

BGN Interview: Ruth E. Carter, Costume Designer For 'Black Panther'

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Carolyn Hinds

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BLACKGIRLNERDS



With dozens of costuming film credits to her name, Ruth E. Carter has become the go-to for many directors in Hollywood, including Ava DuVernay (*Selma*) and Spike Lee (*Malcolm X*). Looking at a list of the productions Ruth has been involved in, it almost seems as though she knows, on some deeper level, that these films will end up having a huge impact, not only on the film industry, but society and, especially, the Black community. *Black Panther* is no different.

Once *Black Panther* was released to the masses, one aspect that had everyone excited were the costumes, which clearly and unashamedly represented Africa. With thorough and extensive research, multiple concept renderings from costume illustrators like [Phillip Boutté, Jr.](#), Ruth was able to bring to life the unique aesthetic of Wakanda and her people. She aided in the creation of a movement unlike anything I've ever seen. As someone whose mother refers to as a clotheshorse, I excitedly pounced (see what I did there) at the chance to speak with Ruth about her career as a designer and being a part of shaping the fashion of Afrofuturism.





Carolyn Hinds: I'm doing good. Thank you so much for speaking with me, I know you must be extremely busy with all of the other interviews that you've been doing, and all the promotion for *Black Panther*, so I really appreciate this.

Ruth E. Carter: Not a problem.

Carolyn: So, I just have to say, as someone who really loves film and its costumes and fashion, I really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you. I've been itching to do this forever. I know you have a limited time, so I'll get right into it. For my first question: after graduating from Hamptons University, you began your career as an apprentice in the Santa Fe Opera, correct?

Ruth: Correct.

Carolyn: What was it like working on stage productions, and what made you transition into

film?

Ruth: You know, I love the stage productions, because you really get to be very creative. Because stage is larger than life, the aesthetic is big and broad because of the setting, the distance between the stage and the audience. So you get to do all kinds of things, like paint patterns on fabric...and you get to trick the eyes with theater, and there's like, an optical illusion that transcends the theater. I've always loved it. I got to do more period work with stage. You study the classics, Shakespeare and Moliere, and that's the part that you don't get to do in film. The whole majesty of it, the pageantry of it...you get to go to rehearsals and see the actors performing; it's a different type of performance. And, you know, I still love the theater as much as I did from the first day, but when I came out to Los Angeles, there wasn't a whole lot of theater here. The little bit I know, the theater stages, like along Santa Monica boulevard, were only like, a hundred seats, some of them fifty seats.

I've never, ever seen such a small stage in my entire life. There's the big stage here, CTG, Center Theatre Group, and such, and when I first got here, the Los Angeles Theatre Center had just opened, and I saw on the Talented section of the LA Times a large photograph of the staff, and they were all standing on the circular staircase in the lobby of the Los Angeles Theater Center, and I thought, "They just opened, and they have five theaters under one roof. They're gonna need somebody like me who has experience with theater." So I went down there and I got a job right away.

I met so many actors that also performed in film that I was more or less curious about it [more] than anything. And I still loved dyeing and painting but, slowly, I was beginning to hear the rumblings of film life, just through the other designers, through my fellow theater costumers who also worked sometimes on film. But, my hub was in the theater. So one day, Spike Lee came to see a performance of Otis Sallid's *Night for Dancing*, it was this dance company that was performing to the music of Stevie Wonder. I had seen their performance prior to Spike arriving and asked them if they needed a costume designer, which they did, and when Spike came to the theater and saw their performance, I was there.

He talked to me about getting involved in filmmaking, and he suggested that I go to USC or UCLA and sign up for the film department, for a student thesis project. And he said, you know, "The senior thesis project will allow you to be on-set to, you know, be around a movie set and to experience a different medium." And I did and before I knew it, on this weekend I was working on a USC student thesis project and it was the first time that I had heard, "Rolling, cut, quiet on the set," and I thought. "Here is a quiet story, a story just about a person, a human being that is trapped in such a normal way." The clothes look so normal, so different than what I was used to on stage and being broad and painting clothes and dyeing clothes. So I thought "This seems easy!" I've been doing Shakespeare and *The English Cat* and *The Marriage of Figaro* ... I had been doing these big, big productions, and here was this quiet, little, simple story being filmed. So I immediately felt like I was ready.



character	version
DORA	012
MALAJE	
costume designer	costume
Ruth Carter	
concept artist	date
Keith Christensen	7-26-16

C. Carter

Carolyn: As someone whose previous film work consisted of costumes that were dictated by specific fashion trends of a particular era...say for instance in *Marshall* the costumes have to fit the '40s. Would it be fair to say that *Black Panther* allowed you to stretch your designing wings, so to speak, with regards to the technique, technology and styling interpretation?

