Well-Suited for the Stage
Costume designer Jess Goldstein (CFA’72) has dressed the likes of Denzel Washington, Al Pacino

For more than three decades, Jess Goldstein has been one of Broadway’s hottest costume designers. His clothes have been worn by a who’s who of the American theater, including Blythe Danner (A Streetcar Named Desire), Mary Louise Parker (Proof), and Denzel Washington (Julius Caesar). In addition to dozens of Broadway credits, among them the hit musical Jersey Boys, Goldstein (CFA’72) has designed costumes for productions at regional theaters and opera companies across the country.

One of his most recent Broadway projects—creating the costumes for the Public Theater’s acclaimed production of The Merchant of Venice, starring Al Pacino as Shylock—earned him a nomination for the American theater’s highest accolade, a Tony Award, for Best Costume Design of a Play.

The nomination marks the third time Goldstein has been so honored. His first nomination was for a revival of Shakespeare’s Henry IV. He won a Tony in 2005 for his designs for a production of Richard Sheridan’s 18th-century comedy The Rivals.

When The Merchant of Venice opened in Central Park in summer 2010, it quickly became the hottest ticket in New York. In November, the show moved to Broadway. Critics hailed it as revelatory and singled out Pacino and costar Lily Rabe, as Portia, for their performances. New York Times critic Ben Brantley praised the production’s “fine, elegantly inhibiting set and costumes.”

Goldstein typically approaches a production by reading the play and spending a couple of weeks thinking about the characters and their situations. “If it’s a period piece, I’ll start doing research in my studio,” he says. “I have a pretty extensive library, but often go out and treat myself to a new book on the historical period.” With a Broadway production, he usually has the luxury of a couple of months to finish the designs.

For this Merchant of Venice, director Daniel Sullivan had already chosen to update the period to 1910. Sullivan wanted the opening scene to look like a version of the Venetian stock exchange, Goldstein says, a setting that posed a challenge. “It meant that the all-male scene would be two dozen actors in Edwardian business suits, which were historically mostly black and gray frock coats,” he says. He solved the problem by incorporating small variations in each costume that would distinguish one actor from another—“subtle bits of color in their cravats, waistcoats, and other accessories.” When it came time to dress Portia and her companion, Nerissa, he chose “bright red and orange Pre-Raphaelite gowns.” The effect, he says, was to “lighten and feminize the mood of the play.”

Goldstein admits to being something of a minimalist. “I don’t like fussiness and overwrought clothes and details. I want my work to look effortless and real. I feel it’s important not to overwhelm the actor,” he says. In designing the costumes for Merchant, he and his team “lessened the degree of corsetry and petticoats in the ladies’ costumes so that they didn’t have the upholstered effect that often happens when that period is done with absolute historical authority.”

Goldstein’s favorite part of the design process is working with actors. “While the director may not be ready to talk costumes,” he says, “actors are always eager to get into those personal details.”

Having worked with stars such as Mary Tyler Moore, Mary Steenburgen, Nathan Lane, and Kristin Chenoweth, the veteran designer says it’s impossible to name a favorite actor. But he launches enthusiastically into a story about working with Pacino on Merchant. “He’s the least vain actor I have ever worked with,” he says. “He doesn’t really like to look at himself in the mirror, and so he would just watch me looking at him to see if I was pleased. He was very dear and trusting and had a wonderful sense of humor about himself.”

Following Merchant, Goldstein designed the costumes for an Atlantic Theater Company production of Through a Glass Darkly, based on the Ingmar Bergman screenplay, and for a new Broadway-bound Disney musical, a stage adaptation of the movie Newsies.

“You really have to love the work,” Goldstein says. “It’s not a job for lazy people and you constantly have to prove yourself over and over.”

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Web Extra
Watch a slideshow of costumes from The Merchant of Venice, designed by Jess Goldstein, at bu.edu/bostonia.

A scene from The Merchant of Venice.