

MOIRA STANSFIELD

Moira possesses a unique blend of humility and extraordinary creative prowess.

WHILE SHE MAY DESCRIBE HERSELF AS A FASHION ILLUSTRATOR, SHE HAS ALSO AMASSED A WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE AS A FASHION DESIGNER WITHIN THE INDUSTRY.

Moira was born in January 1950 and grew up in Ickenham, in northern Uxbridge, within the London Borough of Hillingdon. In 1967 she left to go to Hornsey College of Art in North London, known as HCA. It was recognised as an iconic British art institution, celebrated for its progressive and innovative approach to the education of art and design.

I was thrown out of sewing class at school and my grandma said I was the worst sewer she'd ever seen. I had hoped to be a ballet dancer but didn't get tall or slim enough – I was disappointed. I went to HCA with the intention to be a fashion illustrator which was quite a thing in the 50s and 60s. However, it wasn't a fashion illustration course – it was a 3-year fashion course – an Art and Design Diploma. Now recognised as a BA. HCA merged with Middlesex Polytechnic in 1973 and later Middlesex University. I actually liked the idea of seeing the reality from the drawing. It's important to see how the item adapts to the body and how the body adapts to the material.



I loved the Foundation Year. There were evening courses run by Sylvia Ayton. She was inspiring, encouraging and had expectations of us.

Sylvia studied textiles at the Royal College of Art and that's where she met, now Dame, Zandra Rhodes. Together, they opened the Fulham Road Clothes Shop in 1967. Their store offered a selection of the most cutting-edge designs, that were unparalleled among London boutiques. Sylvia has since received an MBE for her services to fashion.

During the Diploma, a group of us were selected to travel to St Gallen in Switzerland, to enter into the "Swiss Cotton Competition". Swiss Cotton is renowned for its exceptional softness and comfort. This particular embroidered couture cotton, is sold all over the world, especially in West Africa. Mine was chosen from HCA.



Swiss Cotton Competition (1970)

HCA...

During May 1968, a period of social upheaval unfolded across France, lasting a total of seven weeks. The unrest was characterised by widespread demonstrations, general strikes, as well as the occupation of universities and factories. The initial spark for this unrest, was a series of student protests led by far-left groups, targeting capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and established institutions. This unrest became global, with student protests in not only Paris but Prague, West Germany, Japan, Mexico and in London – LSE and HCA.

At HCA, the college's central building in Crouch End Hill, gained infamy due to prolonged protests led by students. The objective was to demand a comprehensive evaluation of the teaching methods. Support was received from visiting artists and staff. A sit-in was initiated that lasted six weeks and control over the college's administration was temporarily assumed.

Moira says:

We were saying: we're the students, we know what we want from the course and we want to be listened to".

The magnitude of these all-night protests and sit-ins, gained nationwide recognition for HCA and sparked a series of student movements, in art schools throughout the United Kingdom.

In 1969, a publication titled "The Hornsey Affair", shed light on the student and staff protests, while a documentary film titled "Our live experiment is worth more than 3000 textbooks", was produced and aired during the same year.

Moira adds:

It was a very exciting and political time.

Swinging 60s...

The swinging 60s was a period characterised by a youth-led cultural transformation which highlighted aspects of modernity and carefree indulgence, with "Swinging London" serving as its focal point. This era experienced a surge in creativity across art, music and fashion.

I was a good observer, I used to watch "Ready, Steady, Go" – it was before Top of the Pops. It was a studio setting but looked like a club environment. There were loads of major stars from America and bands such as the Rolling Stones. They stood on little platforms and people would mill around them. I remember seeing the Dollyrockers label which was part of the British Boutique Movement. I'd watch and draw my own version.

As a teenager I was homely, shy, quiet and awkward, yet enjoyed a more modern and trendy world, to express myself through.

I went on to study my MA in fashion at the Royal College of Art, right next to the Royal Albert Hall. I made nice friends there. One of my outfits, using Swiss sequined embroidered silks with feathers, was featured in the Daily Telegraph in 1971.

