

## **Starke dresses the stars: Jean Simmons' 21st birthday wardrobe**

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### **Abstract**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1950 British actress Jean Simmons turned twenty-one. At the time Simmons was one of the most popular and successful British film stars, voted actress of the year in the *Daily Mail* National Film awards the same year. Simmons twenty-first birthday was therefore viewed as international news. However, rather than choosing a birthday wardrobe from a haute couturier, as a film star of her status undeniably could have, Simmons chose garments designed by London ready-to-wear firm Frederick Starke.

This article questions why Simmons chose a wardrobe from Starke and investigates how these garments helped Simmons to project a certain image. It also considers how the outfits selected were later used as Simmons' costume in the Ealing Studios crime drama *Cage of Gold* (Dearden, 1950). The film credits Anthony Mendleson, Ealing Studios resident designer and wardrobe supervisor, for the costumes. However Starke designed the majority of the clothes worn by Simmons in the film. This is an intriguing example whereby Simmons' garments are, at once, both her personal clothing and her costume.

### **Keywords**

Fashion

Costume Design

Wholesale Couture

Jean Simmons

Ealing Studios

Cage of Gold

In January 1950 the British actress Jean Simmons turned 21. During the late 1940s, Simmons had appeared in a number of high-profile British films, including *Great Expectations* (Lean, 1946), *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947) and *Hamlet* (Olivier, 1948). *Hamlet* was successful with audiences and critics alike and won multiple Academy Awards, including the 1948 Academy Award for Best Motion Picture (the first British film to do so). Simmons was nominated for the Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for her performance as Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Owing to Simmons' increasing celebrity status in the late 1940s it is understandable that her 21st birthday was viewed as international news. Her birthday, on the 31 January 1950, and the parties held to celebrate it were reported on in the national and international press. The 28 January 1950 issue of the British Photojournalistic magazine *Picture Post* ran one such story. Simmons appeared on the front cover of the magazine and inside there was a three-page feature on a birthday party thrown in her flat. In 1950 it can be argued that Simmons was one of the most important young British starlets. However, rather than choosing a birthday wardrobe from a haute couturier, as a film star of her status undeniably could have, Simmons' birthday wardrobe was designed by the London wholesale couturier Frederick Starke. This article first explores what the 'wholesale couture' sector of the fashion market was. It then goes on to question Simmons' choice of a wardrobe from Starke, analysing the specific garments chosen and what these suggested about her image and fashion sense. Finally, it considers the brand Frederick Starke Ltd and the collaborative energy that existed between London fashion designers and film studios in the late 1940s and the early 1950s.

### **Frederick Starke: Wholesale couturier**

Frederick Starke was one of London's leading wholesale couturiers. Whilst this term has fallen out of general usage, during the 1940s and the 1950s, such firms operated at the pinnacle of the British ready-to-wear industry and produced a wide variety of garments from smart tweed suits to cotton sun dresses. Firms within this sector were also referred to as Model Houses by the press. Wholesale couturiers' output was largely copied or adapted from Parisian haute couture garments; however, the garments were modified to meet ready-to-wear manufacturing techniques in Britain and were produced in a set of circumscribed sizes. Such firms created high fashion that was accessible to more women than bespoke haute couture owing to the lower cost and the fact that wholesale couturiers dispensed with the need for time-consuming fittings. Wholesale couturiers' garments were generally retailed in small boutiques (at the time these were referred to as 'madam' shops) and department stores. Such firms did not typically have their own standalone stores.

