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# Lyn Paolo and Kerry Washington on ‘Scandal’ and Fashion at Stylemakers Awards

By [Khanh T.L. Tran](#)



Lyn Paolo is no stranger to dressing for the White House. The British costume designer has outfitted scores of television actors portraying power players on “The West Wing” and “Scandal.” For her work on the latter, the hit ABC drama that was created by Shonda Rhimes and features Kerry Washington as gladiator-in-white Olivia Pope, Paolo was honored as Costume Designer of the Year at the Variety and WWD Stylemakers event.

According to Washington, Paolo is such a force that she “shuts things down” just like Pope. She’s also compassionate enough to cry with her leading lady when they both collapsed from making 19 costume changes in a single episode.

In a conversation with Variety's Debra Birnbaum, the duo discussed the new power suit, the fashion line they designed for The Limited, the importance of social media and the beautiful sweater by The Row that they purposely destroyed on the show.

**Variety:** What's it like when you get a script for the show?

**Lyn Paolo:** I think things are a little different for Kerry and I than they are on other shows. Depending on the show and my relationship with the actor and the writer, there is a lot of prep. A pilot is different than a movie, it's different than a television show. With Kerry and I, at this point we're sort of symbiotic. I don't know if you noticed but we didn't talk [beforehand] but we showed up in exactly the same colors today. I don't know Olivia Pope as well as Shonda and Kerry know Olivia Pope. They live in her skin and so, for me, it's important I run around and I read the script. I think, well, this is what I'd like to do but then Olivia Pope doesn't come to life until Kerry and I have our moment together in the room.

**Variety:** Kerry, what about you? What input do you have?

**Kerry Washington:** I think one of the things that's important about what Lyn does that kind of distinguishes her from some of the other honorees today is that costume design is really about telling a story. I love to put together a moment on the carpet. I love it. It's like creating an amazing, performance-art moment. But costume design is different because you are telling a story. And so you have to think about theme and you have to think about mood and you have to think about personality. And Lyn does all of that through clothes, and so she helps us be who we are. She breaks down every episode, every moment. She's tracking what accessories I wear, she's tracking the color palette, she's tracking the mood, she's looking at language. She's really a fundamental part of the storytelling machine.

**Variety:** In that vein, what is the idea of Olivia Pope wearing white when she is gladiating?

**L.P.:** That was in the pilot, wasn't it?

**K.W.:** Um-hmm.

**L.P.:** We were working together and I had shown the same images. We have the same images. Our one debate in that fitting, I think, was skirt? No skirt? And you said, "She wears the pants."

**K.W.:** I wanted her to wear the pants literally and figuratively.

**L.P.:** Yeah, and so for me it was about femininity and how do I make, how do we as a team create, this moment when this woman walks into a room with all these gents in dark suits? What would make it resonate with the audience? And we came up with the idea of light tones, not white actually at the time. And then later on Shonda wrote about the white hat. And that

seemed to continue our theme of using lighter tones on TV, which most people don't do.

**K.W.:** Also, it's actually interesting because Lyn talked a lot about the aesthetic of D.C., which is navy and black and dark gray, so we're standing out in lighter tones. But also we talk about the fact we don't see a lot of lighter tones on television because they look really good on people of color in a different kind of way. So there's also this idea of, "Oh, here's this brown woman who's going to be the lead on a show. She can carry the color white in a different way aesthetically."

**Variety:** One of the things we love about the show is you brought back outerwear. We get to see you wearing these fabulous coats.

**L.P.:** Outerwear! Yes! It's funny for me because I also worked on "ER" and I remember fondly, and [on] "The West Wing," running up to the actors on the backlot of Warner Brothers and making them button up their coats. Our show is an East Coast show. Even though we shoot here all the time, which is amazing to the audience, I just feel outerwear is such an integral part of the East Coast. And I'm British and I love them. I love coats. You can have your pajamas on, you throw a coat on and all of a sudden you're dressed up. Kerry only wears pajamas on the show, really.

**K.W.:** And coats.

**L.P.:** And coats. So I have a love affair with coats. I think all of the cast on the show loves their coats. Scott Foley is obsessed by his coats. He borrows them all the time.

