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Michael Wilkinson: American Superheroes meet Australian Style

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Sydney-born Michael Wilkinson has conquered Hollywood with his costumes for films including American Hustle, Batman V Superman and Babel. Now he has launched his own company to bridge the gap between fashion and film.

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Many mere mortals would be intimidated at the prospect of clothing Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman but Michael Wilkinson simply mustered his own super powers when he was called on to costume the caped crusaders for the upcoming blockbuster Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice.

“There’s nothing I like more than a challenge – I like to get out of my comfort zone and go to new creative places,” says Wilkinson.

The journey to create the costumes for Zack Snyder's film starring Ben Affleck as the Caped Crusader and Henry Cavill as the Man of Steel spanned 18 months and 75 years of film history with a costume department that at times swelled to 75 people.

"I immersed myself in the long histories of these iconic characters and studied how they've been portrayed over the last 75 years on film, on TV, in comic books, graphic novels and video games," says Wilkinson. "It's rare to have the opportunity to explore the visual world of a film in such depth and it's a chapter of my life that I'll never forget."

There have been many unforgettable chapters in Wilkinson's life since he graduated from Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney and moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in costume design. In 2014 Wilkinson received multiple award nominations for his work on *American Hustle*, including an Oscar nomination for best achievement in costume design, a Costume Designers Guild Award nomination for excellence in period film and a BAFTA nomination for best costume design. Earlier in his career Wilkinson designed the costumes for *Tron: Legacy*, *Man of Steel*, *Babel*, *Noah*, *Terminator: Salvation*, *300* and *Watchmen*. His theatre work includes award-winning costumes for the Sydney Theatre Company, Opera Australia and Radio City Hall, in 2000 he masterminded the opening and closing ceremony costumes for the Sydney Olympics.

"I like to get out of my comfort zone and go to new creative places,"

Next up is *Joy*, David O. Russell's follow up to *American Hustle* starring Jennifer Lawrence, and if that wasn't enough to keep him busy, earlier this year Wilkinson launched the design company WilkinsonMartin with his architect husband Tim Martin.

"Whenever I work with David (O. Russell), he reminds me how important it is to constantly challenge yourself, to get into a fresh, spontaneous, uncensored state of mind where interesting creative choices are made," says Wilkinson of his diverse roster of work.

While he now lives in Hollywood and counts its A-list among his circle of celebrity friends and colleagues, Wilkinson credits his studies in Sydney as forming the foundations for his stellar career.

"My three years at NIDA really shaped who I am today," he says. "It was constantly challenging on a creative and personal level, and it changed the way I see the world and how I process my experiences. It was at NIDA that I first decided to 'say yes to everything'. I realised that if something sounded scary and new, I'd grow as an artist and, as a person by facing it head-on."

His degree in design from NIDA also instilled in Wilkinson a belief that creativity is an intrinsic part of his humanity, something he embraces in his professional and personal life.

"NIDA instilled in me that what I do is not just a job or how I earn a living, it's a way of expressing who I am, and how I feel about the world around me."

The philosophy has informed all Wilkinson has done since, including dressing Amy Adams in *American Hustle* in flares, silky wrap dresses, plunging gowns and see-through blouses, kick-starting the current 1970s fashion revival around the globe.

"I was excited when the clothes coming down today's fashion runways began to express the mood of *American Hustle* and the freedom of the 70s," says Wilkinson. "The 70s was such an exuberant and expressive period for clothes - an era when ideas were big, people lived large, took risks, didn't give a damn. I'm constantly inspired by the spirit of that decade."

His work for *Joy* is an entirely different proposition: 35 costumes for Jennifer Lawrence spanning over 30

years of fashion history.

“David wanted a timeless, classic look for the costumes that avoids the clichés and expectations of a given decade, so the film has a very special, genuine look,” says Wilkinson.

Whether the film is about super heroes or a period drama, Wilkinson’s starting point is always the same.

“My approach to designing the costumes for a film like American Hustle is similar to my approach on superhero films, even though the genres of the films are so different,” he says.

“I work out what ideas and mood I want to convey to the audience for each character, and aim to capture them using colour, texture and silhouette.”

Wilkinson is not the only Australian costume designer to have found success in Hollywood, with other bold face names including Orr Kelly and Catherine Martin.

“I think Australians have a combination of hunger and fearlessness: we can escape the cautiousness and over-thinking that might affect designers from other cultures,” says Wilkinson. “The Australian quality of ‘giving it a go’ and not being afraid of what other people might think, is wonderfully liberating and helps you fly off into uncharted creative waters.”

His latest project is WilkinsonMartin, a design company set up with his architect partner Tim Martin. In February it was recruited by Prada to turn its Soho store into a stylish nightclub during New York Fashion Week Spring/Summer 2015. WilkinsonMartin created 24 outfits, all made in the Prada workshops in Milan. The project devised by Prada designer Miuccia Prada, saw three costume designers interpret her spring summer 2015 collection for stores in Paris, London and New York.

“We just went to town,” laughs Wilkinson. “We tried a couple of crazy schemes, then settled on a heightened Studio 54 theme where the models had reinvented themselves for a night to end all nights: uptown chic meets downtown grit.”

Wilkinson and Martin are now talking to other fashion houses about more collaborative projects for their company that provides consultation, design and creative direction to brands at the intersection of film and fashion.

“What’s incredibly fun about doing this is that you work with people from around the world - photographers, designers, curators, magazine editors – who have spectacular talents, and a culturally diverse view of art and fashion,” says Wilkinson. “We recently directed a photo shoot and art-house film with Modern Weekly in Shanghai, and it was a cultural awakening for us, as much as an artistic one. It’s an exciting time for us both.”

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