The wholesale couture sector was widely regarded as trading on an oxymoronic exclusivity. Very rarely was a wholesale couture piece a one-off, and yet such firms' advertisements persuaded potential customers of the luxury and originality of their pieces. Models were manufactured in runs of approximately 100–200 garments in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. The number of each model made was governed by the amount of cloth available and in many cases wholesale couturiers had cloth exclusively manufactured for them. Starke had exclusive arrangements with the fabric manufacturer Ascher and in the late 1940s he used many Ascher artist-designed textiles (by the likes of Christian Berard) for his garments. Wholesale couture garments were generally made using a mixture of machine and hand processes. Original garments indicate that whilst elements such as linings, pocket flaps, hems and buttonholes were hand stitched, wholesale couture pieces were largely machine stitched. The cost of labour in this sector was high because workroom operatives needed to

be very skilled to carry out the complex manufacturing processes (1948a: BT 94/249). This method of trading was also costly because overheads were expensive; consequently, wholesale couturiers' annual profits were generally fairly small. Overheads included central London showrooms (Starke's was known for its Persian carpets and Jacobean furniture) and lavish press shows. Press articles indicate the opulent nature of wholesale couturiers' shows. The journalist Anne Barrie suggested that Starke was the first wholesale couturier post war to throw 'a sumptuous, fan faring press party to launch his new collection' (1961: 86–87). There is evidence of such press parties in Starke's showroom diary. In 1948 for example approximately 75 journalists attended his spring/summer 1949 press show (AAD/2000/10/2).

Wholesale couture clothing was primarily worn by middle-class women during the 1940s and the 1950s. A 1949 article in the trade journal *Fashion and Fabrics Overseas* suggested that women who bought wholesale couture were 'doctors, business people, barristers, solicitors and welfare workers. Their main interests are in their work. But they are discerning about good clothes' (Anon. 1949b: 104–08). This customer base of working, affluent women was reflected in the price of garments. On average a wholesale couture afternoon dress would have cost between £15 and £18 in the late 1940s. For example, in October 1948 *The Evening Standard* advertised a Frederick Starke shot taffeta dress with a very full finely pleated skirt costing £17.6.0 (Anon. 1948b: n.pag. AAD/2000/10/1).

Frederick Starke was born in 1904 to Jewish émigré parents. Starke's family were heavily involved in the fashion industry and both his mother and maternal grandfather ran their own fashion businesses. Starke's birth name was Frederick Henry Weinbaum, although he adopted his mother's maiden name, Starke, from an early age. He established his business,

Frederick Starke Ltd., in 1933 at 20 Little Portland Street, London. In 1944 the firm moved to Bruton Street owing to wartime bombing. The new headquarters, 31 Bruton Street, were in the heart of London's fashionable Mayfair. Starke's neighbours on this important fashion thoroughfare included the haute couturier Norman Hartnell, fellow wholesale couturier Ian Meredith and Sekers fabrics. Starke worked closely with Sekers and many Frederick Starke garments were manufactured in Sekers' innovative fabrics. One example was a crease- and crush-resistant nylon that Starke used for evening dresses from the late 1940s onwards.

Starke was notable amongst wholesale couturiers because of the multi-faceted role that he played within his business. As Jean Soward suggested in *The News Chronicle*, whilst 'primarily a businessman [he] is as touchy about his reputation as a designer as any prima donna high fashion monger' (1959: 6). Typically wholesale couture businesses were run by male businessmen, with their wives often taking on the role of head designer. This was not always the case, but it was certainly unusual for the company director to take on both the role of designer and that of businessman in this sector of the market. Starke's function as designer is especially interesting because most of the garments produced by his firm were copies or adaptations of Parisian and Italian haute couture. It is likely that Starke did some designing for the firm, although the assertion in *The Kansas City Times* that Starke designed 'every' piece of his collection is untrue (Sities 1962: 3). In the 1950s and the 1960s Starke was certainly recruiting young staff from notable art colleges, including the Royal College of Art, to design for him. Whilst he did not have design autonomy, the creative decisions were it seems still his, even if he was not actually designing the garments.

Starke was involved with several fashion industry groups. He was a founding member of the London Model House Group, established in 1946 'to influence the style and to improve the

general standard of wholesale models' (Anon. 1946b: 83) and 'to demonstrate the high standard of design and craftsmanship, and to impress buyers from overseas with the importance of London as a source of supply for fashion' (Starke 1947: 25). The Model House Group and wholesale couturiers more widely were very export-minded. Britain had come out of the Second World War as a debtor nation and export was essential to Britain's recovery. It is interesting to note that by 1948 whilst the general proportion of export to total production in the clothing industry was 5–8 per cent firms within the wholesale couture sector were exporting up to 25 per cent of total production (1948c: BT 94/249).

