, but then things change so you have to renegotiate – you have to add all the wardrobe supplies, and if you cast an actor for two scenes, one on Day 1 and one on Day 75 then I have to hold onto that outfit for that length of time, which might cost more than a principle, that you are only hiring for three weeks. Hire fee is the same whether is a principle of extra outfit.

***LB:*** *Productions, are they aware of these types of things?*

**JK:** Some of them are but some aren’t, but I will tell them. I’m not going to agree to a budget unless I think it covers everything. Then what I will do I will buy as much as possible – if it costs £150 to hire it for a week but I can buy a whole outfit for £75 then I’ve saved £75, but I can also keep using the clothes in different places again and again. So rather than hiring ten costumes I use one for twenty times, but then that stuff you buy needs to be almost invisible – either that or you use it on the same person over and over. You have to keep tabs on everything though, you don’t want a scene where someone is wearing something distinctive then cut to a scene and somebody is in the same outfit.

**This section discusses the production the designer was working on at the time of the interview. This is a TV mini-series of six episodes set to air on Sky Atlantic in April 2017. It charts the relationship between a pair of political activists in 1970s London who set out to free a political prisoner and wage a resistance movement. Here again, working with very particular clothed ‘bodies’ with regard to age and race in identity or character formation is a key consideration. Alongside unique research methods the designer comments on particular points of reference that are used in the design process.**

**JK:** I’m doing a six-part drama for Sky Atlantic called *Guerrilla*, like the Battle of Meinhof. The basic premise to start with, is black equality or black empowerment – set in 1971. It’s about a young couple who see the injustices – one is black and one is Asian, and they know this black guy who has written a book about the problems that black people have in Britain, or are having, and the history of black people via slavery and everything, and they decide to break him free from prison as a political statement, to get publicity, and in doing so they realize what they have done and they have to go on the run. So we have to live with them in this black society in Notting Hill [[17]](#endnote-17)in the 1970’s, where it is very very very poor.

***LB:*** *Not the Notting Hill of today then?*

**JK:** No, definitely not the Notting Hill of today – in fact the opposite. We film in these various safe houses and cafes and clubs, so the look of the costumes has got to be real, because the writer is black and he has written this from the heart, as he wants it to be truthful story about black people – good or bad. He wants them to look real so we represent people as they were. So although its set in 1971 it’s not an opportunity to show off and say, ‘aren’t I good at early 70’s’ – it’s about making it look real and with poor people.

We do visit the Rhodesian embassy, because at that time is when the Rhodesia starts to become Zimbabwe, and the problems that entails. We also go to posh West End art galleries full of Ozzie Clarke types, so we have a contrast between impoverished people and the rest of London society. But within the Notting Hill community, we have the real poor people. We have people that have been over here since the 1950’s, and they can’t find work because they are black – you know that ‘no blacks no Irish’ thing. We have a black population within that population that do work – who drive tubes and buses and do all the manual jobs that they were invited over to do. Then we have this young group of black people who want change, they see the injustices and they want something done about it. So we start off this project reflecting all of that, and then this young couple get this guy out of prison and then they have to go on the run with him and it’s how politics and the guerrilla movement change them throughout the series and it becomes a bit of a thriller. So we the audience, rather than just dislike these people because they are ‘baddies’, we get to know them much more. At the beginning, the girl is the one that pushes the boy to do things, so he questions everything he feels and thinks and by the time you get to the end, their relationship has completely transformed which is really interesting. So whatever we are shooting, there are like, three story lines going on at the same time so there is a bit of depth.

***LB:*** *Do you know if it was based on any actual events?*

**JK:** It wasn’t based on actual events but there were race riots in Notting Hill [[18]](#endnote-18) – so we will have that – and I’ve done some research around that and I’ll make it look like that as much as possible.

***LB:*** *I read something recently about a particular house in Notting Hill that was politically active at that time….*

**JK:** Yes that’s right – it’s called the black house, there is some footage of that, and there is a book that came out recently of photographs by a chap called Colin Jones I think, and he shows all these people that were in and lived in the black house and that is one of the looks I’ve gone for. The riots were I think, in the latter part of the 70’s, but the idea is not to over dress people – to make them look real.