Ruth: Yes, I would say that, I think that it allowed me to be theatrical, and utilize some of the things that are from the world of Africa into this new, fictitious place that was based on Africa. And it allowed us to create the world, [allowing] us to be the authors of the world, as opposed to a world that was already once-lived, and lived in the past, where you really need to understand what was going on socially, culturally.

You do need to understand that too, about Wakanda, but because we're the authors of the story, we get to decide who is gonna represent what.

Carolyn: During the design process, from conception to assembly, how did you know when the costume was just right and not overdone? How did you know that, "Okay, we have the perfect amount of beads, the perfect amount of fringe," so that it doesn't look like a big mess. How do you get to the point that you say "Okay, this is just right."

Ruth: Well your main thought is beauty, and beauty sometimes dictates that you need to follow the human form. And because these actors have worked really hard at their craft—you know, one of them is training in martial arts—and just as being kind of a vessel in front of the camera, they're presenting you with their body type; the human body is quite beautiful in itself. And so, you try not to [stray far] away from the human form, so that you can kind of honor it. And that's when you know you have gone too far, when items start looking like they're sitting on top of [each other] as opposed to marrying to [it]...when you find that you're adding too much padding, or the costume is, as they say, wearing *them*, and they're not wearing it. That's when you know you've gone too far.

And so, that aesthetic is continuous. In every fitting, you basically try to honor the female, the male body form, and also create a surface that, whether it be embroidery or a supplemental printing that—especially for *Black Panther*—goes around the muscles that travels around the female form, that honors it in a way so that they can actually wear it and move in it and it works with the being or the soul of the character that they're creating, [that] you're creating together.

So, the body form is actually at the nucleus of all things that work because, you know, if a person puts something on and it's the wrong color, and it makes them look strange or if it enhances their color, that *too* is working with form because the skin, the color of the skin is part of the human form.

And that transcends all projects, everything that you do, that you want to sort of make sure that you're creating...unless it's an art piece you know, some things become wearable art. You know, a person could wear a box, they could wear a triangle, they could wear an oval...but at the same time you have to understand that it's performance art, and so that person is going to move, and they're going to need to walk, or see. And so everything becomes a form of adornment.



W.I.P.

J

Signature

Carolyn: Right, and since *Black Panther* is, I believe, your first action film, and it's your first time making costumes for superheroes...when you have characters like the Dora Milaje who use weapons and part of their costume consists of accessories, did you have to work with the props department to make sure that the costumes didn't interfere with their movement?

Ruth: Yeah, my department became home for everybody. The department was so massive, someone could be in the back, in the mold shop, talking to my mold makers about where the spear was going to be placed so that we could actually mold a piece that would accommodate it. Or, they could be in the workroom looking at how we were going to do the armbands on the Dora, so that when she carries the spear everything would work seamlessly. And we worked together on this project, even though we are separate departments we always have an open door policy, where you can come in and have lunch, just to talk over some of the things that you had to do for particular characters and what they look like, so that when they start designing weapons, we could really work hand in hand.

Carolyn: A large part of film is visual storytelling, and costuming plays a very vital part in that. In some of the films that you've worked on, the costumes became almost as iconic as the characters themselves. An example that I was thinking of was the blue zoot suit worn by Denzel Washington in *Malcolm X*. Now, in *Black Panther*, we have the Dora Milaje, M'Baku, Nakia and even Shuri, we can identify them strictly by their costumes, we know who they are. As a costume designer, how does it make you feel that audiences are connecting with the costumes as much as they're connecting with the characters?

Ruth: You know, I never really even thought that I would be here today like this and [have] people enjoying the costumes like they are an actual character in the film. And I've been told that when my name comes up at certain theaters they applaud and cheer just like they did for some of the actors. And you know, I never like to upstage the actors, I always try to be the person who's quietly there, but for a performance, or a performance piece like this where everyone is very specific, I have to be very specific in the design. I wanted to honor the culture in general so I was always thinking about, you know, royalty and beauty. Let me find the most magnificent purple, let me work really hard to find which green is going to be the best green for Lupita to wear in this scene. It really was a test to my color sense and my sense of drape and costume knowledge.

To find that people have embraced it and can see that I had a lot of passion behind it...I was always told by my mentors that if you put passion behind it, wherever that passion is stemming from, it could even be the passion of a bad day, you know? When you put that kind of intensity behind your work, people feel it, they see it. They see that you brought an extra something to it. They don't know quite what it is, but they can feel it. And I feel that the audiences and the people have seen the majesty and the intent that I had for this piece, and they're responding to it so, so nicely. And it just makes me completely proud, I'm so glad I could deliver. You know like, in the beginning, you're paranoid, you're thinking, can I deliver? And I feel like I delivered for Ryan Coogler, and that's what really meant the most to me.