Starke's garments can be found in editorials and advertisements across a wide range of fashion magazines, general interest magazines and both British and international fashion trade journals in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Starke's garments regularly appeared in quarter and half page advertisements in *The Sketch* and *The Tatler and Bystander*, whilst full-page black and white advertisements were seen in fashion magazines including *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and trade journals including *The Ambassador*, *Vogue Book of British Exports* and *Fashion and Fabrics*. Starke's most used model was Barbara Goalen, who was widely regarded at the time as Britain's 'top' model (Anon. 1952: 27). Goalen was well known for her elegant slender figure. Certainly Starke's predilection for slim-line skirts and blouson-type jackets and blouses in the late 1940s and the early 1950s suited Goalen's shape.

In the late 1940s Starke acknowledged the power of utilizing screen and stage actresses to promote his products. Actresses appearing in Starke's 1940s advertisements included Hazel Court and Kay Kendall. The use of Kendall was particularly striking, and she appeared in almost all of Starke's magazine advertisements in 1947. Court and Kendall were both part of

The Company of Youth, which was established in 1945 by the film tycoon J. Arthur Rank. This was colloquially known as The Rank Charm School. This was a conscious attempt by Rank to manufacture and mould young film stars in a similar way to the Hollywood studio system. It is notable that many of the young women who were part of the school in the late 1940s appeared in advertising campaigns for fashion and beauty firms alongside their film roles, as is evident with Court and Kendall. Such advertising is illustrative of the connected power of film and fashion. Women, as can be seen in film magazines such as *Picturegoer*, wanted to dress like the young British film stars they saw on-screen (O'Neill 1950a: 21). The usage of such film stars for fashion advertising was pivotal in helping British fashion manufacturers to target new consumers, particularly in these instances, younger cinema-going consumers.

### **Jean Simmons' birthday wardrobe**

The examples of Court and Kendall demonstrate that in the late 1940s Starke was actively engaging with actresses to promote his designs. However, there is little evidence prior to the early 1950s of film or stage actresses wearing Starke's garments other than in editorials or advertisements. This changed with Jean Simmons' 21st birthday wardrobe. Aside from receiving an Academy Award nomination in 1948 Simmons' popularity with international filmgoers in the late 1940s and the early 1950s is striking. Numerous film review or favourite actress polls of the period rated Simmons amongst the top five British actresses. For example, in 1950 Simmons was voted the fourth most popular British star amongst American and British Film Exhibitors (Anon. 1950h: 12), whilst a poll for the *Daily Mail* National Film Awards in 1950 suggested that she was the most popular British actress (Anon. 1951b: 133). This popularity was also seen in film magazines. A 1950 article in

*Picturegoer* described her as 'easily the most valuable piece of star material in this country' (Anon. 1950d: 10). With such widespread notoriety the opportunity for Starke to dress Simmons must be regarded as a significant moment for his business.

Whilst Simmons was not a product of Rank's Charm School in 1950, Rank was her manager. Articles imply that the choice of birthday wardrobe from Starke was Simmons' own (Robertson 1950: 26–27). However, it is possible that Rank decided that Starke should dress Simmons. It seems likely that Starke and Rank were first acquainted when Starke used Kendall for his advertising in 1947; however, the pair had other prior connections. Starke was one of the original backers of the New Lindsey Theatre Club in London, where actors including Dirk Bogarde and Flora Hird got their break (Anon. 1949a: 52). Starke owned half of the venue and according to Barrie was heavily involved in the theatre, and both read and chose plays for production (1961: 86–87). In 1949 Rank bought the rights to the play *Flowers for the Living*, which had been shown at the New Lindsey Theatre Club (Anon. 1949a: 52). Whether the choice of garments came from Simmons or Rank the publicity Starke received for the wardrobe must be seen as important in promoting the brand, Frederick Starke Ltd.