***LB:*** *So with a project like this, how do you go about your research? What kind of processes do you use?*

**JK:** I have a collection – believe it or not - of Freeman’s [[19]](#endnote-19)catalogues or Littlewood’s or Burlington’s – there are loads of them, they cost about £100 each, so I start off with that and it gives me an idea of everyday working clothes and fashions – because you wouldn’t find the queen getting something from Freeman’s, trying it on and sending it back. Its working class people who use these catalogues, so it gives you an idea of what young and middle aged people and children would be wearing. So I start there with 1970, then I look at 1969 and 68, and that’s what I will base the young – and some older people on. But for most of the older generation I’ve got references from in and around London - Brixton and Notting Hill and it shows you what the older people would wear. You know that old man that is still wearing the old suit that he came over on the Windrush[[20]](#endnote-20) in, because he doesn’t have the money to go and buy loads of new fashionable clothes. So there is still a look that is more dated for the older people. Which you need in the piece to make the younger people look more 1971. So it gives you a sense of when this is happening. Because I think, if you backdated everything the audience would be left thinking – when is this? Younger people for example who don’t remember the period would think it would just look 60’s.

***LB:*** *So, do you absorb yourself in the period you are recreating?*

**JK:** I’ve got loads of reference books, I photocopy things, I look at other reference that is nothing to do with the period, it might be a particular painting or photographer that takes particular photographs, and then I’ll work with the set designer and get a colour palette of the colours that the director wants to use or wants the set designer to use – I might not like the colours but it will give me an idea of the colours or the palate that we are all working from. And then I’ll start to look at for instance, it may be a photographer who took photographs in 1970 and in the photographs they used those colours or textures. One of the painters I’m using on this, is a chap called Jock McFadyen, who has just brought out a book of his paintings – I think it is F-a-d-y-e-n. Now, he has painted all these buildings in Hackney [[21]](#endnote-21)– he lives in Hackney, and he uses lots of texture. So if it’s a cream wall, rather than say, as in this room it’s just flat cream, he paints paint peeling or something like that. So I’ll look for those kind of textures that he is painting of real buildings, or look at using texture in that way in the costumes that I use.

***LB:*** *In the fabrics?*

**JK:** Yes in the fabrics, so it means when the DOP (director of photography) is lighting, they are not lighting something that will go into a black hole or a white hole. Because for instance, if you put a white, Marks and Spencer polyester cotton shirt on a really dark black actor, then to light the face, because it is so dark, the shirt will glare, so you then have to dip that shirt down so it is not white white, just off-white – to be able to see the detail on the face. The problem then, is that the black actor is doing a scene with a white actor and the light that he needs to light the black actor is making the white actor look very white, with no detail, so you can’t see what is going on in their head. So you then have to be aware of the colours that you are using in all scenes, so that you know you don’t have that as a problem.

***LB:*** *Do you think you will have the same problem with this production in terms of making the actor comfortable in the clothes?*

**JK:** It will be worse. The problem with the 70’s thing is, you get all these young modern actors, who all work out and are really muscly. You want to put someone in a nightclub, a black nightclub, so you want to put them in just a vest and a pair of jeans. So the vest is fine, it makes them look sexy, it shows off all their muscles – that’s wrong for the period of course and they are all covered in tattoos – And then you try and put them in a pair of 70’s flared jeans, that are flat fronted and really really tight around their crotch, and they don’t get it because they can’t get into them. And especially if they have an African bum, and they are too tight. Then they all have this big bulge down the front, and they are not comfortable with that – so you have to compromise again there.

***LB:*** *The 70’s was not a decade of comfort was it?*

**JK:** Not that I remember ha ha – the thing about the jeans is – you were aware how tight they were but that was what it was all about – it was about sex it was about discovering yourself, it was about looking in the mirror and thinking I look good in all the right places. The emphasis was on the crotch the waist and the bum, not on hiding it, it was about showing it off on the dance floor.

