

Costume designer Paolo Nieddu on the set with *Empire* star Terrence Howard



CHUCK HODES

The wardrobe on *Empire* is over the top, and that's by design.

## Dressed to Excess

**Period dramas don't usually spark fashion trends.** Yet so little about Fox's *Empire* is usual. Having wrapped a tumultuous fifth season and been renewed for a sixth, it remains that rarest of shows: a successful musical melodrama.

Flashbacks to the '90s, when Lucious's do-rag was a hip-hop must, instantly place the era and define the characters. It didn't matter that Cookie and Lucious (played by Taraji P. Henson and Terrence Howard) were broke back then — they always had style. And that's courtesy of costume designer Paolo Nieddu, who has been Emmy-nominated for his work on the show four years running.

"It is hip-hop, *Dynasty*, super fashion-y, over the top," he says, sitting in his muted office, where he oversees a wardrobe department of seventeen. "I see it as a comic strip, [Roy] Lichtenstein style."

While fashion-forward outfits reflect the characters, actors must feel right in the clothes. Nieddu shops vintage, online and every price point to dress the cast, including women from size zero to size twenty-four.

Each member of the Lyon clan has a distinct closet. Lucious has a "classicness to him," Nieddu explains. "He's distinguished." Andre's (Trai Byers) look evolved from business suits to prisoner uniforms to casual chic. The constant? The clothes are custom-made, to accommodate Byers's muscles.

Jamal (Jussie Smollett) is "all-American classic," and his outfits repeat the most (at press time Smollett's return to the show had not been confirmed, following his personal legal drama). And youngest brother Hakeem (Bryshere Y. Gray) "is the boy Cookie," Nieddu notes. "There were times I had them both in leopard print. That's her cub."

But there's no denying the appeal of *Empire*'s matriarch. "Cookie has been the most fun for me," Nieddu admits. "Taraji is able to handle it, even if she would never wear it in real life. When I shop for Cookie, I am Cookie."

Nieddu's credits include *Sex and the City*, so his exquisite sense of accessories and shoes is no surprise. As he walks through the cavernous, tightly organized wardrobe department at Cinespace Chicago Film Studios, he reaches for a leopard print dress. It's intentionally cheap, from Forever 21; Cookie wore it in a flashback when she was freed from prison.

He then displays another slinky number, but this leopard print is from Neiman Marcus. Cookie wore it when she strode into the boardroom to assume her rightful throne. She owns her bold style, which others try to copy.

"There's an excessiveness to the hip-hop world," Nieddu observes. "Now when you say, 'She's like Cookie Lyon,' you know what that means."

— Jacqueline Cutler



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