It is clear from magazine articles and accompanying images that Rank had a high level of control over Simmons. A 1950 article in *Picture Post* suggested that 'Mr Rank [was] tenderly solicitous of [Simmons'] much publicised naiveté' (Anon. 1950a: 17–19). An article in *Picturegoer* also shows Simmons cutting into a tiered birthday cake (much like a wedding cake) with Rank seen looming behind her. The accompanying text alludes to the pressure Rank put upon Simmons. 'By the time it was all over, the star herself was tired, and according to some, a little tearful. Well she might be' (Anon. 1950d: 10). The article also suggested that 'the publicity on this friendly and gifted young woman has lately been



heavily overdone, and unless the Rank people start soft-peddalling on it pretty quickly there is a danger that the girl will be over-sold to the public' (Anon 1950d: 10). Owing to this, it is likely that Rank at least played a part in the choice of wardrobe from Starke. In late 1949 and early 1950 it is striking how often Simmons appeared within articles, not only about the films she was starring in, but in general interest pieces too (O'Neill 1949: 19 and Hobson and O'Neill 1949: 19). Often such pieces concentrated on Simmons' fashion choices. Simmons, like Kendall and Court, appeared in a number of fashion and beauty advertisements in this period. These were likely orchestrated by Rank. For example, in 1947 Simmons appeared in an advertisement for Lux toilet soap (Anon. 1947b: 2) and in 1950 she appeared in lipstick advertisements for the cosmetic company Goya (Anon. 1950e: 22).

As one of the leading British actresses Simmons could have unquestionably chosen a 21st birthday wardrobe from a haute couturier rather than a wholesale couturier. I argue that this was a deliberate choice to both promote the fashion credentials of London wholesale couture and to make Simmons more accessible to her fans. Simmons' birthday wardrobe represented a transitioning of her image away from being a teenager and towards being an adult. This is reflected in the roles that she played in 1949 versus 1950. For example, within *Cage of Gold* (Dearden, 1950), filmed and released in 1950, Simmons plays a wife and mother. On the other hand, in her roles in *Adam and Evelyne* (French, 1949) and *The Blue Lagoon* (Lauder, 1949) she is presented as a teenager or young adult. Isobel Robertson iterated this idea of her transitioning in an *Illustrated* article:

Her taste is sound. She has avoided the two most common traps of those in her position and profession. She has never tried to prove her grown-up status by wearing

clothes far too sophisticated for her years. Neither has she clung to the typically teenage styles now that she is well and truly in her twenties. (Robertson 1950: 26–27)

The title of this article ‘A smart girl grows up’ and the choice of images (showing her as a child or young girl next to her as a 21 year old in comparison) reiterated this idea of maturing into adulthood. Overall this article suggests that this transition was enabled in part through her choice of clothes, all of which were suitable for a woman rather than a teenager.

In the early 1950s Starke’s clothes were targeted at a more mature woman than Simmons, at least in her 20s or 30s, as is illustrated by advertising and editorial images. Starke went on to launch a younger subsidiary line called Fredrica in 1954 but certainly in the late 1940s and the 1950s his target market was slightly older. Many of the articles that discussed Simmons’ birthday wardrobe illuminated the accessibility of these garments for the general public. Robertson suggested in *Illustrated* that ‘Jean’s’ wardrobe might well be the ideal wardrobe for any girl of twenty-one’ (1950: 26–27). The garments selected were fairly sensible and mature for a 21 year old. It can be argued that this collaboration offered mutual benefits. It helped to promote Starke’s garments to younger audiences whilst equally demonstrating Simmons’ maturity in her fashion choices.