***LB:*** *Zipping jeans up with coat hangers.*

**JK:** Yes exactly – it was all so tight, just before that you would buy a pair of jeans and wear them in the bath for two hours so that they would shrink to fit you or your shape. So you go and find some original jeans and you put them on guys and girls today and they will just not go. So that will be a problem – that will result in a compromise.

**This section discusses the collaborative nature of costume design practice. This collaboration begins with the preparation, working alongside writers, directors and actors and continues throughout filming when the costumes must ‘disappear’ within a frame which includes set design, lighting design and camera work.**

***LB:*** *So lighting is a key component to the whole design process then?*

**JK:** Yes, if you look at productions with a black cast for example, *Eastenders* (1985–present) – when you see the black cast on their own then it is lit in a certain way, when they go into the pub, the Queen Vic or whatever it’s called, the lighting has to fit the whole cast. That’s where it is ‘institutionally racist’ – if you want to use that term - in that the black cast will be the ones that miss out in lighting terms, and you don’t see the detail in their faces quite often.

So that’s just one of the things you have to think about when you are choosing the colours and the textures. The colour palate, the character and what they would wear and the situation and so on and so forth

***LB:*** *So the design process is very collaborative – do you think many people are aware of this – such as students entering into the profession?*

**JK:** It is yes, it has to be because you are working together to create one piece it’s not just you showing off – it’s about the whole thing. And no people do not realize how much of a collaborative process it is.

***LB:*** *So has it ever reached a point on a production where you feel you have to go? Where it becomes less collaborative and more dictatorial or problematic in other ways?*

**JK:** Oh eye, I’ve just started off doing a thing about Queen Victoria, called *Victoria* (2016) with the girl that was in *Doctor Who* (1963–present). So I started that off – and it’s quite a biggie – it’s supposed to take-over from *Downton Abbey* (2010–15). They want it to run for five years and as Victoria gets older they want to change the actress. So I started off doing that without any information, and I kept saying I need information. The second AD [[22]](#endnote-22)wasn’t very good or rather she wasn’t experienced enough – it was too big for her. And we had a principle cast of twenty or 30 people which wasn’t a problem for me because *Mr Selfridge* was like that all the time. But we had a crowd AD and we would not even get a list of names on the day we were filming, and I would say – who are we fitting? So these people would turn up and we would have to try to fit them to the sizes of the costumes we had. We had to recreate the coronation or the opening of parliament without any information so I didn’t even know what I was trying to supply. So I did my research, I did what I thought was right. Then on the day I would get told, there are these six soldiers, you think what six solders? I said you cannot come to me and ask for this stuff when I didn’t know I was supposed to have it and I haven’t got it. The next thing would be, this is the guy that is playing the butler, at the same time, someone else is saying, the guy who plays the butler is in a three way and I say, what do you mean? We have only got one butler and I fitted him last week? This other guy won’t fit this costume – so you go to see him and he is much bigger – 6ft 4" with a 48 inch chest, and you can’t fit him into that uniform and it has to be that uniform because you have established it on an extra in the background. He is one of the members of staff and he has to wear that uniform and you can’t find anything to fit him. They did that with principles as well – you would get the name the night before. So I was forever phoning Sarah, my assistant in London and saying ‘there is a van picking up at 5pm – just chuck on whatever you can find’. So I’d be waiting till half 12 or 1 in the morning , unloading the van then taking it in next morning for five o’clock thinking, Sarah that’s the wrong stuff, that’s not right or that’s right but it won’t fit. So there was no time to stand back and look at the picture and see what was going on. They wouldn’t get a crowd AD that was any good so you were fire-fighting all the time. Dealing with last minute principle casting and extras that did not look right. It was a complete nightmare and it meant for instance, that with last minute script re-writes they would come and say – we have got this messenger – what do you mean you got this messenger – well we have this messenger that has come from the palace to take this message and we want him to ride on this horse. I said that’s a specific costume – I haven’t got that – well see what you’ve got! So you put him in something and you think, it’s completely wrong but they use it. And they like it so much they start writing scenes around the messenger and you think, but his wrong and then you think, but what can I do? And so as you are on the set trying to sort that out the principle butler comes back looking completely ridiculous because it doesn’t fit. So then you go back to set and they have the butler driving the queens carriage and you say, but he shouldn’t be wearing that he’s a butler! And they say, well we haven’t got anything else so we just thought we would do it and I say, but you can’t do that. It was like that all day, every day, and we did the opening of parliament and I think I maybe just got away with that, but they will have to do some CGI, and then we were doing the coronation and suddenly this advisor appears who knew everything about everything and was pointing out to the set and art department everything that was wrong. So suddenly they were coming to me and saying we need four of these and four of these and another two bishops and I’m saying but I’ve only got what you asked me for yesterday – did you not know yesterday?– No we didn’t, it’s the advisor that’s telling us what we need to have. So you say to the director that you cannot shoot it that way because we do not have what’s needed because I was told we needed that that and that, and this this and this, and that’s what I’ve done. And then the advisor would get involved and start saying well, that’s the wrong uniform, he shouldn’t be dressed like that, he should be dressed like this and you are made to look a fool. When it actually came to the coronation bit, she goes in to a room and she is disrobed and then she puts that thing on – they all have names – then she goes back and is crowned blah blah blah. Then she goes backstage takes the cloak off and puts another one on and walks out. I did all that because I’d done my research, and we had the cloak all made, the cloth of gold thing and it looked very good, but you think please don’t focus on anybody else because it looks terrible. I said to the producer things have to improve, otherwise I’m going because I’m not being allowed to do my job properly. He had it in his head that all these things could be done – makeup can be put on any face, but I cannot fit a costume to any-body. You have to fit the costumes. He was so intimidated by the make-up artist, and I thought I can’t do this anymore, and I handed in my notice and left. Another designer who has a very different approach to me took over.