**K.W.:** I want to say that actually, because I think in many ways the focus on the high fashion aesthetic on the show started with Olivia Pope but all of the characters, I mean, Lyn does this with every single character on the show. She carves out their space, their personality, their unique journey through their clothes. One of the most fun I ever had in an episode was recently when Olivia was on the run and I had to dress out of Quinn's closet. I got to wear motorcycle boots and jeans and a T-shirt for the whole episode. And everybody knew. Even when they saw still photos before the episode aired, everybody said, "Was Olivia in Quinn's closet?" Because that was how imprinted they are through Lyn's work.

**Variety:** Was there an episode that was the most challenging to dress her for?

**L.P.:** Actually I think the one that Kerry referenced. The first season we did — it's no joke — we both sobbed uncontrollably, I think, in your trailer.

**K.W.:** Yes, that's right.

**L.P.:** It was in your trailer. Because we had no time and that was so challenging. There have been other challenges later on.

**K.W.:** There was one episode that I love making fun of [with] Lyn. It was the kidnapping episode. In the whole episode all I got to wear were these beautiful silk pajamas and this beautiful sweater from The Row. They were completely destroyed. They're covered in mud and blood. It was horrible. At one point, Lyn was commenting on my acting on Twitter and said, "It's so hard to watch this episode. It's just so hard." And I wrote back on Twitter: "I know — who could do that to that sweater from The Row?"

**L.P.:** I meant I felt so bad for you. It was awful. But yes, The Row sweater, the poor Row sweater, which we had eight of.

**K.W.:** Yes, we did. They had various stages of blood and mud. But I would also say, Lyn, using outerwear and larger and larger Prada purses, Lyn also had the extraordinary challenge of dressing me during my pregnancy when Olivia Pope was not pregnant. And you did it. You somehow kept me elegant as I became ginormous.

**L.P.:** It's all good.

**Variety:** Where do you have the best luck finding clothes for the cast?

**L.P.:** Oh, gosh, no. There are so many good places everywhere. There's not one place. Just to speak to today, the Internet is my friend. I let my fingers do the walking now. And I think that's also changed the dynamic of fashion and film in that what we do is instantly recognized every Thursday night on Twitter and all the other social media. That aspect of our world has changed how people perceive the costume designer, the stylist, all of us. I think this symbiotic relationship of those two worlds is developing at a rate that I find scary.

**K.W.:** I think we also always want to stay ahead of the curve. So we've set out on trips to New York together and separately, meeting with designers so that we can have access to looks before they hit the store. We're communicating with buyers so that we know what the trends are before they happen, because we don't want somebody to tune in and feel like they saw that, they did that. We want people to say, "I want that." That requires a real effort to stay ahead.

**L.P.:** We see that every week because people reach out instantly and say, "What was that? Who designed that?" I have friends in the fashion industry now who actually call me and say, "Wow — thank you for using that piece."

**K.W.:** "That coat sold out. We can't get that bag anymore." I mean, we're not Michelle Obama but, you know.

**Variety:** Do you warn them that you're going to use something just to give them a heads-up?

**L.P.:** Absolutely. Usually the day that the show airs I will call designers and say, “You know, tonight you should watch the show.” I can’t tell them who wore it but we instantly get on Twitter.

**Variety:** Talk about your relationship with The Limited and the inspiration for doing that line.

**L.P.:** That was completely based on the show. Shonda and [executive producer] Betsy [Beers] invited me to the office and I called and said, “Where’s Kerry? Kerry should be here.” That for us was about the fans that are gladiators, wanting to give them something that was at a price point they could reach out and afford. But also we wanted it to be true to the show and express how Olivia dresses and how they could easily get anything that we are producing, that we are creating, on the show. The look but at a better price point.

**K.W.:** We had so many instances of fans tweeting pictures and videos of themselves saying, “I have a job interview today so I wanted to look like Olivia Pope.” “I’m going to propose to my girlfriend today so I’m dressed like Olivia Pope.” Lots and lots of people were posting their interpretations of Olivia Pope. We just realized that in some way a lot of the fashion that she wears is so aspirational that it is unattainable for a lot of people who watch the show. And so we wanted to create a way for them to build this look. And it was so rewarding. Neither of us had designed before for retail. We were micromanagers. We were at different places in the world. Lyn was in London, I was hiding out in my house in L.A. because I just had my daughter. We were FedEx-ing zippers and buttons across the Atlantic and across the country just to be on top of every detail, because we also made the commitment to The Limited that we would wear pieces from the collection on the show. So whatever we created had to be on par with Ferragamo and Armani and Stella [McCartney] and Dior and all the designers that we wear on the show. It had to seamlessly fit in with all that fashion. We worked very hard on it.