At the end of year fashion show, press and buyers came and students were offered jobs. It was an elaborate procedure. Film and TV students would light it – it was quite spectacular.



Daily Telegraph (1971)
Royal College of Art

The creative gene...

I came across a branded box of dressmaker pins, from my great aunt's boutique. Many years later, I found out dad's mum was a "home tailoress" – I must have inherited my interest in fashion from them.

My parents both liked writing. They wrote letters to each other. Nothing for publication. As my dad's eyesight wasn't good, during the war, he joined the troops that set sail from Liverpool, when he was 21 years old. He first went across to America then Rio. With American troops, he travelled along the bottom of the Atlantic, then onto South Africa, India, then up to the Red Sea and worked in Jerusalem. My dad would send photos with interesting and funny notes about them. This experience made a really big impact on him. All he had known before, was the area he'd grown up, Cheshire, Manchester and South Port where mum lived. He felt very lucky that he didn't have to be in battle himself. He'd tell us about the nature of the journey and had this incredible ability to recall places and identify streets – and he could remember the writing on ships. His recollection of places was quite amazing, for instance, when my sister-in-law worked in kibbutz, he said "you should go to Jerusalem, there's a wonderful little shop there". Mum wrote really good letters to you – so my love of writing must come from my parents.

The rag trade...

I was a designer and pattern cutter in the rag trade. There were many Greek Cypriot workers doing this. The roads north of Oxford Street were occupied by the rag trade. There were button dyers, zip people and cloth salesmen.

I made design drawings on which the collections would be based, then created the patterns using either flat pattern cutting or a dress stand to work on.

It was a really tough job and I almost lost a finger on the laser! It was an unscrupulous business. Your designs would be taken from you and then you'd be told "it doesn't seem to be working for you here" – then you wouldn't get paid. It was an insecure way of living but an all-round good experience to have had.

I then worked for knitwear company Mach 1. A length of cloth was made, then it'd be overlapped together with my pattern. I went to the yarn shows in Italy with them, Bologna and Florence for the yarn merchandising. This would be done 1 ½ years ahead of making the item. One of my ensembles was presented at a runway, exclusively made for them. I worked pretty much well on my own there and with a fascinating Spanish lady called Amelia – she was an amazing machinist. She was from northern Spain and was a refugee in childhood, due to the Spanish Civil War. You'd always be respectful of sample machinists, as they would advise you of your patterns. They were like "artist machinists".

In 1980, I set up a company with two guys I'd met in workplaces. One was the late Joe Casley-Hayford OBE. We produced two tone denim – black with a strong colour, such as emerald with black thread. In the 80's era, the look was tight waisted jeans with a baggy style. Our coordinating knitwear was made in Leicester. We had a lot of success in Camden Market but foolishly moved to a terrible workspace, where virtually no-one turned up during the week. We split up after that.

Joe was a black designer and would work for many musicians. We were great friends. We had the same sense of humour. We'd go to Paris for the fashion shows, not big-name ones but ready to wear shows.

Joe built a global recognition as one of the most esteemed and consistently influential designers of men's and women's fashion in the United Kingdom.



Mach 1 ensemble for runway

Just some of the projects Moira has been involved with...

Russell Grant

As a teenager, I ran Sunday School with Russell Grant. When he worked on cruise ships, I made his shirts for stage. In 1983, BBC Breakfast Show, offered him a seat as their astrologer. He said to me that he must have "different frocks" to wear. He'd get the material from marketplaces. I actually appeared on TV with him on "Top Secret". The idea of the show, was for a celebrity to bring someone on from their past and you'd have to guess what the link was. No-one guessed we ran Sunday School together!

Pantomime

In 1988, I started making theatre costumes for Hazelwood School's pantomimes. It was a nice way of using mounds of material I had, plus I love children. I make between 300-400 costumes per year. The first pantomime I saw them produce, I was so taken aback by the musical talent. The show had incredible costume and set design too. All these people were giving their time and ability for free. It was thrilling to work with people from that background.