Newspaper and magazine articles typically presented Simmons as down-to-earth or a girl-next-door. *Picture Post* stated that her flat in London was ‘smart, but not chi-chi; comfortable, colourful and draped, but not aggressively film-set. It is, in fact, what you would expect; rather self-consciously unsophisticated. Like Jean’ (Anon. 1950a: 17–19), something that, as other articles allude to, was also illustrated in Simmons’ fashion choices. *Preview* suggested that she had an ‘individual but by no means expensive taste in dress’

(Anon. 1951a: 21–25). Starke's garments could be regarded as high fashion in this period and yet, were priced within the reach of most middle-class women. The clothes chosen by Simmons illustrate this idea of an 'individual' taste in dress, with the majority of her birthday wardrobe taking clear inspiration from Parisian haute couture. The very slim skirts, tightly 'gripped' waists and blouson backs certainly reference Parisian couture designs from autumn/winter 1949 and spring/summer 1950. Simmons' 'individual' sense is most notable in the bold colour combinations of the outfits she chose and the way in which she accessorized her outfits, typically with berets rather than full hats.

Simmons stated that she liked clothes that were 'smart, simple and comfortable to wear' (Robertson 1950: 26–27). This idea of smart and simple clothes can be seen in the five outfits that Simmons selected from Starke, which included a range of dresses, suits and ensembles. The garment that appeared most frequently in press articles on Simmons' birthday was a tulle evening dress. This featured in a *Picture Post* article (Anon. 1950a: 17–19) and also appeared on the front cover of the 4 February 1950 issue of *Illustrated*. This dress was a striking garment: a ballerina-length full-skirted strapless evening dress with a sweetheart neckline in mist grey tulle with multiple underskirts of grey and blush pink, accented with a pale grey velvet and satin rose shower across the hipline that was semi hidden beneath the top layer of tulle. Alongside this garment Simmons chose one day dress, a crepe tweed dress with a full whirl-pleated skirt and button-fronted bodice in broadly banded tones of contrasting grey and mustard, and three suits. The first was a skirt suit in pale blue lambswool with a woven-in border pattern in a darker shade accessorized with a broad-striped scarf. The second suit consisted of a slim black skirt topped with a battledress-style jacket in pink and black duster check. The full-bloused back was gripped tightly into a stiffened belt, creating a blouson effect. The third was a white and navy skirt suit. The jacket

was navy and white check with a full back reefed into the waist complimented by a narrow navy belt. This was teamed with a plain navy slim-line skirt (Anon. 1950b: 6) (Figure 1).

The five outfits chosen by Simmons were some of the most popular items with the press from Starke's Spring 1950 collection. All of the garments selected by Simmons appeared in fashion editorials or advertisements between late 1949 and summer 1950. For example, the crepe-pleated dress and the skirt suit in pale blue lambswool featured in an article in *The Lady* (Settle 1950: n.pag.) and four of the garments selected by Simmons were regarded as collection highlights by *Women's Wear Daily* (Anon. 1949c: 3).

A number of articles reported on a party Rank organized for Simmons to celebrate her 21st birthday. The party, held at the Odeon, Marble Arch, was described by *Picturegoer* as 'one of the strangest examples of ballyhoo in the West End of London' (Anon. 1950d: 10). It seems likely that this was a press stunt rather than an actual party. Starke designed Simmons' outfit for this party, like those from her birthday wardrobe. None of the articles that discuss the party credit Starke as the designer of this ensemble; however, thanks to a prior knowledge of this collection, it has been possible to confirm that this was one of Starke's designs. This outfit was one of the key models from Starke's Spring 1950 collection and was an adaptation of a design by French haute couturier Jacques Fath. A detailed description of this ensemble appeared in the *Daily Mail* in November 1949:

The bodice is of striped satin – the fine stripes are actually one colour but have alternating shiny and matt surfaces, the effect of which is to catch the light as the wearer moves. The skirt is full sun-ray-pleated net over taffeta and swirls out over the dance floor. The skirt is always black, but the bodice is made in blue, pink or yellow-gold (Ashley 1949: 4).

This outfit broadly fitted with the other garments from Simmons' birthday wardrobe. On the whole a colour palette of pastel shades combined with neutrals of grey, navy and black is notable in Simmons' birthday wardrobe. Whilst the colour combinations were quite bold they were also notably feminine.

