

FROCK TACTICS.

Lies, double-dealing, betrayal...this ain't about politics, honey, it's about getting your clothes down the Oscars red carpet.

It was a month before the Oscars last year and Hollywood stylist Phillip Bloch was standing in the LA showroom of a major European designer sizing up dresses. The designer will go unnamed because Bloch has no intention of ending up in a Los Angeles courtroom facing a defamation suit, but suffice to say, it's a serious couture house.

And at that moment, the house was also very serious about getting its gowns onto the perfectly sculpted bodies of actresses who would walk the red carpet. So Bloch, who was dressing Best Actress nominee Halle Berry and supermodel Carolyn Murphy, was, unsurprisingly, being feted and courted like royalty.

And then it happened. The tone of the conversation shifted, and the dirty pool that Bloch has come to know and loathe, was suddenly being played. "They were showing me a dress another model was interested in. I told them I thought it might be suitable for Carolyn. They said no way, the dress was promised to the model. But, they said, if Halle wants it, of course, she can have it. They were willing to totally screw the model if Halle wanted the dress. And this goes on all over town. Designers will dump you if they think a bigger star will wear their clothes."

If you thought politics was a dirty business, you haven't been in Hollywood at Oscar time, where the fashion wars have become as ruthless as anything you see in Canberra. Lies. Double dealing. Hoarding. Payola. With so much at stake in terms of publicity and prestige, getting a dress on the red carpet has now become a bigger competition than the Oscars itself. Or, as Kate Winslet put it after she was nominated for an Oscar: "From now on, it's all about the frock."

"Without question, the Oscars are the biggest night in fashion," says *Variety* fashion journalist Diane Clehane, who has covered the red carpet for nine years. "One billion people watch, which amounts to millions in branding and free publicity. So every year more designers want in, and will do anything to get in." Ironic when you think that only a decade ago, most nominees bought gowns for the big night themselves. Giorgio Armani was the only designer who had forged relationships with stars, notably Jodie Foster and Michelle Pfeiffer.

"Most actresses just dressed themselves, they weren't approached by designers. And if a nominee did work with a design house, it was unusual," says Tom Julian, fashion commentator for Oscar.com.

"I remember in 1995 journalists asked Uma Thurman what she would be wearing and she said softly, 'Prada.' And they turned to each other and said, 'What did she say?' 'Product?' Nobody knew who Prada was, or what it meant. That was so telling of that world at that time. Designers hadn't begun their full-on assault of the Oscars."



But once designers saw the effect of Thurman's lilac gown on Prada's sales and name recognition, the ground war began. "The same thing happened to Randolph Duke after he put Hilary Swank in her dress in 2000," says Clehane, "instant global recognition that boosts sales and stamps your label with a fairytale prestige money can't buy." In fact, Valentino has said the pay-off from Julia Roberts wearing his vintage gown when she won an Oscar for *Erin Brockovich* was at least US\$25 million in free publicity. Chanel estimates Jennifer Lopez in grey chiffon two years ago netted the equivalent of US\$7 million in advertising.

"Two years ago, few people knew who Elie Saab was," says Tom Julian. "Since dressing Halle Berry last year, his name now comes up regularly as a designer to consider when dressing a star. That is all the result of the Oscars."

As fashion stylists are the key conduit to a star, designers today single them out for special and often lavish attention. And every year, says Bloch, who has dressed Berry, Salma Hayek and Sandra Bullock among others, the lovefest seems to begin earlier and earlier. "They now start coming to me in November. People aren't even nominated! It's crazy. But they want to show me look books, or tell me they will design something special for one of my clients."

Once the nominees are announced, Hollywood stylist Jessica Paster, who dresses Cate Blanchett, Kim Basinger, Naomi Watts and Hilary Swank, says she is so overwhelmed with offers of free clothes, shoes, and jewellery for her clients she feels like she is being shelled. "It gets crazy. Phone calls, faxes, flowers, the works. I think after the nominees are announced it's my job to be respectful and look at all designers' offerings. But, of course, the final decision is always the client's." But design houses like to better their chances, which is why stylists are not the only ones approached. "It's so dog-eat-dog, they will try every which way to get to the celebrity, even though they have a stylist. I have had situations where they went to an actress's aunt with a look book," says Paster.