***LB:*** *It would be interesting to know if they run into the same problems.*

**JK:** Well, she stayed on to the end, but all the actors hated her because I’d tried to make it look as beautiful as possible – that was my brief. She was turning up with an old bit of fabric that she had got for £3.99 and getting her seamstress to run up something.

***LB:*** *So not the same approach.*

**JK:** No

***LB:*** *Well it will be quite interesting to see when it’s aired to see the change in style.*

**JK:** Well I went and did a lot of research and in the Museum of London there is the actual dress that she wore as Queen the day after she was told her uncle had died. It was black but it’s all faded so much it has gone a reddy-brown colour. I made it in black silk moire and it looks very beautiful on camera – except on Day 1, the director decided to get her to lean against the wall and slide down the wall in a very modern fashion – but the wall had just been painted white so all down the back of her black frock is white paint. But you have to deal with things like that – meanwhile you are trying to line up 100 extras for the next day and you have four new principles coming in and you don’t know who they are.

***LB:*** *So where does the breakdown in the collaborative process of the communication happen in that instance – is it the producer to the director or the team that they employ?*

**JK:** All of it. The main problem to start with is that the scripts weren’t written, so we were given a scene to do without knowing when it was coming in the story, and we hadn’t got the right stuff – so all that information should have come from the executive producer and he was the one who made the decisions and he wouldn’t make the decisions. The producer would say – I know you need this but he won’t make a decision. He left everything until the last minute. So for example we had Peter Bowles playing the Duke of Wellington, and I know he is 6ˈ2 but I also know that he as a 36" inside leg – who has a 36" inside leg? So he is in the next day, so I arrange for him to go to Angles (costume house), I arrange for someone who is employed on this show to be at Angles to fit him, and I arrange for transport to pick the costume up at 5p.m. The van turns up at 12.30 and I look at what has arrived and the uniform is ok but the rest of it really isn’t very good, so I go and look at my stock to find anything that I can put on him but we haven’t got endless pairs of trousers that are a 36" inside leg – or jackets with the right length body. He spent the whole time while I was fitting him the next day saying, ‘well I should have had a proper fitting’ and I said to him, ‘you are really annoying me – I haven’t had the time to do this properly – you have to live with it as I do – just go with it – I only found out you were doing this yesterday’, and he said ‘well I’ve known for four weeks and I was wondering why no one had been in touch’!. Sarah, my assistant didn’t want to do it any more, she had had enough of sending me all the items she could find and me saying – sorry Sarah this isn’t right. Jane, my supervisor had had enough, because she was having to deal with it on the day. There was an actress who played the queen’s mother – who collected lace – so I made everything for this character from lace. Then the actress tells me just before filming, that she is allergic to lace – which is not the case – but she won’t wear it, unless you then spend the time with her to be with her as she dresses – in which case there is nothing wrong with the lace, but if you are running around between five other principles, then that’s when there is something wrong. For example, she can’t act properly because her petticoat is too heavy or something. And you explain, well actually that is because they used to wear a minimum of three petticoats and the problem was these petticoats were so heavy they could hardly move, so somebody came along and thought I’ll invent the crinoline, and that means you don’t have all that weight and that’s good. And she’s really interested in this, but then she still says ‘yeah but I can’t act in that because it’s too heavy – have you got a crinoline?’ And you have to say – no, because it is only 1846 and crinolines weren’t around until 1851 – ish. And I’m thinking, ‘arrrrgggghhhhhhhh’.

And I looked at what I was doing and it didn’t look good enough for me so I resigned. Everyone was really upset and the producer was upset and said but it looks amazing, and I said but it could look better and it doesn’t it could look sharper – it’s not sharp enough – it’s not detailed enough and there are too many mistakes where I have had to make do. My name goes up at the end of this and everybody is going to say – well that’s wrong – and you will get 1000s of letters of complaint and you’ll think, why did he get that wrong and I’m not prepared to go on with it. At the moment my agent is negotiating whether I get a credit or not – anyway so that is an instance where I resigned because I couldn’t do my job properly. It would be different if I did a bad job but I didn’t.

**This section discusses the work James is particularly proud of and the reasons why.**

***LB:*** *So just to finish things off – as I have kept you for quite a while – what would you say is the work you are most proud of?*

**JK:** I am actually pleased with a few things – I did a little thing a few years ago which was TV and was made into a feature film, I did the first series which was my first period thing. Phoebe de Gaye did the rest. Then I did *Truly Madly Deeply* (Minghella, 1990) which I’m proud of because I survived it – not because it was horrible but because it was low budget. Then *Our Friends in the North*, because I stuck to my guns even when I thought I was going to get the sack and I ended up getting nominated for a RTS [[23]](#endnote-23)and a BAFTA for that, so I thought I can’t be that bad – because all the time you think you are going to get found out! Then on the strength of that I got offered a job by a producer and I turned her down and she was not pleased and then I went for this thing called *The Long Firm* (2004).

***LB:*** *That’s mark strong as well isn’t it?*

**JK:** Yes, and I said to the producer who I had turned down before that I’m surprised that I’m hear as I turned you down before, and she said well I was furious, but I’m seeing you now because you’re the best person for the job – not knowing at that point it was Mark Strong. But this was really good fun to make more than anything else I’ve done and it came out and it looked good, and I won a BAFTA, and you think, so you can enjoy your job – so it was a learning thing – so I’m proud of the fact that I had a good team we did a good job and enjoyed it. From that point on I’ve tried to make everything like that, so that helped putting the *Victoria* incidence in perspective, and helped me walk away – I thought I’m not spending six months of my life like this.

***LB:*** *So other than* Victoria *– anything you are not particularly happy with?*

**JK:** Yes – *39 Steps* (Hawes, 2008)!

***LB:*** *We have spoken about that before, haven’t we?*

**JK:** Yes, it was a shame because everything could have been very good. I spoke to the line producer and he hadn’t got this character cast yet but on Day 1 he gets shot and killed, and we needed treble suits for him and I needed to get them made, like last week, and about three days before we were going up to Glasgow they cast the actor, so I had to rely on Angels making the suits for me because I was off doing other things. The fabric I had chosen wasn’t available so they choose something that looked like it but was a different weight – it was light and flimsy – so we had these period suits that looked modern because of the fabric and that was across the board. But once I’d established them I couldn’t change things because basically we had filmed the end scene first, and I kept moaning and all I was doing was moaning and I thought it’s the first week of filming and these people haven’t met me before and all I’m doing is moaning, and that set the tone for the whole thing.