Carolyn: Another thing about the costumes, I wanted to ask you a question about Shuri. Let me know if I'm reading way too much into this. There are scenes that stand out for me with her costumes, one is the first scene where we see her in the lab with T'Challa, she's wearing the white mesh dress. It's simple, but I'm looking at it and I'm thinking that mesh actually mimics the pattern in the walls and the floor, so I wanted to know: is this intentional, and is it supposed to show us how connected she is to the lab and the technology?

Ruth: Yeah, there's a connection. Since we're all connected and we happen to be very close in proximity to each other, when the lab was being built, I went and viewed it several times with swatches of color, we take pictures and then you go back to your lab, your costume department and you have bolts and bolts of fabric, and you have things that you can choose from. And you really do rely on your subconscious brain when you see things, when you start putting textures together. And you go, "This looks right."

Because, in your subconscious, you do remember [that] this is what you saw, this is what you experienced on the set. You know, sometimes the set isn't finished and you have to look at little pieces at a time, but you're walking through and you see that there's this white, there's this illumination, there's this texture. And so when you're selecting fabrics and textures for the clothing, you have that in your subconscious brain, you really are kind of taking your sense of things, and you're looking at your senses, of things in front of you, and you're marrying them.

That's how you work, there's not always a cut and dry, "I'm going to take A and I'm going to bring it to B and it'll make C" [method]. Sometimes it's, "I feel like this is right. This looks right, this looks good for that scene." And then you kind of build on it.

Carolyn: Yeah. So I know you have to go, so I'm gonna give you my last question. For this year's Black History Month, Xfinity produced a series called **Groundbreakers: Heroes Behind the Mask**. How did you feel to be chosen to be part of this project and involved in it at the time of *Black Panther*? The film, to me, has become part of the African diaspora and our

modern culture because, from now on, when we think of Black History Month in 2018, we're gonna think of *Black Panther*. So what does it feel like to be involved in that project at a time like this?

Ruth: Well I feel like we brought Afrofuturism to the next level. And we can redefine, *we have* redefined Afrofuturism, because we started to create a culture of celebrity, and we were so focused on our Instagram, on what Beyoncé was wearing and how Beyoncé and Jay-Z's life was together and what Diddy was doing, that we were mimicking celebrities as opposed to really understanding [anything]...and, at the same time, losing touch with our culture. And that goes for everybody, not just Black people. I think that we have now been reacquainted with Afrofuturism, and we have re-authored and redefined it.

Afrofuturism now is cultural futurism, which means that no matter what color, what culture you have, you can bring it into the future. You can take your culture and you can really make it cool, you can really honor it and make it real and even wear it as is. I think we've reintroduced the world to embrace culture. And so, that's what Afrofuturism is to me, it's cultural futurism.

Carolyn: It is. I really have to thank you for what you did, it sounds weird, but making Black people in general feel more comfortable wearing African print, and wearing traditional African garb—we've been doing it, but now we are more comfortable doing it. We own it more.

Ruth: They don't have to feel so lost. Yes, they don't have to feel so lost in it. They don't know where it came from, or who wore it, or anything. And now they have...they can actually say it's Wakandan, and it will have a context.

Carolyn: Yeah. You know what, now that you said this I know that in a lot of African cultures and particular tribes, each tribe usually has their own pattern and they have their own colors. Is there a plan for there to be a particular Wakandan print that is all Wakandan? Would it include the hieroglyphs that we saw in the film?

Ruth: Wow, that would be an awesome thing to start developing. I think so. I would be very much interested in some type of embroidery that represented Wakanda. We already have a Wakandan language that they developed, but we haven't developed a design. Like the kente, for instance, is associated with Nigeria, and in the valleys they do these big blankets and the neck rings. It would be really cool to come up with a very intricate woven idea that would identify Wakanda.

The panther suit does have the Okavango, the triangle with the Wakandan language going through it. I would be interested to see how that pattern works out when you lay it flat, and I wonder if it would create a really beautiful place to stem from for that Wakandan pattern. I think that's a brilliant idea.



You can follow Ruth on her Twitter account [@iamRuthECarter](https://twitter.com/iamRuthECarter) and Instagram [@iamruthecarter](https://www.instagram.com/iamruthecarter)

“**Groundbreakers: Heroes Behind the Mask**” will be available to ALL consumers online at [xfinity.com\discovermore](https://www.xfinity.com/discovermore) on January 31st. Xfinity customers can also watch the short on Xfinity on demand in the Black Film & TV destination or on their mobile devices via the Xfinity Stream app. Simply say ‘Black Film & TV’ into your X1 voice remote to access the original short and the full curated collection of TV, Movie and web content.

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