



Neysa Bove Dives Into the Very Fabric of Animation Costume Design

As head of the industry's first official studio-designated 'Costume' department at Skydance Animation, the former Disney visual development artist no longer jumps between outfits one day and props the next, and that welcome change allows her to bring a focused human touch and feel to designs that machines cannot match.

By **Victoria Davis** | Thursday, October 12, 2023 at 11:15am

In **2D, 3D, Art, CG, Films, People** | **ANIMATIONWorld** | Geographic Region: **All**



Disney's 'Encanto.' Images © 2021 Disney. All Rights Reserved.

Skydance Animation is making history this year, establishing the animation industry's first official studio-designated "Costume" department, and Neysa Bove is making history as the first fashion design expert to sit at the head.



"When I worked on *Encanto*, that's the first time I've ever seen them put specifically 'Costume Design,' in the credits for an animation," says Bove, who is currently serving as Head of Costume Design at Skydance after previously working for six years as a Visual Development Costume Designer at Walt Disney Animation Studios. "At Disney, there were many other visdev artists working on costumes, and their capabilities

are incredible. But now, at Skydance, it's dedicated to costume design, instead of having the same people working on costumes one day and props the next."



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Along with the Academy Award-winning *Encanto*, Bove has designed the costumes on Disney titles such as *Moana* and *Raya and the Last Dragon*. For Skydance, she's in production on costume design for *The Search for WondLa* as well as another top-secret animated Skydance project she can't talk about. *WondLa's* first two seasons, based on the children's science fiction fantasy novel by Tony DiTerlizzi, will mark Skydance Animation's TV debut on Apple TV+; it's slated to release this year. The show is also the studio's first project to utilize their new Costume department, established by Bove and former Pixar chief creative officer John Lasseter.

"John and I worked together at Disney since *Moana* and he called me because he wanted to create this department," shares Bove. "That's what brought me in two years ago. I feel very lucky to have John as a mentor. He knows how important costume design is and he's elevating this studio so much that he cared enough to say, 'Let's build a costume department.' He actually helped me get into the costume designers guild and, so far, I'm the only one from the animation industry in the entire guild."



Disney's 'Moana.' Images ©2016 Disney. All Rights Reserved.

Bove's efforts to change the game of costume design in animation is as much a surprise to her as it is to anyone else. Before she was adorning Disney heroines, she had every intention of a career as a serious fashion designer, set to contend with the likes of Prada. But while attending the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles, Bove felt herself drawn to her sister's classes at Cal Arts.

"My sister was studying in the character animation program, so I'd go to Valencia and hang out with her and attend some classes, like Shane Prigmore's animation class and different life drawings and story classes," remembers Bove. "I ended up being an unofficial student there for about two years."

She continues, "One day I was doing an assignment where we had to design for our favorite brand and create a collection. I chose Anthropology and was drawing my fashion model, a mannequin, and I was like, 'I wonder what her story is?' That's when it clicked that maybe I enjoy more of the story side of this, as opposed to purely the fashion side. I wanted to design for something story-driven, not fashion-driven."

Bove's first internship was at Walt Disney World, where she designed and refined costumes for Epcot animatronics like Cleopatra and drew "technical flats" for cast members' outfits.



