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RED-CARPET WAR STORIES: TWO DECADES OF BATTLING THROUGH A AWARDS SEASON MAYHEM

12:16 PM PDT 3/19/2012 by Merle Ginsberg



Illustration: Brett Affrunti



THR senior writer Merle Ginsberg on slapping cameramen, taming surly actors and how Hollywood's runway evolved from a style disaster zone to a global-branding gold mine.

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War correspondents toil in the trenches, fashion reporters in trench coats -- preferably Lanvin or Burberry. But that's not where the comparison ends. People assume reporting on red-carpet fashion is glitzy at best, frivolous at least -- but these people remain blissfully unaware that awards-show fashion is a battlefield. Outfits get crushed. Egos get bruised. And brains and brawn actually are required to stay in the game.

Of course, a good wardrobe never hurt.

PHOTOS: THR's Top 25 Stylists of 2012 - The Best Awards Season Looks

At my first Oscars in 1992, when I worked for *Women's Wear Daily*, I was the lone fashion reporter on the Shrine Auditorium's red carpet, and I was constantly amused by how many journalists didn't know how to spell "Armani," let alone "Giorgio." Mine was the single voice ringing out amid the din of fans, screaming, "WHAT ARE YOU WEARING?????" I remember calling **Julia Roberts'** publicist to ask what the *Pretty Woman* star might be showing up in (before this info became as well guarded as **Catherine Zeta-Jones'** age).

"WHAT?" she screamed back. "WHY would you want to know THAT???"

Hollywood publicists resented fashion. They'd gotten used to actresses procuring outfits for themselves. And outside of **Barbra Streisand's** 1969 see-through Scaasi bell-bottoms and **Audrey Hepburn's** Givenchy sheaths, nobody cared.

Which is how every red-carpet disaster we now bemoan occurred between the '60s (end of the Studio System) and the '90s (beginning of the Stylist System), including **Cher's Bob Mackie**, complete with headdress, in 1988 and **Geena Davis'** Bo Peep dress in 1992. The red carpet then was truly a different animal; fashionwise, it was prehistoric. The Globes were completely backwoods: In 1992, the checkout line at the Beverly Hilton snaked right through arrivals. When **Sarah Jessica Parker** was cut off by a family with broken suitcases checking in, discount vouchers in hand, it didn't faze her. **Whoopi Goldberg** wandered into the press room barefoot, carrying a bottle of champagne. It was the wild, wild Globes.

STORY: Hollywood Reporter Names 25 Most Powerful Stylists List

Then, before anyone even knew to mourn them, fabulous Oscar and Globes fashion disasters like **Demi Moore's** bike shorts went the way of the dino. A couture breeze blowing in from Europe suddenly turned tornado. **Madonna** wore **Jean Paul Gaultier's** cone bra on her 1990 *Blond Ambition* tour, Giorgio Armani hired a Hollywood team and Gianni Versace made inroads into the pop music world before the job of "stylist" even existed. Not long after, stylists such as **Jessica Paster**, **Deborah Waknin** and **Phillip Bloch** started putting Valentino and **Alexander McQueen** on their clients. When **Uma Thurman** showed up in violet Prada in 1995, followed by **Nicole Kidman** in chartreuse satin Dior couture in 1997, we fashion writers were in Hollywood heaven.



Gucci, I actually peeked at the inside.) when **Daniel Day-Lewis** arrived in a tuck coat and asked who made it, he spat back, "wrong question." My response: "Wrong event for questions about Stanislavski." There were a few icy seconds -- then abundant laughter.

Being on the red carpet then was Hollywood fashion ground zero, like being at Yahoo in 1999 (without the stock options). As red-carpet fashion earned cred in New York and Europe, awards-show coverage went off the charts. That's when the carpet morphed into a better-dressed battlefield.

I remember arriving at the Shrine by noon for the 1997 Oscars. All pros know you get to the Globes or Oscars three hours before the carpet opens. You snooze, you lose -- your designated space will be inhabited by four other people. A conundrum, I know, but somehow a law of red-carpet physics. Another weird law: If you get there first, you get shoved less.

STORY: Inside THR and Jimmy Choo's Inaugural Top 25 Stylists Luncheon

But at 2:15 p.m., I had to do a TV interview off site. I kept looking at my watch, panicked, as the interview ran long, knowing that when the carpet proceedings begin, it might as well be Fort Knox.

Scampering back, I found the worst had occurred: Celebrities had begun snaking down the red expanse, and there was no way to get through the sardine-like tangle of crews, photographers and print press. But no quotes equals no job, so I embarked on the inevitable: I crawled. Under many legs and feet, in a white cocktail dress too tight to even walk in.

The scars that left on my legs -- and dress -- remained all the way to the Emmys. But lo and behold, when I popped up in my spot, there was **Chloe Sevigny** waiting -- wearing Alber Elbaz for YSL, no less. It had all been for good cause.

