

## DRESSING FOR SUCCESS

# James Acheson costumes The Last Emperor and Dangerous Liaisons

BY ADRIANA CAPADOSE

After bringing home the 1989 Oscar for his work on Stephen Frear's *Dangerous Liaisons* and the 1988 award for Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, for which he also won an award from the British Academy, costume designer James Acheson admits that he still knows remarkably little about costumes. Indeed, he originally set out to be a set designer. He studied at the art college in Walthamstow, London, and then the Wimbledon School of Art before changing his plans and applying for a place on a BBC Television costume design course.

It was not until 1978 that he first worked on a film. He was recommended to director Terry Gilliam by colleagues at the BBC who had originally been offered the job by Gilliam themselves. The film in question was *Time Bandits*.

Eleven years later and eighteen years after he began his design career, James Acheson reflected on his most critically-acclaimed works from his home in London.

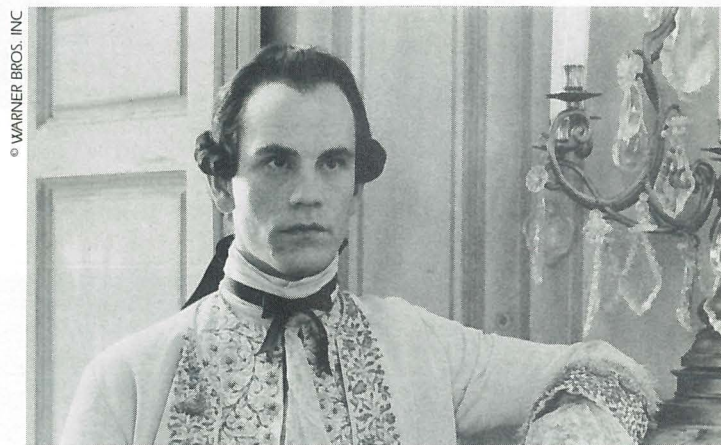
*The Last Emperor* and *Dangerous Liaisons* are a far cry from designing suits of armour for Gilliam's dream sequences in *Time Bandits* and from a background

of films which include Gilliam's *Brazil*, *Flash Gordon*, *Monty Python's Meaning of Life*, *Water* and Russell Mulcahy's *Higlander*.

Acheson is the first one to wonder why Bertolucci ever thought of him for *The Last Emperor* — "How did I get the job? I think everyone else had turned it down. Word on the street was that he'd never get the film made. Bertolucci's first words to me were, 'I'm looking for a costume designer because my last one died.' My reaction was to ask if he'd died of natural causes or overwork! Bertolucci had seen half of *Brazil*, and I was fascinated by how much he'd noticed."

Acheson is very aware that good costume design should go unnoticed. In films set in the present day, if the clothes work, they are unobtrusive, no one leaves the cinema musing over the costumes and they do not win awards. "A lot of one's best work is just there. Costumes should support the film, not smother it. I just happen to have done a couple of rather obvious costume pieces."

Preparing *The Last Emperor* "was a bit like asking a Chinese designer to do the life of Queen Victoria. We had a period of



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extensive research, going to museums in the UK and France, looking at catalogues from Canada, going to the shoe museum in Northampton. After six months we had already made a huge collection of costumes and we knew down to the last hat button what they should look like. You can't do the designing until you've done the research." While Acheson generally prefers to do his own research, during *The Last Emperor*, he had the privilege of working with a professional researcher. It was also during this film that Acheson started working with his current assistant, Frank Gardner.

With 10,000 outfits to build for *The Last Emperor*, Acheson had to come up with some ingenious ways of stretching his £3 million (US \$5 million) budget.

He admits that the fabrics used in the film ran the gamut from pure silks to cheap rayons. "There were these huge scenes with 2,000 extras. We certainly couldn't clad all these extras in silk, so we created a process of photographic silkscreening which looked like authentic