**L.P.:** And it was fun.

**K.W.:** It was really fun.

**L.P.:** The Limited teams were amazing and put up with us.

**K.W.:** They did.

**Variety:** Do you see yourself doing another venture like that?

**L.P.:** I think so.

**K.W.:** I would do anything Lyn wanted me to do. I’d do anything Lyn asked.

**L.P.:** We’re going to figure something out. We’re not sure yet. We’re working on it.

**Variety:** Do you have a favorite look of Olivia's? Have you stolen something from wardrobe?

**K.W.:** I don't steal anything from her.

**L.P.:** Thank you.

**K.W.:** Because I don't want Lyn to get in trouble. And also we made this commitment that the show wouldn't be fashion for fashion's sake. We wanted Olivia to have a closet. Every episode, we wear at least one item that Olivia has worn before, whether it's a pair of pants or a jacket or a bag or shoes. We reuse a lot of the clothes. So if I took something, I'd be taking from her closet.

**L.P.:** I'd be calling her at home. I think it makes it more realistic. I like to do that on all the shows that I work on. In fact, when Portia [de Rossi] first came to the show she was like, "This is kind of great that I'm re-wearing." These are real people, you know. Our show isn't about fashion for fashion's sake. It is literally about telling a story. We want the audience to genuinely believe within the "Scandal" world that these are real people and that they go to the closet that we just saw last week all the time. For me it was important that it's not a fashion show, that it's not just something new just for the sake of it.

**Variety:** How closely in advance do you work with the writers? Should Olivia become First Lady, will her look change?

**L.P. and K.W.:** [laugh]

**K.W.:** This is a very tricky question to answer.

**L.P.:** Yeah, given that we're leaving to go into a table read. Each character evolves very quickly on "Scandal," more than any other show I've ever worked on. That's amazing. It's something I've enjoyed. Every time I get a script I'm like, "Oh my god, Quinn's a new human." She was in Peter Pan collars in season one. Now she's like a dominatrix. So the evolution of each character is so intense and so fast; that is what I love about the show. Shonda keeps me on my toes. I'm never going to be bored ever on "Scandal" and I have a low threshold for boredom. I'm like a butterfly. I want to jump off to another project right away. So [with] Shonda really, I think that's what's so magical about her. For an actor, it must be amazing.

**K.W.:** She takes amazing risks. I wouldn't say we collaborate with the writers. Television is the writers' medium. They are boss, and I don't mean Hugo. Just kidding. They know what they want emotionally and intellectually as storytellers. Then we are allowed to interpret that through our behavior as actors or with Lyn it's through fashion, through clothes. Sometimes we get confused and we say, "What do you mean here? What are

you getting at?” Then they help us understand what is going on emotionally and that helps us makes decisions in the fittings.

**L.P.:** Shonda really empowers us to make those decisions and allows us to make those decisions and lets us play in the fitting room. Sometimes I’ll be unsure about something and I will send it to her just because I’m a little, sort of like, where are we going with this story? And one of the writers told me the other day that when they mention stuff that we do in the fitting room, she goes, “That’s a Lyn and Kerry thing — stay away from that!” She gives us that power. She lets us do what we do and dance the dance that we do and play with the clothes and the story.

**Variety:** We know you had a successful career before “Scandal,” but how has the success of “Scandal” changed the course of your career?

**L.P.:** Oh my gosh, I’m having a blast. I absolutely love the show, obviously love Kerry. We are crazy friends. I think not just the show, but I think our world has changed significantly in the last five, six, seven years with social media — the fact that I can reach out to the audience. I feel like when I was doing “The West Wing,” we did get the same press and that “ER” was the same thing but the fact that you can reach through your computer and explain to somebody why you made the choice you did in a given moment and an actor can explain what you were feeling within a moment is so intrusive — but great as well. We particularly adore tweeting with our friends. Thursday nights are the most amazing fun so it’s a joyful thing. But I think for me that’s the show, Kerry, the whole cast, Shonda. But the interactive nature of being able to talk directly to the gladiators is quite fascinating.