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'Transparent' Costume Designer Talks Maura Pfefferman, Caftans, and More

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By Phoebe Reilly

If you're not already watching *Transparent* (<http://www.amazon.com/Pilot-HD/dp/B00J3MNF6S>), then consider us jealous, because it means you can still look forward to experiencing it for the first time *immediately*. The rest of us have blown through the debut season, which Amazon released Netflix-style on September 26—you have to join their Prime service in order to access it (*Transparent* plus two-day shipping means everybody wins!). The brilliant, honest, hilarious, heartbreaking series was created by writer/director Jill Soloway, whose *Afternoon Delight* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2312890/>) was seriously one of the best movies of 2013, and it stars a bunch of people that you likely already want to be friends with—[Gaby Hoffmann \(http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000451/\)](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000451/), [Sleater-Kinney \(http://www.mtv.com/artists/sleater-kinney/\)](http://www.mtv.com/artists/sleater-kinney/)'s [Carrie Brownstein \(http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1247855/\)](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1247855/), [Katherine Hahn \(http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1063517/\)](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm1063517/). But it's [Jeffrey Tambor \(http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001787/\)](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001787/), whom you probably recognize from *Arrested Development* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0367279/>) and *The Hangover* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt119646/>) and a ton of other stuff, who delivers the performance of his career as Mort Pfefferman, a retired professor transitioning to life as Maura in present-day Los Angeles and struggling to share the news with her children.



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In the first season, Maura’s announcement ripples through the family in waves, and since the Pfefferman kids are already pretty unmoored, we see both how they respond to their parent’s new identity but how they’re also, in her words, “too selfish to see beyond themselves.” In the second episode, Maura’s eldest daughter, Sarah (an excellent [Amy Landecker](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0484541/) (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0484541/>)), asks if this means her father is going to “start dressing up like a lady” all the time now. “No,” Maura responds, without missing a beat. “All my life, I’ve been dressing up like a man.”

It’s a small but precise moment that made us think about lots of things, including the importance of Maura’s wardrobe, which is one of the many details that make *Transparent* so perfect (the soundtrack is also awesome, and the references to Los Angeles are as micro as “the pupusa woman” on the city’s East Side). We asked costume designer [Marie Schley](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0772307/) (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0772307/>) to chat with us about the exciting challenge of creating a closet for someone who is living openly as a woman for the first time in her 70s.

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MTV STYLE: In the pilot, we first see Mort as Maura in this awesome, vintage-looking caftan. Did you put a lot of thought into how best to introduce this aspect of her identity to the audience, and what would be most logical for her to wear?

MARIE SCHLEY: Well, we wanted something that was comfortable but maybe a little bit ambiguous. It's not the big reveal, so we wanted something that might be just a little bit eccentric. You weren't necessarily saying, "Oh, she's transgender" or "She's a woman." It was an androgynous thing that Maura might wear around the house while she's finally being herself in the privacy of her own home. And it was kind of an inspiration for the rest of the season. We put her in a lot of caftans. And it is vintage. I rented it.



Maura’s friend Davina describes her as “a California earth mama.” Is there anyone in particular you were thinking of as an inspiration for Maura to model herself after? I’m definitely getting a Laurel Canyon-in-the-’70s vibe.

That’s totally right on. Everybody looks for different style inspirations and who they want to be, and Jeffrey and I discussed which women Maura would be looking to and feel a kinship to. We talked about Joni Mitchell and Mama Cass. Also, Maura’s not just a transgender person. She has many other elements to her life. She comes from a liberal, intellectual background. She’s a professor. We always thought she’d be well travelled, and she probably went on sabbatical and gathered items from around the world.

Where do you see Maura doing her shopping?

We tried to create those layers of story in her wardrobe. When she was a cross dresser 20 years ago, she would be going to vintage stores, because she would not want to expose herself publicly, so she has had those clothes in her closet for a while. I was also imagining some of these things she has left from her mom. And maybe she’s going to Macy’s once in a while, just dipping her toe in the water, to be out in the world as a woman.

