Written by Patricia Turnier
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Mrs. Antoinette Messam was born in Jamaica to a family immersed in the creation of clothing for the entertainment industry. Her mother was a dressmaker who specialized in bridal dresses; her grandfather was an established tailor. Mrs. Messam was destined to be involved in clothing design. Antoinette Messam graduated from the Academy of Merchandising & Design in Toronto, specializing in textiles. This quickly led to a post in Asia designing fabric for bridal shoes. She aptly titles herself “a woman of the cloth” summing up her diverse roles as fashion designer, fashion stylist, and costume designer. Mrs. Messam’s energy has enabled her to build a strong line of film credits, develop the innovative clothing line,
I Style
and maintain her position in the fashion and music worlds as a stylist. Her pursuit of excellence as a costume designer is best exemplified in the following projects:
Redemption
, starring Jamie Foxx;
Jewel,
starring Farrah Fawcett; the Emmy-nominated anthology
Common Ground
and

Ruby's Bucket of Blood
starring Academy Award Nominee Angela Bassett.

Mrs. Messam has just finished designing a television show, called " Haven " which was shot in Nova Scotia and her latest release is a romantic comedy called *Love, Wedding, Marriage* (starring Mandy Moore, Jane Seymour and James Brolin) where her work as a costume designer will be featured. Through her contemporary work on films such as the Indie hit,
Lie with Me
(2005) and
Orphan
for Warner Brothers in 2009, Antoinette Messam has kept abreast of the latest trends in fashion from street to couture. She thrives on being creative and along with her fashion line, film & television work, she is a fashion stylist for brands Bacardi Rum, Miller Beer, Ford Canada, among others. She also had a unique relationship with EMI Music Canada which enabled her to create an individualized and specific look for their musicians that was used in all aspects of marketing and advertising. She continues to excel in all areas of design and fashion, but says her love has always been conjuring character through clothes, not having the clothes wear them. It is important to mention that Antoinette Messam designed costumes for MTV's first television show,
Catwalk
(1993). On September 7 2011, she designed the opening number for the prestigious 26th Annual Gemini Awards.

As an in-demand guest speaker, she has lectured and been a panelist at various high schools, colleges and universities in Toronto (Canada), reaching young and up-and-coming fashionistas. Messam counts among her most notable achievements her recognition as one of the first African-Canadian costume designers. Mrs. Messam's work has been highlighted in various platforms such as *Who's who in Black Canada* online. It is worth noting that Antoinette Messam never forgot where she came from. For instance, she was involved in a fashion show at a Christmas brunch at The Jamaica Pegasus hotel.

Antoinette Messam's interest is not limited to specific domains; she is also an avid reader. Her favorite books are Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston – and The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. In her spare time, Mrs. Messam actively volunteers for mentoring young people on the benefits and rewards of a career in fashion and film. On a more personal level, she is the proud mother of an adult son, her "greatest accomplishment" she says. Mrs. Messam lives between Canada and the United States.
Mega Diversities

had the pleasure to talk to the renowed costume designer Mrs. Messam who shared with us her passion for her domain.
The interview was conducted on May 9th 2011 by the Editress-in-Chief, Patricia Turnier.

P.T. Growing up, who inspired you to become a costume designer?

A.M. I would like to rewind first. I didn't grow up thinking I would become a costume designer. As a child, I didn't even know what a costume designer was. I was born in Jamaica. My grandfather was a tailor and my mother was a dressmaker. So, maybe on a subconscious level I was inspired by her. I was really exposed to television when I arrived in Canada. This is how I saw more fashion being showcased. Even then, I did not consider seriously being in the film business. I started modeling officially at 14 and fashion became my world. So, for me at the time, the profession of filmmaker or costume designer was far from my mind. As a model, I spent a large part of my money to buy *Vogue* (magazine) [Laughs] and shoes. I was not thinking beyond that.

P.T. Would you say that the realm of costume design chose you later?

A.M. Yes, definitely! I became first a fashion stylist but I needed consistent money in the early 90s. A friend of mine suggested that I could become a buyer for movies. This allowed me to improve my financial stability. At the time, I had more responsibility as a single mother of a young son. I approached a Costume Designer who hired me. MTV was looking for a Stylist for the TV Series CATWALK 2 in the early 90s. This is how I became part of the film industry two decades ago.

P.T. Can you share with us your migratory journey from Jamaica to Canada on a personal basis (if you so choose) and on a professional level?

A.M. My parents left Jamaica before my siblings when we were very young. We were at that time 5 and 6-years-old. We followed our parents six months later when they got settled. Though I migrated to Canada, I don't have the feeling that I left Jamaica because I spent so much time there during my youth and my adult life. It was always home to me. We spent the summers, holidays and so on in my home country. For my son, also, Jamaica is his second home although he's Canadian.