### **Costuming *Cage of Gold***

Simmons worked on four films in 1950: *Trio* (Annakin and French, 1950), *The Clouded Yellow* (Thomas, 1950), *So Long at the Fair* (Fisher and Darnborough, 1950) and the Ealing Studios crime drama *Cage of Gold*. According to the *West London Observer*, production of *Cage of Gold* began at Ealing Studios just a few days after Simmons turned 21 (Anon. 1950c: 4). The costuming of *Cage of Gold* is particularly significant because most of the outfits worn by Simmons in the film were part of her 21st birthday wardrobe. Simmons had twelve/thirteen costume changes within *Cage of Gold*. The majority of the outfits worn by Simmons either included elements or were complete ensembles from her birthday wardrobe. Within the film the battledress-style jacket in pink and black duster check with a matching black slim-line skirt appears a number of times. Only one garment from her birthday wardrobe, the mustard and grey pleated crepe dress, does not feature at all (elements, but not the whole, of the navy and white suit appeared). *Cage of Gold* is largely set in the winter and this perceptibly summery dress would not have been appropriate for the film. There are a few additional garments worn by Simmons in *Cage of Gold* that appear to be by Starke, including a check coat with attached scarf and a coat with balloon sleeves, worn over a two-piece suit from Simmons' birthday wardrobe. Whilst it has not been possible to prove it, it seems highly likely that all of the costumes worn by Simmons in the film, other than loungewear, were by Starke.

The outfits worn by Simmons in the film were as follows:

- A woollen coat with check revers and cuffs worn with a beret. Whilst not part of Simmons birthday wardrobe this coat was similar to other Starke pieces from 1949 and 1950.
- A suede belted jacket worn over a slim-line dark skirt and white shirt. This was accessorized with a scarf from Simmons birthday wardrobe. It is likely that both the skirt and the blouse were part of Simmons' birthday wardrobe and that they were elements of the suits.
- A dream-like sequence where Simmons wore various outfits. None are seen clearly enough to identify whether they were or were not by Starke.
- The strapless tulle dress that was part of Simmons' birthday wardrobe (Figure 2).
- The platina blue wool suit from Simmons' birthday wardrobe. This was accessorized with a cap style hat with feather adornment. The same hat appeared in 1950 editorials and advertisements for this Starke suit.
- An asymmetric single shoulder strap dress in *ombre* effect tulle. This dress was not part of Simmons' birthday wardrobe but was similar to other pieces designed by Starke around 1950.
- A nightdress that was briefly seen whilst Simmons was in bed. It is difficult to ascertain whether this was by Starke or not. It is unlikely that Starke designed this as there is no evidence that his company designed any lingerie or nightwear.
- A full-length belted housecoat that is unlikely to be by Starke.
- The black and pink check suit from Simmons' birthday wardrobe. This was worn under a matching overcoat with wide sleeves and check cuffs that match the suit.

- A quilted bed jacket that was briefly seen whilst Simmons is in bed and is unlikely to be by Starke.
- An embroidered blouse with a Peter Pan collar worn with a very full-pleated black skirt. The black skirt appears to be the one worn by Simmons for her birthday party at the Odeon; however, the blouse cannot be identified.
- A woollen coat with a large shawl collar, balloon sleeves and belted waist accessorized with a white scarf. This was not part of Simmons' birthday wardrobe but was likely designed by Starke.
- The black and pink check suit from Simmons' birthday wardrobe (Figure 3).

It is clear when examining stills from *Cage of Gold* alongside press articles relating to Simmons' birthday wardrobe that Starke designed most (if not all) of Simmons' outfits worn in the film; however, Starke is not credited for his contribution. Anthony Mendleson, Ealing Studios resident designer and wardrobe supervisor between 1947 and 1954, was credited instead. This was not unusual for the time and a 1993 interview with Mendleson illustrates why this might have been the case. In the interview Mendleson discussed the specific demands of designing for black and white and the relationship between the studio designer and the couturier who might costume a leading actress. Mendleson made it clear within this interview that he did not necessarily design all the costumes he was credited for; rather, he sourced them for the productions. He stated, '[a] lot of it was going out and buying the clothes, finding them, going to the costumiers, going through the rails' (1993: n.pag.). This is re-iterated in *The Historical Dictionary of British Cinema*. 'In British films – contemporary fashions were still acquired largely from general production lines (in low budget films, actors

frequently wore their own clothes) or from specific couturiers' (Burton and Chibnall 2013: 112). It is unclear whether *Cage of Gold* was a 'low budget' film. The film was a first feature and the cast included leading British actors of the day (David Farrar and James Donald played the two male lead roles). It seems unlikely therefore that *Cage of Gold* was a 'low budget' film. Rather, that the choice of 'costumes' from Starke was a deliberate one.

