

Hair, Makeup Mirror Authentic Internal and External Changes in Characters' Arcs

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)



CREDIT: COURTESY OF INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC

Cinematic hair and makeup is often unappreciated as a time-travel device. “I remember when Will [Smith] did ‘Ali,’ or Jamie Foxx did ‘Ray,’” says Stacey Morris, co-head of the hair department on [“Dolemite Is My Name.”](#) “They took you there. Hair, makeup, wardrobe — it all comes together and complements each other. You can imagine being back in time, when it’s successful. If those things are incorrect? They take you right out of the movie.”

Whether contemporary or period, hair and makeup are two of the least-appreciated visual contributions to a movie. Every hairstyle conspires with a complementary makeup application to create not just a look, but to fashion a storyline that audiences can follow from start to finish — even if they never realize the roles those elements play.

In “Dolemite,” Morris (who shared duties with fellow co-department head Carla Farmer) transported audiences to the 1970s, where everything from natural Afros to a wide palette of wigs transformed many people’s heads into works of art. With over 200 wigs in rotation, the hair ranged from synthetic (popular at the time) to expensive, more natural looks, depending on how far along the story arc went and whether it was on stage. One character, Lady Reed, might have two to three wigs on top of one another at a time, for example.

But the key look was in the lead character Rudy Ray Moore, whose hair told the story of his rise to success from record store worker and failed comic to successful moviemaker. “His first wig was big and synthetic and looked hokey — because that’s what he could afford at that time,” says Morris. “When he becomes Dolemite, he gets a better wig. And his last look, at the [movie] premiere, was from sponge rolling his hair and fingering it out, so he looked more polished. As Rudy progressed in life, his hair progressed with him.”

Popular on Variety



With “[Joker](#),” Arthur Fleck also underwent a transformation that altered his appearance, and in this case, his arc from working as a clown for a living to being the title character symbolized his mental state. That meant his makeup had to also shift from something a clown might wear to something sinister, a process makeup department head [Nicki Ledermann](#) spent weeks working on with star Joaquin Phoenix and director Todd Phillips.

The look also had to be something that Phoenix could apply in scenes and Ledermann could fix up or wipe off between shots, so she used a mix of waterproof and water-soluble colors. “The makeup is telling its own story,” she says. “There’s a turning point when things are unleashed [in Arthur], and I call it the resurrection when he turns from Arthur into [Joker](#). That’s a turning point that’s reflected in the makeup: free the madness, you’re not intimidated anymore, and now you’re free to deal with what has been taken from you. It’s a mix of madness, realization and resurrection.”

The hair and makeup departments for “[Hustlers](#)” were particularly well-matched. Department heads [Angel De Angelis](#) (hair) and [Margot Boccia](#) (makeup) have worked together multiple times before. “We have a great shorthand,” says De Angelis. “We can read each other’s faces when we’re having a panic attack.” De Angelis and Boccia focused on two different time periods: before the 2008 crash, when money flowed from Wall Street, and after. “Strippers love makeup and hair,” laughs De Angelis. “Constance [Wu] was like, ‘I want to look good, but like a stripper.’” “A little seasoned and a little tacky,” adds Boccia. “That’s a hard thing to do sometimes. You want to clean it, but we had to be authentic,” says De Angelis.

That meant shifting from different quality wigs before and after the crash, and looking at even the smallest details, like nail shape. “Before the crash, there was more glitter, but after that, the girls were less glamorous and the mood wasn’t as happy,” says Boccia. “They all had flair and fake nails and French manicures before, but later on the nails were oval and not as well kept.”

“You wouldn’t put that much makeup on in a film that wasn’t about strippers,” says De Angelis. “But here it was all about creating an arc, trying to figure out how to bring that person they were playing alive.”

Department head for makeup and makeup effects [Scott Wheeler](#) faced a different sort of before and after in “[Us](#),” where a happy suburban family is confronted by doppelgangers that looked “bad copy” versions of themselves, he says.

That meant coming up with a specific look for the leads, then imagining what characters that looked like them but had lived underground and gone insane might also look like.

For example, father Gabe “has this perfectly trimmed beard and glowing skin,” says Wheeler. “We wanted to make him as good looking as possible without being metrosexual. Cut to Abraham, who has this gruff textured look. We exaggerated his facial features to make him even more uneven.”

In addition, Adelaide looks “fantastic, pristine” when the audience first sees her, but “by the end of the movie, she’s bloody and beaten up and stabbed,” he says. “It represents her physical journey and her spiritual journey back to how she found out who she was. It’s a return to her roots.”

In the end, though, all of the hair and makeup work shouldn’t be something that makes audiences stop and wonder, or admire. It may be time travel, but it’s also supposed to be so subtle as to pass without notice.

“It’s not really about the design,” says Ledermann. “It’s about the reality. Makeup — and hair — has to be organic and simple, and if it’s too complicated and intricate, it’s not realistic. There has to be a middle ground in finding a new, iconic look — that’s also simple enough to balance between performance, character and storytelling. It has to be subtle ... and also make a big statement.”



[LEAVE A REPLY](#)

[ANGEL DE ANGELIS](#)

[DOLEMITE IS MY NAME](#)

[HUSTLERS](#)

[JOKER](#)

[MARGOT BOCCIA](#)

[NICKI LEDERMANN](#)

[SCOTT WHEELER](#)

[US](#)