P.T. This means you were never uprooted.

A.M. Absolutely! I even went to Jamaica more often than my parents. I am very patriotic. Jamaica is in my heart and will never leave me. Actually, wherever I am in this world Jamaica will have a special place for me. On a professional level, I designed a clothing line that I sold in Jamaica. I coordinated fashion shows in my homeland. I developed a very good relationship with the Pegasus Hotel in Kingston where I do Holiday fashion shows. As much as possible, I bring my experience and "the talents" that I discover to Jamaica. There is a wealth of talent in the island which needs to be showcased and I do my part by supporting my own.

P.T. By the way, I saw on YouTube an interesting fashion show that you did in Jamaica.

A.M. I am glad to hear that. It was an amazing project where I was able to work with many talented Jamaicans.

P.T. How has your West Indian culture been a benefit to your career? Also, how did your Jamaican flavour and your work experience in Asia intertwine with your design creations?

A.M. I am going to start first with my West Indian background. My sister calls me a soldier. We know what it means to work hard, we are not afraid to go the extra mile. I prefer to talk specifically about my Jamaican origins because I have not been impregnated by the culture of the other islands in the Caribbean. In this regard, I observe that my people are not afraid to go after what they want. They are willing to really work hard for it and they have excellent work ethic. When I hear that we are lazy, I don't know where that comes from because I didn't observe that for most of my people. We all have 10 jobs [Laughs].

As a costume designer, I like to use jersey in my stylish pieces. However, I usually work with silk, but I have to admit that the jersey is easy to care for. I want to mention that I love to design for Jamaican women because they are not afraid to explore colours and I definitely use that in my design creations. My Jamaican roots are definitely reflected in my design creations. I know what the Jamaican woman wants, what is missing and I do my best to give her easy, sexy versatile pieces.

P.T. I can see that you have a big sense of entrepreneurship in your work. When I think for instance of Marcus Garvey, he was the only one who unified on a grand scale the economy of Black people in the United States with his Black Star Line, and he had Jamaican roots. He founded the UNIA which promoted self-help and self-reliance. He was also a strong advocate for Black business and Black nationhood.

A.M. Wow! Do you know how many people who are not aware that he was from Jamaica? A lot of people think he was American. I discovered not too long ago that Jamaicans were brought to Nova Scotia to build forts in the 17th century. Jamaicans were one of the first workforce who were brought to this province so it is an obviousness that my people are strong workers otherwise these contributions to the nation would not have occurred.

To go back to your question, my experience in Asia as a designer was very formative. I studied at The International Academy of Merchandising and Design to acquire an expertise in textiles. My Asian experience allowed me to broaden my horizons, to create a diverse and eclectic portfolio by not limiting myself to local designs. I love it when my creativity is being challenged and this is what foreign immersion brings to me. I was hired overseas by a company which designs shoes in Hong Kong. They created expensive shoes for brides (and so on) with a mass production in Taiwan. I was a part-time model also during this period. So, being multi-faced is important for me.

Again, about my eclecticism in my style, for movies I can do a comedic style, another one will have a funky or dramatic style, etc. When I work for films, I like to put depth in my creation because it has to fit with the characters. For instance, I love to design costumes for an 80-year-old man and ensure that his attire looks natural, like he has been wearing it for years. I am able to adapt and I love the challenge.

P.T. Do you think that it takes a godfather or a godmother to climb up the ladder to become a celebrity costume designer?

A.M. I would say yes and no. I will say yes for having a network which can provide support. It helps to have a father in the business [Laughs]. I learned very early that it is the quality of the relationships we build which is very important. If someone wants to make it to the top, he has to make sure to have as few enemies as possible. To obtain more clients you need to establish a strong reputation. So, you can't burn your bridges. For instance on TV, you need to create an excellent rapport with the networks.

P.T. What about the "no" part of your answer?

A.M. Actually, it is comforting and agreeable to know that it is your talent which allowed you to go far. You need to have the ability to manage the budget well, to interact accordingly with the cast (the producers, the directors, etc). Communication is very important. You need to know how to function in the environment, to decode the culture and to adapt to different personalities. It is important to be rapid. It is not everybody who can work on a movie set or in the film industry as a whole. It is not easy and you need a thick skin. All these qualities can help you to set yourself apart from a lot of people, and it is a sure way to make it in the business without patronage.

P.T. How did you create a solid network to work with the top people in the movie and music industry?

