

# As Seen ON SCREEN

Award winning costume designer Andrea Galer ensures that the work of Sri Lankan lacemakers reaches a wider audience. Liz Hoggard meets this passionate defender of traditional skills



If we don't respect the skills of British makers, there will be no industry to support period drama'

**Opposite: Sally Hawkins, who played the part of Anne in Persuasion, with Rupert Penry Jones, who played the part of Captain Wentworth. Sally is wearing a jacket designed by Andrea using a 19th century shawl. 'This was mounted and patched together with cross stitch, which I did myself; hand embroidery being something I have always enjoyed doing,' says Andrea**

**Right: This dress (again for Sally Hawkins in Persuasion) was designed and made using hand loom fabric from India and lace from the Power of Hands lace project**



**'I WANT CRAFTS to have a cutting fashion edge,' says the costume designer Andrea Galer. 'My film work, passion and research over the years has led to my campaign to value skills outside of mass production.'**

Galer's many film credits include the feature films Don't Look Now, Withnail And I (where Richard E Grant wore her famous Withnail tweed frock coat) and Mansfield Park. She also designed costumes for many bands in the 1970s, including Pink Floyd, Robert Palmer and Dire Straits.

Galer won the 2007 BAFTA crafts award for her work on BBC1's Bleak House. She was also awarded the RTS award for costume design for the same series, and nominated for an Emmy. Most recently, she was the costume designer for BBC1's Jane Eyre, which this year is also being considered for an Emmy, and ITV's Jane Austen film, Persuasion.

Where Galer differs from most other costume designers is that she doesn't just make clothes for films: she has a studio where she develops her on-screen ideas into collections of real clothes for normal people. So people can see the character of Jane Eyre on screen and think: 'I want a dress like that', and then go and buy it.

In 1993 she set up her fashion label, designing suits and classic day and evening wear for professional women who want an identity not overpowered by fashion. Over the years

she has added new collection pieces from her film work, mainly 18th and 19th century in inspiration, which can be re-interpreted with a contemporary twist.

'Even if you're cutting period clothes, you're cutting for a modern body,' she points out. 'The proportions of bodies today are different, so you're cheating a bit anyway. When I've done a film I just think this might be a nice idea to take forward.'

## Withnail and I...

Alternatively, you can simply go for the bestsellers – including the sharp suits worn by Jenny Agutter in Spooks – or the famous Withnail boho-aristocratic coat. For the 1986 film, Galer came up with a design based on 19th-century tweed riding coats and lined with Indian silk

She wanted it to look as though it had come from the family attic, to allow Grant ease of movement as he gallivanted around the countryside. 'When shooting fish, he had to be able to tie it up,' she explains. 'Or in the scene where he rubs in Deep Heat, he had to push the sleeves up and make it look like an entirely usual activity.'

She lined the tweed lined with striped Indian silk dupion (her thought here was that 'some hippie friend had decided to give it a lift into the 1960s') to be suitably louche. 'Withnail needed to look decadent,' she says. 'It's a coat that has a life.'



Chris Evans snapped up the original coat at a charity auction. But Galer's replica design in soft Harris tweed, produced by Scottish weavers, still sells, 20 years after the film. 'I went up there to the workshop and sat with them picking out the different coloured yarns,' she recalls.

Galer never really set out to be a costume designer at all. It all started with being Julie Christie's best friend. Self-trained, apart from the odd evening class in pattern cutting, she had always dabbled in costume design, made costumes for the Royal Opera House and Glyndebourne and designed and made fashion garments for artists and friends in the 1960s. She was introduced to Christie through her brother, with whom Andrea was friendly while he was studying in her home-town of Cambridge. 'I started making clothes for Julie, and she became an extremely close friend,' explains Galer. 'Then I went on film sets with her.'

## From here to maternity

Galer's big break came when Christie was filming *Don't Look Now* in the early Seventies. The filming schedule got pushed back and the main costume designer left to have a baby, so Galer ended up being co-designer of the film's clothing.

Over the years, Galer has always been passionate about preserving the crafts. 'In my film work I constantly use handmade lace and embroidery but those skills are dying. We are at crisis point. If we don't respect the skills of British makers, there will be no industry to support period drama.'

She has always sought to include the work of craftspeople from across the world. Her research has taken her to India to work with handloom weavers in India.

When the tsunami struck in 2004, she went to Sri Lanka to research the plight of local craftspeople. Together with actress Geraldine James and documentary maker Ashley Bruce, she met the lacemakers of Galle and saw first-hand the destruction wrought in local traditional lace making, embroidery and handcraft industries.