*Cage of Gold* was briefly mentioned within this interview. Mendleson stated 'now that was um... a muddle, in many ways! [Chuckles.] We had some quite glamorous clothes for a girl called Madeleine Lebeau, who was a night-club singer' (1993: n.pag.). Mendleson did not elaborate and there is no discussion of Simmons' costume within the film. The garments worn by Lebeau do not appear to be Starke's designs. It is plausible that the costuming of *Cage of Gold* was a 'muddle' because Simmons wore her own clothes from Starke throughout the film. It should be noted that actresses certainly wore their own clothes in other Ealing Studios films. For example, many of the outfits worn by Petula Clark in *Dance Hall* (Cricton, 1950), also released in 1950, were from her own wardrobe (O'Neill 1950a: 21).

### **Characterization in *Cage of Gold***

In *Cage of Gold* Simmons plays Judith Moray, a young aspiring artist. The film is a contemporary one and there are mentions of the war within it. It can be assumed that it is set between c. 1948 and 1950. The film follows Moray's life over the period of two years. It starts with her meeting an old flame on a train and charts their tumultuous relationship, whereby he leaves her shortly after they marry. She believes he has been killed in an air accident. After a period of mourning Moray re-marries, only for the husband she presumed 'dead' to return and try and extort money from her. Simmons' character comes from a



wealthy background, although she is not rich herself. *Picturegoer* suggested that ‘Jean plays the part of a well-to-do and very well-brought-up young girl in *Cage of Gold*. As a result, most of her clothes are very simple – but they’re chic’ (O’Neill 1950b: 21). Wholesale couture clothes would certainly have been appropriate for a ‘well-to-do’ young woman. This fits closely with the ethos of Ealing Studios. As Catherine A Surowiec suggests, ‘[w]hatever the route, the objective was always the same: to array the actors in clothes that expressed their characters’ (Surowiec 2012: 111). It is interesting that Moray’s style in the film mirrors Simmons’ own down to minor details. Simmons had uttered her preference for comfortable yet stylish clothing and in a 1950 interview she had stated her preference for berets over hats. These are seen on Moray throughout the film (Robertson 1950: 26–27). With prior knowledge of Simmons’ birthday wardrobe it is challenging to separate the character of Moray from Simmons; it is unlikely, however, that this was a problem for audiences at the time, seeing as there was a gap of eight months between Simmons’ birthday and the film release. It can be argued that the costuming was appropriate as the character Moray was from a fairly affluent background, like most women who typically wore wholesale couture. Furthermore, as Moray was an artist, the slightly avant-garde touches present in Starke’s garments were appropriate in terms of constructing the character.

### **Production Facilities Films limited**

It is plausible that the costuming of *Cage of Gold* was executed through an organization called Production Facilities (Films) Ltd. This organization was founded in 1946 by the British film industry and Rank was the organization’s chairman. A key part of this organization was its fashion department, which ‘collect[ed] together fashion designers to create, and manufacturers to produce in bulk, styles which [could] be publicised in connection with

particular films' (Anon. 1947a: 21). A variety of designers and firms were supporting this scheme by early 1947. The majority were wholesale couturiers and included Starke's fellow Model House Group members Simon Massey and W & O Marcus and other notable wholesale couturiers such as Ian Meredith, Madame Doree and Lady in Black.