Dazu

I got involved with a local charity called Dazu for 10 years. It's inclusive of children with disabilities and is a fantastic organisation. There was drama, music and I ran the arts and crafts. It was hard for parents with an autistic child at that time, to be accepted in an environment with children who didn't and to work alongside them. It was rewarding for the parents, to know they had an opportunity for their children to engage. The children adapted and became confident, forming friendships.

Sewing club

I used to run an after-school hand sewing club at Hazelwood School. There were some standout youngsters – I loved seeing how their minds worked.

Drag Queen era...

Moira says that drag styles cover a wide spectrum from grotesque monster drag to glamorous femininity but always seeks to express the personality of the Drag Queen and the stories they are trying to tell.

In fairytales, folklore and myths, characters symbolise different facets of human nature, when analysed from an archetypal psychology perspective. Instead of representing distinct men, women or gender, each persona reflects a particular element of an individual's psyche. By grasping the dynamics of these internal interactions, we can pursue our path towards self-realisation and experience inner fulfilment that fuels our creativity. Drag could be regarded as a visceral representation, of portraying the many aspects of that single person's psyche.

I first met Tony Fran AKA Fantasy in 2016, when he took on a paid post at our Talkies Community Cinema, that I run with my husband and he embedded himself right in with us. Tony's skills are writing, illustration and set design. He does art directing in commercials. We got chatting and discovered a mutual love of costume, drama and storytelling and shared a background in design. I have a large collection of costumes, accessories and cloth in all corners of my home and Tony came to look through them.

At "Talkies", I hosted the cult movie, "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" and Fantasy made a guest appearance to answer questions about drag, "that people don't dare ask".

One of the questions was "do you get a sexual thrill out of it". Fantasy's response was brilliant, "no, I see myself as an art installation and it takes me 9 hours to get ready". The movie itself is fascinating. It's about a real camaraderie of gay men that dress in drag. It's like a club that's safe and is their support system. There are touching moments. The film made you think. Terence Stamp was a heart-throb in the 60s and ends up in a relationship with a Drag Queen – interesting piece of casting. It shows what it's like to be an outsider and how you create your world with other outsiders. It's a breathtaking film.

After that Tony gave me the opportunity to collaborate with him, to design and make costumes for Fantasy. Tony's boyfriend is Vangelis Polydorou on the Culture Club tours. I made a pink superhero outfit and then I saw Fantasy wearing it and she was on Boy George's arm which was lovely to see. It was quite exciting. The outfit was tailored strongly, as you don't want wrinkles – I was proud of that one. Fantasy is breezy, flighty, ditzy, enthusiastic and open-hearted so a look that really showcased her personality, was the Marilyn Monroe dress. Fantasy loves it. It's just one of those dresses that works – glamour and comfort. The colour and material is like a visual signal to say "this person is saying *this* about themselves".

The shower curtain dress... everyone commented on it. It has glamour, fun and humour. I was worried about this dress, whether it would work – I was having chemo then. I remember sitting on the bed and putting all the pleats together and then discovering I'd put all the pleats the wrong way around. I think the chemo tranquilized me because I just said to myself, "fair enough, I'll do them again". I'd like to do more things where you take a material, you wouldn't normally use.



Featuring Fantasy

Photographer: Dean Stocking
Shower Curtain Chic

Need glamour?
No funds?

4 plastic shower curtains and a bag of Poundland's best
jewels will see you through.



Featuring Fantasy

The Sisterhood. Photo by Dean Stocking.

Satin and lurex for this sister.

It's a crime in the drag world if something looks drab!

With the Quality Street dress – Tony loves writing character parts as Fantasy and he accepted a script. Tony found a skirt I'd made for a pantomime and wanted to wear it over his shoulder – he said, "I'm going to wear that". He loved the bright colours and registered that it would work well on camera. I love transforming clothes – skirts to a top or hat! I've learnt that it's a crime in the drag world if something looks drab!