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Maura’s ex-wife, Shelly ([Judith Light \(http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0509937/\)](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0509937/)), is fairly dowdy. Her clothes seem

asexual in contrast to Maura, whose outfits are so colorful and sophisticated. Is that intentional?

Yes, early on in the process, Jill told me she wanted Maura to teach the women in the family about femininity, and specifically Shelly. Shelly's character in many ways had to be the man of the family. In a flashback scene, she says to Mort, "I want you to be a man, I want you to save the day." She was thrust into that role because Maura was always a mother in many ways.

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It looks like we're seeing mostly tunics and loose-fitting shirts on Maura. Is that a temporary style as she transitions, or is that what she prefers?

I think Maura will always wear caftans. Maura is 70 years old and those things are comfortable. Jeffrey would say, "If I have a bad knee, Maura has a bad knee." It's a big adjustment to women's clothing, in general. And also, Maura is OK with herself, and I think that's expressed through her comfort in her clothes.

Did Jeffrey have any input in terms of what he would prefer to wear?

We definitely had fittings and conversations about it. I guided him where he needed to be guided. He had never put a bra on in his life—that kind of thing. But he responded to the flowing materials and the dangling earrings. He had a visceral reaction to those clothes in which he felt feminine, so I tried to give that to him as an actor so that he could draw from that.

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I love the dress and necklace Maura wears to the Shabbat dinner. Do you have a favorite piece of hers?

That's my favorite as well. I bought that months before we even started filming, because it was such an amazing piece. To me it says everything about her earthy, hippie background. The rainbow—it's just beautiful. And the necklace is mah-jongg tiles. I kind of imagined traditional old ladies playing mah-jongg together.

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Her purse, too, pops up in a lot of scenes, and suits her really well.

Jill picked that out for Maura. That was her special thing that she really wanted Maura to have. It set the tone for a lot of what Maura was and is. It's from [Will Leather Goods \(willleathergoods.com\)](http://willleathergoods.com).

When we see a flashback to Mort dressing as Maura back in 1994, with Bradley Whitford as Mark/Marcy, her style is different. Is that just a reflection of the era, or is it because Maura hasn't truly found herself yet?

We wanted it to be period appropriate, and that is stuff she would have gotten at the time. But you know the first thing she says is, "I'm Daphne Sparkles." And that influenced what we were putting her in. If you've been denied expressing yourself as a woman, you get attracted to things that are overtly feminine. In those scenes, she is just beginning to experiment with clothes that she has never been allowed to experiment with, and so she's attracted to the sequins and all the things that men are denied.

For the trans talent contest, who were Maura and Davina channeling?

I mean, we just wanted it to be a really fun costume that they could have found for themselves in a thrift store and embellished. We imagined that they should look really glam in a draggy kind of way and just have fun with the theatrics of it.

One question that is not about Maura, but I have to ask anyway: What’s up with Josh (Jay Duplass) and the buttoned-up shirts?

I don’t know, we kind of just thought it looked cool, and it fit with his character. It felt a little bit more stylish than being open, and it’s a very controlled kind of thing. I feel like his character is not in control, and desperately trying to be in control. His apartment is so clean and white and austere, and I was influenced by that. He’s meticulous, and he likes things just right.

Were you in any way apprehensive about taking on this job and being responsible for playing such a big part in presenting Maura’s identity?

Absolutely. It was very stressful. Being a cis-gender woman, I took a lot of things for granted, and it’s interesting how putting on clothes and wearing clothes are all part of our identity and how we present ourselves to the world. At one point, I talked with Jeffrey about it, and we realized that Maura was just a person like anybody else. The clothes didn’t have to be symbols of anything, and that released us to find her as an individual rather than a concept. This has been an exciting journey. A lot of things happened this season that I did not anticipate in the pilot.

What else happened that you didn’t expect?

One thing that’s interesting is how much Jill plays with gender identity, and flips between things that are typically masculine and typically feminine. We were always playing with that in different characters in subtle ways. For instance, Gaby’s character, Ali, is such a tomboy, but in that one episode she gets dressed up [to be “high-femme”] in a corset, because it’s such a feminine piece of clothing. It’s a restrictive piece of clothing and a fetishized piece of clothing. But it’s symbolic of what it is to be a woman.



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