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Stylemakers: Lyn Paolo, Power Wardrober

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“I had no intention of becoming a costume designer,” admits two-time Emmy-winner Lyn Paolo, who’s responsible for making Kerry Washington White House-chic and Emmy Rossum affordably trendy on hit shows “Scandal” and “Shameless” — now in their fifth and sixth seasons, respectively. “I really did start at the bottom, not knowing that I wanted to be in the film industry. I grew up in a very small, coal-mining town in England, and had no idea that this world existed.”

Paolo, who initially intended to be a teacher, and moved to L.A. with her American beau-at-the-time, applied the experience she’d gained doing set work and costumes on plays in college, and worked her way up from production assistant.

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A perfectly suited opportunity on World War II drama “Homefront” — set in a period she knew, through her grandfathers who fought — resulted in two Emmy wins, and an introduction to director-producer John Wells (“The West Wing,” “ER,” “Southland”), with whom she’s partnered ever since.

“‘ER’ really did make me a better costume designer, because in less than 30 seconds, I had to tell the story through the clothing of who this person on a gurney is,” she recalls of the Chicago-based show, shot on the Warner Bros. lot. “I was running around telling our actors — including George [Clooney] — to please button up your coat, because it’s supposed to be the middle of winter!”

She met different challenges on one of Wells’ other Chicago-set series, “Shameless,” which follows the financially strapped Gallagher family. “But not having any money doesn’t mean you can’t have style,” insists Paolo, who takes a unique approach to William H. Macy’s character. As she wants his clothes to seem ill-fitted and picked from the trash, she simply leaves them out for him. “Bill and I have yet to have a costume fitting,” she jokes.

Paolo’s work on White House drama “The West Wing” afforded her familiarity with presidential attire, and caught the eye of “Scandal” creator Shonda Rhimes. Of Washington’s character Olivia Pope, she says: “I loved the idea of dressing this amazingly powerful, strong woman who could also be feminine.” Paolo lent Washington her own Prada purse for the pilot, and had a bold color idea, after “West Wing.” “There were so many men in dark suits. ... But never white,” she muses. Paolo uses color as a storytelling device more on “Scandal” than she has on any other project. “When [Olivia’s] gladiating, she’s in white. And [when] she was so conflicted about Fitz [Tony Goldwyn’s President Grant], we did brown on her, which we never do.” The designer — who collaborates with the Limited on “Scandal” lines — also has a clear penchant for outerwear. “When a woman walks into a room [with a coat], it just feels powerful!”

Paolo ventured to London to work on Wells’ chef comedy feature “Burnt,” starring Bradley Cooper — “Each individual person had their own style within the world of their uniforms,” she notes. She’s also behind his new pilot, “Animal Kingdom,” a California beach community story. But for now, she’s content costuming “Scandal” and “Shameless,” two shows that have longevity.

“Something either has a magical moment or it doesn’t,” Paolo explains. “I think things like this are never really planned.”