The following year, I got smarter and wore a black dress. But years of experience had taught me: If you stand out, actresses are more responsive -- so I added a white leather jacket by **Richard Tyler**. Sigh, such a great jacket. I should wear it again ... if I ever can get the ink marks off it from all the conjoined reporters scribbling next to me. They'd mistaken it for a notebook, I think.

The next year, I unearthed a size 2 Chanel gown made for a minus-2 rib cage, but I was determined to wear it, even if it meant going to Cher's rib-cage specialist. I never got there, and my ribs nearly broke from the strain. Of course, I should have known better. The year before, I had borrowed shoes that were too small. Needless to say, the Vanity Fair party is a minefield of Jimmy Choos; going barefoot is not an option. Besides, you never want your feet bleeding in a rented limo.

None of this apparel is job-friendly -- but even less so for the scuffles. I've had more fistfights on the red carpet than commentators for the WWE could ever hope to face. It's just fallout from the job, part and parcel.

VIDEO: THR's 25 Most Powerful Stylists: Behind the Scenes

One year, photographer **Art Streiber** was my shutterbug partner in crime for W. The next year, he was shooting for a competing publication, *Vanity Fair*. When Art, who also now shoots for *The Hollywood Reporter*, tried to crowd into my better-placed spot, things got ugly. Verbal abuse between former colleagues is not so becoming in public.

The next year, a TV cameraman hit me in the head with his constant craning down the carpet -- until I hauled off and smacked him.

In 2011, a cameraman for *Extra* tried to horn in on my arrivals interview with a star. That kind of hijacking goes on all the time. But then he grabbed my hand out of what he thought was his shot, and I slapped him in the face. **Kevin Spacey**, a producer on *The Social Network* and my interviewee, dropped his jaw and said: "I've never seen a girl hit anyone that hard. Buddy, if I were you, I'd back off."

This year, covering for *THR* and *THR.com*, I finally got it: I wore a comfortable Donna Karan jersey gown -- with no Spanx. (They make for one surly evening -- just ask **Melissa McCarthy**.) I wore flats. And I got lucky and was squashed in with three female reporters, all size 4 at best.



Smart man.

PHOTOS: Hollywood Reporter and Jimmy Choo Host THR's Top 25 Stylists Luncheon

AWARDS-SHOW PHENOMS: 7 Designers Who Stole the Spotlight

What a difference a year makes -- a red-carpet year, that is. For a fashion label, one successful awards season can equal 10 years of climbing the retail ladder. These front-and-center designers -- some well known before this season, some not -- will enjoy a surge in sales and name recognition

David Meister: The NYC-based eveningwear designer can be found from Bergdorf to Nordstrom, but this season put him over the top: He dressed **Diane Lane** for the SAGs, **Janet McTeer** for the Oscars and **Sofia Vergara** for the Globes. "People used to look to fashion magazines for what to buy," he says. "Now they look to actresses in weekly magazines."

Tadashi Shoji: The Japanese designer toggles between N.Y. and Shanghai and sells to Neiman and Saks but didn't have a red-carpet profile until **Octavia Spencer**. She wore him exclusively from the Globes through the Oscars. "Her Oscar dress was lost until the day before," he says. "I sent it UPS from Shanghai. They had a fire in their New Jersey office, and the computers shut down."

PHOTOS: TOP TEN Oscars

Marchesa: The glam label was particularly prominent this season, dressing Vergara, **Viola Davis**, **Lea Michele** and, most notably, **Stacy Keibler** in a gold strapless and **Sandra Bullock** in a white-and-black column for the Oscars. "It's our commitment to our relationships with actresses and stylists," says co-designer **Georgina Chapman**.

Jenny Packham: The London designer's client list (**Emily Blunt**, **Kate Winslet**) grew after hiring a Hollywood PR firm a few years ago. But when **Angelina Jolie** turned up in a black halter Packham gown at the SAG Awards, the designer became even more golden. "Angelina looked amazing in that," she says. "But I knew nothing about it until it happened."

Victoria Beckham: Please don't call the former pop singer an "entertainer" -- she's all designer now. **Michelle Williams** wore her posh looks proudly at the BAFTA Tea Party and the Oscar nominees lunch, and Viola Davis showed off her curves in a tight white sheath at the Essence Awards. It's so rare for one celebrity to wear another's styles that you know VB means business.

Elie Saab: For this Paris-based Lebanese designer, it started at the 2002 Oscars when **Halle Berry** introduced him to the world. Since then, **Beyonce** and **Katy Perry** keep turning up in his chiffon wonders, as did a stunning **Milla Jovovich** on this year's Oscar red carpet. But **Rose Byrne** in his beaded jumpsuit at the SAGs was the hip piece de resistance.

PHOTOS: Oscars 2012 The Red Carpet Arrivals

Louis Vuitton: At his eponymous label, Marc Jacobs is no stranger to stars. But he's also head designer at Louis Vuitton, known more for day and cocktail dresses than gowns. That changed with his coral lace confection for Michelle Williams, considered one of the top 2012 Oscar looks. She also wore a gamine LV suit the day before at the Spirit Awards.

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