Yet dresses, shoes and bags gratis are not the only items on offer at Oscar time. To guarantee a star wears a dress or shoe, rumours suggest

design houses take stylists on Concorde to view collections, 50 per cent discounts for life, free wardrobes and — yes — cold, hard cash.

"I don't need a wardrobe to put a dress on someone and I don't want it," says Paster of the practice. "In fact, if I was an actress and my handlers were getting free things before any award show, I would question their integrity."

But let's not single out designers for bad behavior. There are plenty of suggestions the stars also like to play hardball. "I have heard actresses tell designers, 'Dress me only, or forget it'," says Julian. "Or, 'I will wear you if I get certain things from you.' And some designers buckle. And, yes, some do provide payola to an actress to get their clothes on the red carpet."

And then there is the actress (who will remain nameless) who is famous for calling in 10 dresses to ensure no other actress will be able to wear them. "She holds the dresses, leaving the designer with nothing to offer anyone else," says Clehane. "Actresses can be very cunning when it comes to the Oscars. They don't just want to look good, they want everyone else to look mediocre."

And there are some actresses, says Bloch, who are so intent on wearing a hot label, they don't stop to think it might not be the right look for the occasion. Cases in point: Jennifer Connelly last year in Balenciaga (the dress was not red carpet) and Gwyneth Paltrow in McQueen. Paltrow's Goth-goes-to-the-Oscars look was met with wide disdain. "I always tell women, 'You have to wear the dress, the label can't wear you.'"

Jessica Paster says the one thing she does ask is for a little exclusivity. "I would never tell a designer, 'Dress my client and nobody else.' But if I am dressing someone nominated in the Best Actress category, I don't want the other nominees in the same label. They understand that. If everyone is in the same designer, it doesn't make it special anymore."

Yet while fashion houses offer all kinds of prizes and lures to stars and stylists, there is actually one huge landmine they must carefully step around. Saying no to an actress who wants to wear them.

"Designers have an idea who they want to dress, who fits their image," says Clehane. "Everybody wants the dewy, glowing twentysomethings and the chic thirtysomethings. There is only a handful of women over 40 they want to dress."

But they don't tell Actress X she is too fat/short/busty/tacky for their wares when she calls. Rather, they say a particular dress has already been promised to another actress (even if it hasn't) or they are only dressing one or two stars that year. "Sometimes they say the dress has been called in by a magazine for a photo shoot," adds Bloch.

And what if two big stars have their mind made up about the same dress? Bloch says it's usually the stylist who has the best relationship with a designer who wins. "Two years ago for the Golden Globes, Kim Cattrall, Jennifer Lopez and Sandra Bullock all called in a purple Valentino dress. I put first dibs on it and I got it for Kim. It's a lot about forging a strong relationship with the designer."

Ironically, while designers are killing themselves in Europe and America to be part of the Oscar hoopla (Donatella is rumoured to be the most aggressive), Australia's Collette Dinnigan couldn't be more laid-back.

"I am not one who pushes and tries to get my dresses on people," says Dinnigan. "It's just not my way. I would be embarrassed to push myself." But Dinnigan's dresses did appear at the Oscars last year, on Sarah O'Hare, Helena Christensen and Oscar-winner Catherine Martin. Only she did not pursue them. "They came to me. I was so flattered. And when CM asked me to make her dress, I was so honoured."

That doesn't mean, however, that after the nominations come out, Dinnigan was not contacted by stylists in LA. "We do get calls after nominations. People want look books or videos of the shows." Yet she says she is totally uninterested in entering the great fashion smackdown that envelopes LA every March. "I don't like games. I've had people ditching other dresses to wear mine, and I think that's terrible."

Philip Bloch says he hates the way the Oscars bring out the worst in people, considering it's such an exciting time. "People have to get perspective. At the end of the day, it's just a dress." ■