***LB:*** *I guess it’s the logistics again isn’t it?*

**JK:** Well it’s about getting the right information – you’ve been doing this job for twenty years – why didn’t you think it was important to cast this person early as they fall in the water with bullet wounds?

***LB:*** *So you mentioned at the start how you liked theatre, have you designed for theatre?*

**JK:** No.

***LB:*** *Would you like to?*

**JK:** Yes but I don’t think I’d get offered any because people don’t know me for that.

***LB:*** *So you have moved down a path too far away?*

**JK:** There are people that do it TV, film and theatre and sometimes they will say, if I concentrate on the set you can come and do the costumes but they never have and I don’t think they will really.

I have done a couple of sets for amateur productions but I just designed the sets – I wasn’t at any of the productions of anything.

***LB:*** *Do you still paint?*

**JK:** I haven’t done that for ages. But my ambition when I retire is to go back to art school for a year because I have lost the discipline – so now if you do something and don’t like it you chunk it away, but if you do it every day you keep doing it and get better and better. But the interesting thing – one of my sisters who wanted to go to art school and wasn’t allowed because that was for drug addicts and drop outs – she had to become a nice primary school teacher – which she did but when she retired she took up art classes again – I’d like to go back for a year.

***LB:*** *Thank you very much.*

**JK:** If you have missed any questions you can always give me a call and remember we are based in the old CSM[[24]](#endnote-24) building just round the corner so please come and see it.

***LB:*** *I’d love to – thanks again so much for your time.*

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**Figure 1:** Daniel Craig, Episode 1 of *Our Friends in the North* (1996).

**Figure 2:** Juliet Stevenson and Bill Patterson in *Truly Madly Deeply* (1990).

**Figure 3:** Jenna Coleman as Queen Victoria in *Victoria* (2016).

**Contributor details**

James Keast is an award winning and prolific screen costume designer. His career in design spans a quarter of a century but he has worked with costume and clothing for much longer than this in one way or another. He is known for the diversity of the projects he has been involved with, his detailed approach to referencing and the way he informs his designs via the use of mixed media. His CV includes *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (1990), *The House of Elliott* (1992), *Our friends in the North* (1996), *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (2002), *The Long Firm* (2004) for which he won a BAFTA, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (Episode 1, 2008), *Marchlands* (2011), *Luther* (2010–15), *Mr Selfridge* (2014–16), *Victoria* (2016) and *Him* (2016).

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Notes

1. Berman’s and Nathan’s was a Theatrical Costumiers. Now known as Angels Costumes. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Costume staff that work at costume hire houses. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hopkin’s is an antique/period fabric shop based in South London. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All cast and crew read through entire script before filming begins. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. British Home Stores – clothing and home ware shop. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 14lb’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Male high security prison in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Director of Photography. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Renamed Republic of Zimbabwe in 1980. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. City in the North of England. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Shopping area in central London. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Our Friends in the North was a critically acclaimed, award winning TV series that charted the stories of a group of four friends from Newcastle and covered a 30 year period. It is also known for establishing the careers of the actors involved including Daniel Craig. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Donkey jacket is a heavy wool jacket with PVC panels on the shoulders, predominantly blue or black. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. City in the North of England with strong industrial history. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Malcolm McDowell actors known for rolls in. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. First Assistant Director. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Area of London, now particularly affluent. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Race riots occurred in Notting Hill in the late 1950’s and in 1976. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Mail order clothing and home ware catalogues. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Empire Windrush, a passenger liner known for bringing one of the largest groups of post-war West Indian immigrants to the United Kingdom in 1948. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Inner city area of London. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 2nd Assistant Director. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Royal Television Society. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Central St Martins School of Art based in London. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)