A.M. When you have been in the milieu for quite a while, people learn to know you and this is how the trust is built. When you are on location with the crew, you have to be comfortable to create a rapport. To continue to work, the team has to enjoy your company and it is important to network. When I started, I created a line - in the figurative sense - between my work and my life outside of work. But after, I realized that I had to find a certain balance between the two. You spend so much time with the crew and it is important to get to know them. To finish, any successful person creates a solid niche by delivering high quality work.

P.T. What hurdles did you encounter in your professional and entrepreneurial career? Also, how did you overcome them?

A.M. I am one of the trailblazers in the milieu because not a lot of people of color are in my realm. This was a hurdle. I remember when I started in the industry and I dropped my portfolio, some people thought I was the carrier. This is how I could be pigeonholed. It was helpful for me to get an agent because it creates a buffer. Also, it allows me to obtain interesting contracts while I have the possibility to concentrate on my artistic work. It is a great way to manage my time effectively and to evolve professionally.

P.T. Who would you like to collaborate with cinematically and musically as a costume designer in the future?

A.M. I could give a list of three pages [Laughs]. This is a really hard question for me because there are so many people whose work I respect. For example, I enjoyed working with the director of *Orphan*, Jaume Collet-Serra. It was an amazing experience because I had a lot of fun. He trusted my ideas, my creativity and my vision. It was an excellent collaboration which doesn't happen often in my milieu. For Collet-Serra, people don't work for him, he's working with them and this is how I felt.

Rudy Langlais is another creative director/producer to work with. I collaborated with him in the past in *Redemption*, starring Jamie Foxx. Currently, Rudy [Langlais] is developing Bob Marley's biopic based on the book No Woman No Cry: My Life With Bob Marley by Rita Marley who will be the executive producer of the movie. I love Langlais' input and creativity. He's very versatile. He's a journalist and an author. It is a joy to collaborate with people who consider my contribution important for the big picture. It inspires me to work even harder and do my best. This is how I felt when I worked with him. I would definitely like to collaborate with him again. I want to add that when I look at the collaboration between the costume designer of *Alice in Wonderland* and its director, I believe it is definitely something to emulate. I love their working relationship and I would have enjoyed working with Johnny Depp.

P.T. Did you have to research before you created the designs for your latest movie *Love , Wedding, Marriage* ? Tell us also about your input in this motion picture.

A.M. I did have to research for the motion picture. The producers wanted a very esthetic imagery. They used the template of the romantic comedy *Something Gotta Give* with Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton. My closest collaborators and I wanted something more greyish. We still gave the pretty scenes, but we thought it was also important to tell a real story and not something where everything seems to be perfect. The research that I made was to watch romantic comedies. I saw prior work by Mandy Moore. She admitted that I dressed her differently from what she's used to. I was able to help her look sexy effortlessly. So, as a costume designer you need to be able to balance all these aspects with subtlety.

P.T. Your work is really interesting and we can see that you are passionate about what you do.

A.M. Thank you, and my crew can testify to my passion [Laughs].

P.T. You were just working on a TV show called " Haven " shot in Nova Scotia. What can you share with us regarding this latest project?

A.M. "Haven" is starting its second season. I was not involved last year. For the second season, the Producers wanted to elevate the visual aspect of the show across the board. They wanted a designer who has resources outside of Nova Scotia, which is my case. To deliver a versatile and diverse look, you can't limit yourself by just being local. I have an overview of what's out there in North America and elsewhere in the world.

P.T. You are also developing a documentary that is very close to your heart. It is about your name and family origins. What do you want the public to take away from it?

A.M. What is important for me is to show our diversity. Sometimes, I am angry when the media portrays us as a monolithic group, or that we are involved in criminal activities, which are far from the truth. There is an intelligentsia in every nation. In Jamaica, we have citizens who are successful in many fields. In my family, on my father's side I mean the Messams, we have recorded singers who are travelling overseas. For instance, my cousin Milton Messam is a renowned artist on the island and his work is shown in a gallery. Lord Messam is among the pioneers in the Jamaican musical scene. He was around before the new trends such as dancehall. I also have a cousin who is part of a well-known Jamaican group called *Dubtonic Crew* .
In addition, Marc Messam is an artist from my family who is doing very well. Through the documentary, by telling the story of my family, I will narrate the story of Jamaica with its wealth and all its complexities. So, how the media describes my people most of the time is too

simplistic, with a lot of clichés. I will present through my documentary a positive message with an artistic aspect.

P.T. You said in the past to the media that you would be interested one day in producing your own movie. Would you be interested in the future to develop a motion picture on an iconic African-American designer? If so, which one?