I then got introduced to Kevin, Tony's brother known as Veronica Green. I was given the wonderful opportunity to collaborate with all three of them, on designing and making Veronica's outfits for RuPaul's Drag Race. Kevin trained in musical theatre and sings beautifully. I made a 50s "desperate housewives" look, that was part of the transformation scene. The dress revealed a robot outfit that Veronica and Fantasy worked on to create. The dress had to be an easy reveal – without the noise of Velcro – this was a new learning curve for me. The outfit won that particular prize. I was really proud of it. I really liked the Boy George Cama Chameleon look. The cotton fairy look, for the second series, was difficult due to lockdown. The photos looked lovely. If I'd had more time, I would have pushed different aspects – it was supposed to have a train.

Drag is lovely and brings together things I love; theatre, theatrical expression and clothing that tells a story – expressing yourself in a different way. It's lovely working in collaboration. It's nice to use the materials and skills I have in a new way which is fun. It's something other people can enjoy, other than the person wearing the clothes. I'll always try things.

I have entered into a new creative world. Drag for my generation was the Pantomime Dame, such as Danny La Rue. When RuPaul's Drag Race started in Britain, in their sort of first series, it wasn't about glamour but more pantomime-like characters. The American RuPaul's show is more pageant glamour. I think it's nice if countries have their own styles. The first time I saw what goes into these looks, I was blown away.

I went to Drag Con, there was such camaraderie in it. There was a lot of warmth shown to fans – it's a real fan world. It was very inclusive, kind and fun – but a lot of warmth to people who are marginalised generally. It was held at Excel in London – there were people re-visiting who travelled from places such as Germany and L.A. They're all part of a lovely club.





Featuring Veronica Green & Fantasy (Fantasy's Quality Street dress)
Photographer: Heathcliff O'Malley
Queens in the Street



Featuring Veronica Green
Photographer: Kim Hardy
Transformation Scene, RuPaul's Drag Race



Featuring Fantasy
Housewife Superstar
Photo by Tom Pilling

"How to look your best whilst tackling those domestic chores" ~ Real Housewives of Rochdale.



Featuring Fantasy
Marina and the Waves
Photo by Tom Pilling

A sleek silvery gown for those Diva moments.



Featuring Fantasy (The Boy George moment)
Pink Power
Photo by Tom Pilling

Exhibition

Friends from the pantomime are involved with the South Gate Club – the local blues club. The back space has been transformed into an exhibition. I jokingly said, “how about showing drag costumes” and they said “oh, yes!”. I spoke to Tony and he said “yes, absolutely” and he organised it. It wasn't however necessarily to the “old geezers” taste at the club – but they said it really opened their eyes. They could see it was about the portrayal of the personality that Tony created for Fantasy – that's a part of her – and they could see it was like an art piece. Fantasy came out on opening night and entered into the wrong room which was for the club members. All the old geezers gave a round of applause and said, “oh it's Marilyn”. The exhibition got extended. I was thrilled to have the garments shown at their absolute best. It's such a wonderful record and memory.

The creative blood line continues

I met my husband Steve whilst at HCA, he was studying graphics. Coincidentally, that's where my son Matt also went who now runs a jewellery studio on South Bank. My son Luke is a surgeon so he has inherited my sewing skills!

Moirá's saying

Always say yes, why not – you never know what you can do!

Zoom Talking Therapy



About Us

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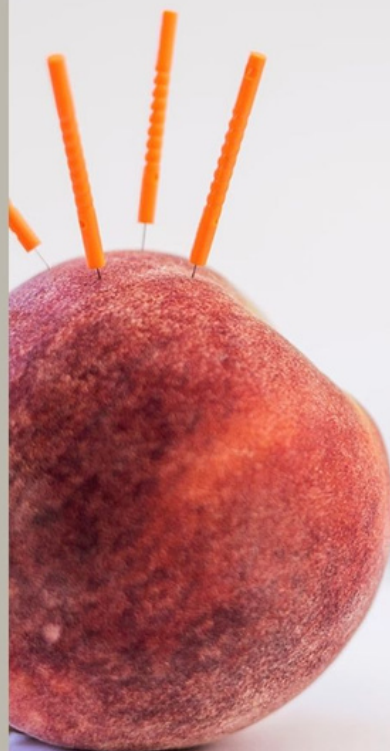
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