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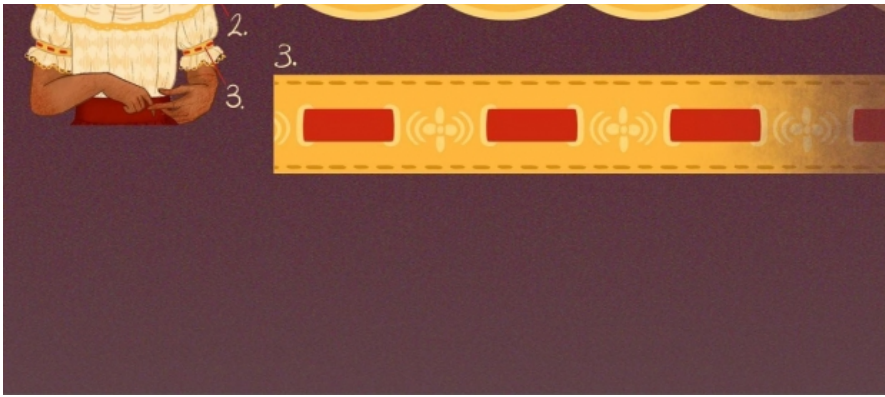
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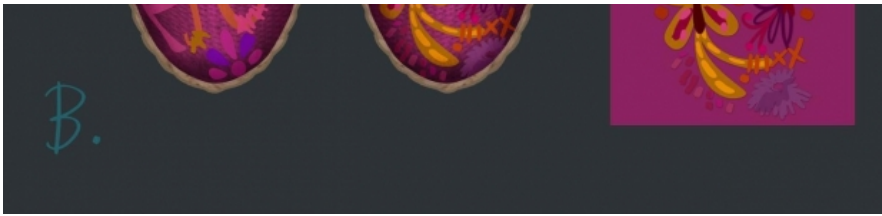
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"I would be brought racks and racks of clothes that the cast members wore—mostly restaurant hosts—and I would have to archive them by drawing a technical illustration of that cloth or garb so you can see where the pockets go, if there are lining buttons, what kind of color it is," she explains. "Then, they would file it away to reference in case something happened to the current costume."

From there, Bove got connected with Disney consumer products, where she began working on pajama and T-shirt collections, as well as learning graphic design. After the 2008 recession, Bove moved to designing Barbie dolls—from hair and faces to clothes and shoes—at Mattel. It was a "dream job," she says, but the opportunity to do costume design on *Moana* when Disney reached out was too good to pass up. However, the costume creation process involved a wild learning curve.

"You start with a script, or treatment, of the story and, as you read it, you go through each character," explains Bove. "Let's say you're designing your main characters first. You ask a lot of questions to the directors and the production designer. 'What are your goals for this character? Do they have an arc that you want to focus on within the story? What is the color story for this film?' Then you start bullet-pointing the areas where there will, or could, be costume changes. So, it'll be like, 'Variant 1: Wet,' 'Variant 2: Dirty,' or whatever it may be, depending on the story. A character may have three costumes and 10 variants for each costume."

And sometimes these variants play into the character development.

"You can actually see some of this with Moana's top, for example," notes Bove. "It starts out orange but becomes more and more red as the movie goes on. Red is a sign of royalty for the people of Oceania, and we wanted to integrate that into Moana's character growth and her becoming a leader to her people."



'Moana' designs





Even before picking up a pencil to design, there's lots of research to be done. Bove shares that 80 percent of the job for costume design in animation is dedicated to research. The rest is design.

"Especially if you're working on something that pertains to a real culture," says Bove. "On *Moana*, we were recreating materials they had from 5,000 years ago. So, the Oceanic Story Trust brought in tapa cloth, which is made from mulberry tree fibers. It's what Moana's top is made from. Getting to touch and play with this old material really helped elevate our costume game to the next level."

But one of the main differences between live-action and animated costume design is that regardless of the material - polyester, nylon, cotton, silk, or something else (or combination thereof) - the designer of the animated character's clothing can't just go out to a store and buy the materials.

"We're doing a lot of the same early work, but we're creating everything from scratch," says Bove. "Sometimes a company will already have a library of denim and cotton and all that built into their simulation system, like Marvelous Designer. But I'm so picky about the feel of the fabric and I do believe there's a lot of additional work we need to put into that in animation to elevate it to go to the next step, and so it doesn't feel like neoprene or scuba diving material. You'll see in a lot of animations that the fabric kind of stretches and bounces and it's often not a fabric that should be able to do that."





Disney's 'Raya and the Last Dragon.' Images © 2020 Disney. All Rights Reserved.

Once a fabric selection has been made, Bove will try to bring in the real fabric for her team to play with, feel it, see how it flows, and test how light absorbs or reflects off it. And, if she doesn't have the resources to buy the fabric, then Bove and the other artists take to the internet, where there's no shortage of Fashion Week videos with models walking down the runway.