## The Power of Hands

As a result she founded the Power of Hands Foundation to help the makers rebuild their lives and find new markets for their work. 'Ever since lace-making was introduced by the Portuguese in the 15th century, Sri Lankan women have been able to supplement what their menfolk earn from fishing,' says Galer. 'But the tsunami not only destroyed the fishing industry, it destroyed the lace-making industry, too, by frightening off the tourists who bought the lace.'

In conjunction with the charity Adopt Sri Lanka, Galer set up a lace-making workshop inside the fort at Galle, which was one of the areas not destroyed in the tsunami. 'Although we did indeed donate millions of pounds in relief funding, the money has not yet got through to them and their truly tragic loss and continuing plight is hard to grasp,' she explains.

Galer set about upgrading and redesigning the lace and raising funds by selling the new lace in special handmade wristbands (which now sell via outlets and the website from as little £4.50 a time), some fastened with locally-sourced coconut buttons. 'For years, these women have been making the same sort of old-fashioned lace doilies and tablecloths that Western tourists no longer want,' she says. 'Instead, we are training them to make things that raise awareness and money for the project.'



**‘There’s no one in the world that produces affordable lace of such a high quality’**

**From left: Ruth Wilson being filmed for a Power of Hands promotion and holding lace from the Galle project. Her outfit combines the corset and wedding skirt made for Jane Eyre and an old lace jacket, which was later adapted into a design with POH lace for the fashion market**

**Ruth Wilson in Andrea Galer bridal wear with lace cuffs and jabot**

**A bedspread hand made by Andrea using old lace – this idea can be developed for a bed linen collection, which uses the Galle lace and handloom**

**Alex Kingston in Boudica (2003) wearing an outfit designed and made by Andrea**

This in turn has fed back into her own TV and film work. Galle lace was used in *Jane Eyre*. ‘All the well-to-do characters wore lovely *jabots* (ruffs) made out of Sri Lankan lace, and most had lace frills on the ends of their sleeves,’ she explains. ‘And I put lace all round the collar of Jane’s wedding dress.’

Delicate yet showy, this riot of frothy handiwork symbolised during the 19th century the wealth and status of those who could afford to wear it. Today, of course, no one makes hand-made lace in such quantities – which is why the Galle lace is so vital. ‘There’s no one in the world that produces affordable lace of such a high quality,’ says Galer. ‘It’s an amazing workforce.’

The objective of Power of Hands Foundation is to raise awareness of traditional and dying crafts, which are being replaced by mass production, and to bring in educational programmes set up by designers from the film and fashion industry, so that with investment and training, crafts-people produce goods that will appeal to the global market.

‘As countries develop and aspire to the Western way, traditions and cultures are often lost. Crafts people involved in these industries are generally women and their economic empowerment through self-employment is central to this initiative.’

Power of Hands operates as an ethical fair trade organisation through Galer’s London Film Fashion Centre. A percentage of the profits from lace sales will go directly to social projects, such as better working conditions and crèche facilities. The aim is to offer jobs that contribute to sustainable development, offering better trading conditions to marginalised workers.

In January 2006, costume designer Alexandra Byrne placed a vital order of lace and tating for the women in Galle to make for the costumes worn by Cate Blanchett in her new film *Golden Age* (the follow-up to *Elizabeth*) and the Royal Opera House has also ordered lace for their stock.

## An uphill struggle

Although there is a real demand for the lace, it has been an uphill struggle for Galer to run the project without funding (in the UK it has staffed by volunteers). But finally there is light at the end of the tunnel. She has completed a collection using the lace, which can be purchased direct or hopefully sold through top-end retail outlets such as London fashion store, Browns. And she has also recently made a presentation about the lace to Stuart Rose and Kate Bostock at M&S.

Over the years Galer’s exhibitions have evolved to show how film design links to craft expertise and have over the years included her own short films as a way to highlight crafts surviving outside mass production. As she observes feelingly: ‘Many people are at this time questioning lifestyle today and are beginning to feel that beauty is often better seen if we just look harder at what we have on our doorstep.’

[www.andreagaler.co.uk](http://www.andreagaler.co.uk)

**An exhibition of costumes from *Persuasion* is at the Jane Austen Centre, 40 Gay Street, Queens Square, Bath, BA1 2NT, T 01225 443000.**

**To buy one of the hand-made lace wristbands, go to [www.powerofhands.org](http://www.powerofhands.org)**