As discussed earlier in this article export was key to re-instating Britain's position in world markets post the Second World War. The film industry, like the fashion industry, was broadening its markets in this period by extending foreign showings of British films. British clothes in British films were therefore seen as essential. One of the major remits of Production Facilities Films Limited was to broaden promotion of British films (and consequently British fashion) internationally. Press articles suggested that this close cooperation between the British film and fashion industries would 'create consumer demand wherever British films are shown' (Anon. 1947a: 121). In effect it was seen that the two industries could mutually promote one another. Articles illustrate the fact that the scheme encouraged close cooperation between cinemas, manufacturers and stores. Special window displays, which promoted both the film and the garments, were revealed around the time that the film was shown in cinemas. Production Facilities Films Ltd. provided manufacturers with a list of dates of screenings throughout the country (and in some cases internationally). Manufacturers were then to contact their retailers in the places on this list so that special window displays could be arranged.

Whilst Starke's name is not seen in any articles relating to Production Facilities Films Ltd, since many of the firms involved were wholesale couturiers, the most likely conclusion is that Starke was involved too. It is plausible that the complex promotion of Simmons birthday wardrobe and the later appearance of these garments in *Cage of Gold* were

facilitated by Production Facilities Films Ltd. It is, however, confusing that Starke was not credited for these garments. Other wholesale couturiers were certainly credited when their garments appeared in Ealing Studios films. Brenner Sports for example were credited for Moira Lister's costumes in *A Run for Your Money* (Frend, 1949) and Spectator Sports were credited for Kay Walsh's in *The Magnet* (Frend, 1950). Whilst the costumes in *Cage of Gold* were not credited to Starke, there was still a level of prestige created through Simmons 'choosing' Starke's garments for her birthday wardrobe. Indeed, rather than simply a publicity stunt, it is clear that Simmons owned and wore all of these clothes beyond her 21st birthday. In 1951 for example she appeared in a photo editorial with her husband Stewart Granger wearing one of the Starke dresses from her birthday wardrobe (Day 1951: 9).

Overall the garments in *Cage of Gold* helped to present a relatable character for the audience. Ready-to-wear clothing increased the accessibility of Ealing Studios films and clothes by both wholesale couturiers and medium range producers, Horrockses for example, were used by Ealing Studios in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. Such costuming, it can be argued, and presenting women such as Simmons in this 'down-to-earth' manner, were part of a wider rhetoric at Ealing. This was an attempt by British film producers to demonstrate that they were offering something different to the glamorous productions that were largely coming out of Hollywood at the time.

Simmons' birthday wardrobe offers an intriguing case study. It demonstrates that fashion in the period was closely connected with film costume, and that many films set in the contemporary period featured clothes by fashion designers rather than costume designers. As Bethan Bide suggests,

It [is] imperative that fashion on film is not considered as a stand-alone area of study, but as part of a wider dialogue about the production of fashion cultures in post-war London, alongside the business of making and selling clothes, because the clothes Londoners consumed visually on-screen related to the ones they consumed in real life. (2017: 329)

Certainly the 'costumes' worn by Simmons were available for purchase by the general public and were seen widely in Starke's advertisements in 1950. The black and pink duster check jacket and slim-line skirt is a particularly notable example and featured in multiple editorials. Starke also produced a number of advertisements promoting this ensemble. One in *The Tatler and Bystander* featured Goalen modeling the ensemble. This advertisement indicated that the suit was also available in a black and blue duster check too and could be purchased from Galleries Lafayette, London; Samuels, Manchester; Elaine, Guildford; and John Moses, Newcastle on Tyne (Anon. 1950g: 401).

Simmons' birthday wardrobe represents Starke's aptitude as an assiduous promoter. It is an example of how Starke attempted to expand the markets of wholesale couture through clever promotion. This article has demonstrated the complex costuming of British films in the late 1940s and the 1950s, unpacking how 'costumes' for films were often widely purchasable clothes bought off-the-peg, and in this instance simply the wardrobe of the leading actress. Interestingly Starke went on to be recognized not only as a fashion designer but a costume designer too. In 1963 he designed Honor Blackman's costumes for the ABC television series *The Avengers* (1961-1969). It can be argued that he was able to do so thanks to this prior on-screen experience with Simmons' birthday wardrobe.

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