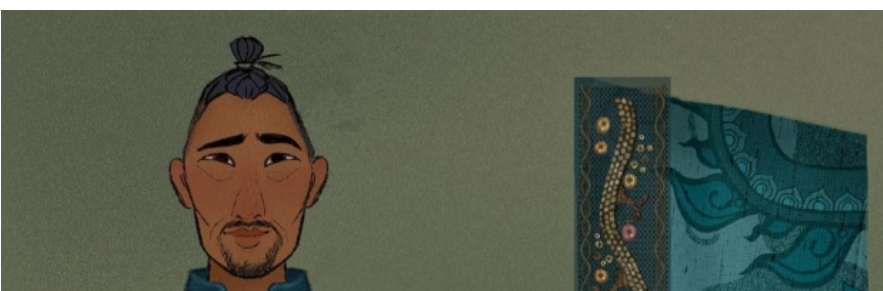
"It's essentially like an animation walk cycle that you're getting, but with a real person," says Bove. "But we also don't want to get too uncanny valley with it. So, when we're looking at these references from the real world, we caricature them. As an example, if you see a silk and it's got all these wrinkles, maybe we don't want to add all those wrinkles into the costume. So, you simplify it. That's how you bring it into your animated world. And it's a very long process. We're constantly picking at and adjusting button dimensions and cloth seams. Nothing's unseen, in that sense."

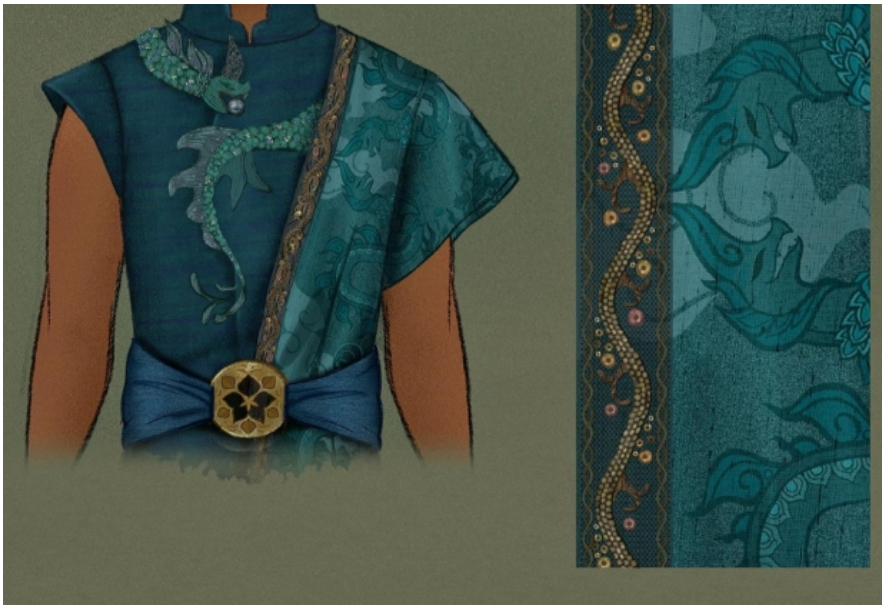
Even the speed at which the fabric moves must be considered. Sometimes, getting the movement right requires adjusting the costume dimensions—adding in a slit, lengthening, or shortening a skirt or sleeve—and, other times, it means putting the fabric in slow motion.

"With Isabela on *Encanto*, because she's such a goddess-type of character, we slowed down the fabric itself," recalls Bove. "It was just a silk fabric but, because we slowed it down, it felt more magical."