A.M. I am not African-American and in the U.S, it can be perceived almost as if I don't consider myself black. Again, we are not monolithic. Also, I navigate between Canada and the U.S. In Nova Scotia, we have a little Jamaica. There are also people from other Caribbean islands and Africa. In addition, there is a community which is a mix of descendants of African-American slaves. Actually, they were among the first Blacks who arrived in Canada. They have been here for centuries.

P.T. I understand your point of view but I used the term African-American instead of black because it can be a limiting term also.

A.M. I see what you mean. To answer your question, I would rather pick an iconic Jamaican like Grace Jones. I would be more interested in portraying her life than a designer. Actually, I was wondering why you asked me about portraying a designer.

P.T. Because I observed that the contributions of people of African origin in this realm are not known. For instance, many people don't know that the African-American, Elizabeth Hobbs Heckley in the 19th century, was a talented dressmaker and designer to the political elite of Washington D.C and a confidante of First Lady Mary Todd, or that Ann Lowe, another black American, for fifty years quietly sewed clothes for leading females in America, such as Jacqueline Bouvier/John Kennedy for her wedding dress in 1953.

A.M. It is really interesting that you point that out because it makes me realize that I saw myself immediately first as a filmmaker when I heard your question. The fashion designer, Patrick Kelly, would be very interesting to portray in a motion picture. Besides being a designer, he was also an entrepreneur; he owned a fashion house in Paris. Celebrities like Iman, Naomi Campbell, Grace Jones, Isabella Rossellini and Cicely Tyson wore his clothes. He was a

trailblazer. I know that I said that I would rather choose someone from my own roots, but I have to admit that Patrick Kelly is an important African-American figure to depict in a movie. He became the first American and the first person of color to be admitted as a member of the *Chambre syndicale du prêt-à-porter des couturiers et des créateurs de mode* which is far from being banal. I can also name the fashion designer Willi Smith who rose to fame in the '70s and '80s. He designed the groomsmen's attire (Edwin Schlossberg) for Caroline Kennedy's wedding. Laura Smalls launched her own line and First Lady Michelle Obama wore one of her designs.

P.T. What was your proudest moment in your career so far and why?

A.M. I would say it was when I saw a big promotional picture of the *Orphan* movie in Beverly Hills near a shopping center with my clothes on the actors. It was a surreal experience and it represented a recognition of my work.

P.T. What message do you have for people who want to follow in your footsteps?

A.M. Integrity is very important. Everything which has to do with work ethic, such as professionalism, punctuality is imperative. You have to show stamina and energy even when you work long hours. It is not well perceived in the milieu if you whine about it [Laughs]. So, having a pleasant attitude under all conditions is important. You need to show an ability to work in a fast-paced environment. It is not everybody who is cut out to be a costume designer and you have to be sure that the entertainment business is really your world. You can't make a life career decision just based on glamour. You have to go past that and find your niche that matches your talents and interests. People need to fully understand what a costume designer is all about. In this regard, it is a person who, in consultation with the director and production designer, designs, creates, or acquires all warbrobe and costumes needed for a production. They also ensure that extra sets of clothing in the right sizes are available for stunt, photo doubles and stand-ins. So, this requires several qualities, such as creativity, diligence, efficiency and so on. You need to know your craft while staying true to yourself and be convinced that you have a voice in your creation.

To finish, even if it seems a cliché, it is important to believe in yourself and go after what you want because nobody will do it for you. In other words, you have to be hungry to succeed if you wish to make it to the highest levels of the profession. Some people daydream about achieving their goals, others make it happen. To succeed in any realm, you have to sweat to make it big. As long as the movie industry exists, costume designers will be in demand.

P.T. Thanks Mrs. Messam for this very interesting interview!

Mrs. Messam's selected work as a costume designer for TV and CINEMA:

1990 The Emmy-nominated Common Ground (starring Cicely Tyson)
1993 Catwalk (MTV's first television show)
1999 Love Songs (starring Monica Arnold, Essence Atkins, Rachel True…)
2000 After Alice
2001 Jewel (starring Farrah Fawcett)
2001 Ruby's Bucket of Blood (starring Angela Bassett)
2001 The Day Reagan Was Shot
2004 Redemption: The Stan Tookie Williams Story (starring Jamie Foxx)
2004 The Girl Next Door
2005 Skinwalkers
2005 Lie With Me
2007 A Very Lucky Girl
2007 Saving Grace (starring Holly Hunter)
2009 Orphan
2009 The Haunting in Connecticut
2009 Sorority Wars
2009 Killer Hair
2009 Hostile Makeover
2010 Three inches
2011 LOVE, WEDDING, MARRIAGE (starring Mandy Moore),
2011 Haven Season 2

Selected Work of Mrs. Messam:

Antoinette Messam's official Web site: www.istyle.ca/messam/