

# [***Why the drag looks in 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert' are still iconic, 30 years on***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1K-TGF1-DY7V-G00F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Sydney, 1994. A dimly-lit bar, wrapped in tinsel curtains and the fragmented, twirling light from a disco ball. Tick Belrose (played by Hugo Weaving) is on stage lip syncing as his [*drag persona*](https://www.cnn.com/style/article/drag-queen-us-history-explainer-cec/index.html#:~:text=The%20first%20'queen%20of%20drag'%20was%20a%20formerly%20enslaved%20person&text=New%20York's%20Harlem%20neighborhood%20is,in%20a%20safe%2C%20creative%20environment.) Mitzi Del Bra; clad in a silver sequin dress with matching gloves and a bouffant blonde wig.

This is the opening scene from "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert", which first screened at Cannes Film Festival 30 years ago this month.

"I made that dress for myself," Tim Chappel, one of the movie's costume designers, told CNN. "The weekend before, I'd gone to the Miss Teen USA beauty pageant as Miss Silicon Valley, because (the dress) had joke plastic boobs inside. Stephan (Elliott, the film's writer and director) was really on my case because I wanted to do lots of obscure stuff (to costume the film ), and he wanted (the principal characters in drag) to look like ladies. So I said we can make him look like a lady and take the piss at the same time, because the boobs are clearly from a party shop. And I'd already made it, so it was cheap!"

In the film, Tick scoops up his freshly widowed friend Bernadette Bassenger (played by Terence Stamp) and flamboyant, fellow drag queen Adam Whitley/ Felicia Jollygoodfellow (actor Guy Pearce) and goes west - both musically and literally - for a road trip across the Outback in their affectionately-christened bus: Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.

"We were just having a laugh!" Chappel said, recalling the film's production. Sydney 30 years ago was at a unique point in time and culture; not yet tethered to the rest of the world via the internet, the somewhat isolated drag scene was able to cultivate its own sprawling visual language for storytelling and sexual ***politics***, beyond the more recognizable female impersonation that Elliott might have initially pushed for.

"It was my first opportunity to really express myself as a designer, and I wasn't going to let anybody stand in my way," Chappel said. "I just really wanted to make (the film's wardrobe) unique and interesting."

Serving looks, on a budget

Film critic Susan Barber, despite calling out the problematic handling of female and non-white characters, dubbed "Priscilla" the "darling" of the Cannes Film Festival after it premiered there in 1994. The film quickly drew attention for its costuming in particular, winning Chappel and fellow designer [*Lizzy Gardiner*](https://www.cnn.com/style/remember-when-lizzy-gardiner-oscars-amex-dress/index.html) an Oscar in 1995.

Among many iconic looks is the flip-flop (or 'thong,' if you're Australian) dress. It was made from shoes Chappel bought for $15 in Target using his mother's staff discount - "which was good," he said, "because that was about three quarters of our budget." Their mandated thriftiness meant that several costumes, "made with hot glue, chicken wire and duct tape", fell apart not long after the cameras stopped rolling. The flip-flop dress survived, though - that was made with cable ties, as well as duct tape.

Two years passed between Chappel first joining the project and its (limited) funding being secured. The time allowed him to play with and re-do ideas, evolving initial plans into their extravagant final form. In one scene, for instance, Tick, Adam and Bernadette put on a fireside performance of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" for a group of First Nations people. Rather than mimic Gaynor's hairstyle directly, however, Chappel spent his elongated preparation time adding an increasing bouquet of flowers to the trio's headpieces, until eventually there was no hair left at all.

"I think that's definitely one of the most iconic looks," drag artist and costumer Philmah Bocks told CNN. Bocks has been designing costumes for 30 years, having broken into the drag scene around the same time "Priscilla" was hitting screens.

"The thong dress is a very iconic piece too, because I think that's very (stereotypically) Australian. And of course the big finale look, with the emus on top of their heads. That's the beauty of 'Priscilla': they've really captured a moment in Australian time and used Australian culture and flora and fauna to create these wonderful pieces."

"The art of drag costuming is the ability to turn drab into fab," she continued. "'Priscilla' showed us a lot of that, because a lot of that type of design work was happening in and around Sydney in the early '90s. There was this sort of explosion of drag costuming that went beyond couture. Of course, queens were also on a budget. You couldn't always afford hundreds or even thousands of dollars to create the most beautiful pieces, but you could kind of get there with stuff we found in a dumpster! It's what you do with it that makes the difference... I've been replicating (Chappel's) costumes for 30 years, so I've got a lot to thank him for!"

Bocks is known for her foam, or 'Phoam', wigs, a look also popularized in "Priscilla" which she's made for London's hit musical "Priscilla the Party!" as well as for Katy Perry on an episode of "American Idol". These creations also follow the "drab to fab" ethos: they're made from materials bought at the hardware store. "I remember buying this product from the hardware store knowing full well that it was going on Katy Perry's head, and that made me laugh a little," Bocks said. "Of course, by the time I'd finished with it, it looked nothing like it had originally."

Spirit of Ecstasy

Perhaps more so than any other costume, the enduring image from "Priscilla" is Adam/ Felicia's opera performance atop the moving bus, decked out in hundreds of meters of flowing silver lame. Its inspiration came from the Rolls Royce "Spirit of Ecstasy" bonnet ornament, though once again the final product went far beyond the script's guidance.

Felicia's windswept aria comes after their bus is scrawled in homophobic graffiti - a reflection of the community's resilience against hate and disaster in real life. "Priscilla" received her standing ovation at Cannes seven months before Australia decriminalized homosexuality at federal level; three years before Tasmania would become the final state to pass similar legislation, and at a time when the AIDS crisis was still at large. Despite that, Chappel remembers the film as coming at a positive turning point: [*new HIV treatments*](https://endinghiv.org.au/blog/hiv-treatment-in-australia-a-brief-history/) were being trialed, replacing toxic doses of the AZT drug that had previously been offered. "All of a sudden there was hope. Out of the blue," he said. "Priscilla", I think, captures that energy of everybody coming back to life."

Stephan Elliott has recently announced that a sequel to "Priscilla" is in the works, with Chappel on board. The newest addition to the empire will join "Priscilla's" musical adaptation, which has toured the globe in Chappel's costumes since 2006. The film's legacy can also be seen in Australia's drag scene today and, since 2021, has been broadcast to new audiences via contestants on "Rupaul's Drag Race Down Under".

"If I get run over by a bus tomorrow," Chappel said, "the last little thought that goes through my head - besides 'ouch' - is going to be 'I've left an impression, that's cool'."

By Caitlin Chatterton, CNN

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