'Raya and the Last Dragon' designs

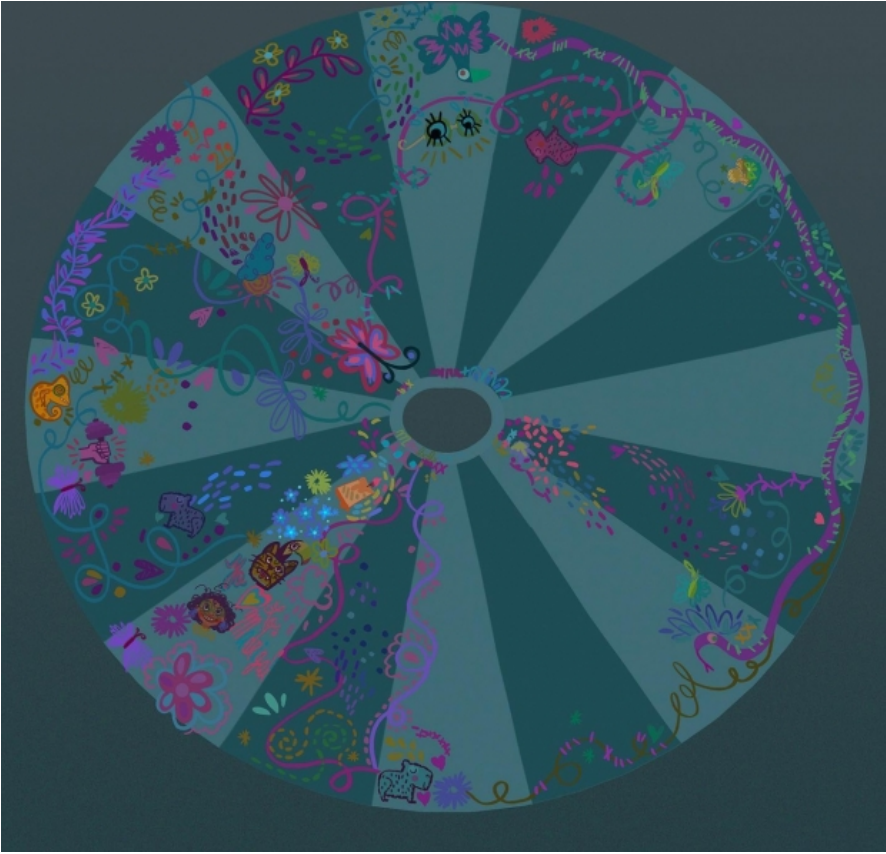




Outside of just fabric type, the way a costume is tailored, whether there's more than one layer, and whether there are added decorations like pins and embroideries are all factors that affect how the clothing moves.

"The easiest thing to do is super-tailored clothing," shares Bove. "And when I say 'tailored,' I mean like sucked into the body. The closer a piece of fabric rests on the body, the less simulation is needed. But if there's a character that needs something baggy, layered, and flowing, you have to pay attention to how the cloth is 'IP'ing, or 'Interpenetrating' with the body. You have to make sure that the clothing doesn't hit anything it shouldn't or mess up an animation for something else in the frame. It's especially hard if there's embroidery—like what we had on *Raya* and *Encanto*—because that can affect how a cloth moves depending on what material was used to embroider the existing clothes. It might not be the same fabric."

She adds, "*Encanto* was on a whole other level of embroidery. Between Mirabel and Isabela, they had the most difficult costumes I've ever worked on, excluding the ones I'm working on now, which I can't talk about. But I can tell you they're going to be really cool."



More 'Encanto' designs.





In total, the process of costume design production takes roughly a year. And while, previously, costume design has been done by a small team under an animated project's Visual Development department, Bove hopes to change that, as well as prove that no machine can replicate the emotions and passions spurred by holding 5,000-year-old fabric.

"There's so much depth to all this, and I feel like animation doesn't get enough credit for the level of realism brought to it," she says. "I want to see a department like this everywhere in animation. We're going to show that humans will bring a quality level that machines cannot. Artists have soul, they have a heart. That's what Skydance and this new department stands for."



Victoria Davis is a full-time, freelance journalist and part-time Otaku with an affinity for all things anime. She's reported on numerous stories from activist news to entertainment. Find more about her work at victoriadavisdepiction.com.

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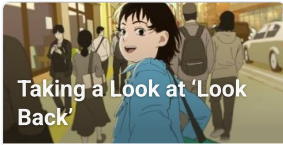
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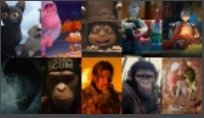


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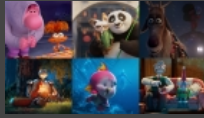
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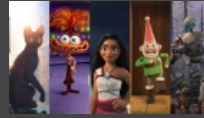
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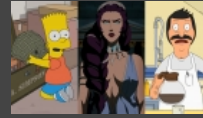
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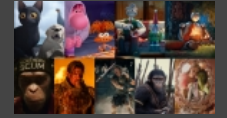
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