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The Divine Mrs. Cumberbatch

From unicorns to *Anna Karenina*, director Sophie Hunter shares her inspirations for the dress she picked to wear as Benedict's bride. By Hamish Bowles.

Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

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It is the day before Valentino's spring 2015 haute couture show, and in the house's regal Parisian outpost on the Place Vendôme, dozens of waiflike girls are still waiting to be fitted. Meanwhile, a battalion of seamstresses brought from Rome are putting the finishing touches to the extraordinary creations (derived from Russian folk costumes and Chagall's whimsical paintings) summoned from the imaginations of designers Pierpaolo Piccioli and Maria Grazia Chiuri. Annie Leibovitz is running late, having caught the last plane from New York before snowstorm Juno closed all the airports in the Northeast. The atmosphere should be chaotic, but instead it is almost preternaturally calm.

Annie is here to photograph the director (and sometime actress) Sophie Hunter, an intelligent beauty with credentials as patrician as her fine-boned Gainsborough looks (her grandfather was aide-de-camp general to the queen). Sophie is currently developing a production of Britten's *Turn of the Screw* with the Aldeburgh Festival, and his *Phaedra* for the annual Beckett festival in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, but her biggest current project may well be her wedding. In less than three weeks, Sophie is to walk down the aisle of a wildly romantic twelfth-century English village church to wed the similarly fine-boned, forget-me-not-blue–eyed Benedict Cumberbatch, Academy Award–nominated star of *The Imitation Game,* distinguished stage actor, and wry embodier of Sherlock Holmes. "You seem to have your head on straight," Annie tells Sophie approvingly. "You seem very grounded."

"When two people meet and it's the right combination, it does ground you suddenly," says Sophie, who appeared on-screen with her future husband in the 2009 movie *Burlesque Fairytales* but has known him for seventeen years.

Sophie is also expecting the couple's first child, which has guided both the design of her Valentino couture wedding dress and her choices for the red carpet, where she has handled a newfound spotlight with cool aplomb.

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Mothers to be, from Angelina Jolie to Emily Blunt, Kate Winslet, and, recently (and triumphantly), Blake Lively, have been widely commended for their frank celebration of what was once considered an "interesting condition" that required an expectant mother to virtually disappear from public view. Sophie's approach is subtler. There is a discernible baby bump, but she has limbs like a champion whippet. The austere, gently A-line black dress that Margiela's John Galliano designed for her to wear to the BAFTAs, and the scarlet column that Lanvin's Alber Elbaz made her for the Academy Awards, were both deliberately sleeveless, to draw attention to her elegant arms and acknowledge but not emphasize her pregnancy.

Valentino's couture house works with about 25 brides a year and generally requires six months to produce a gown. Sophie's ensemble was raced through in three months. For her first meeting with the designers in Rome, she spent three hours reviewing her ideas and discussing their process, "which was in itself very inspiring," she says. "From the directorial point of view, I see opera in it, I see art, I see theater. There's a narrative of the individual and the occasion and the setting that is utterly unique."

She showed Chiuri and Piccioli images of the church and the Daphne du Maurier landscape where she planned to wed, and her elaborate mood board, which included details of William Morris designs of scrolling flowers and foliage (a motif picked up in the marine-blue wedding invitation); Klimt landscapes; the playful watercolors of William Blake; *The Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries at the Cloisters, and Cecil Beaton's romantic image of Lady Lucinda Lambton at her 1965 wedding, an Anna Karenina in white ermine and velvet swathed in tulle.

The designers decided on a high-waisted medieval gown with high neck and long sleeves. For Sophie, it evokes the lines of the dress in Jan van Eyck's sublime 1434 *Arnolfini Portrait*, in which the merchant's presumed bride holds the folds of her robe to drape over her stomach, artfully suggesting her future fertility. They

future fertility. They looked at fabrics and a variety of lace, from fragile cotton to cobweb Chantilly. Piccioli felt "something more medieval and austere was more fitting," and produced a stiff metallic lace of a light silvery hue worked with appropriately fecund motifs of vines and pomegranates developed from an antique fragment. A nineteenth-century loom in Switzerland was specially adapted to replicate it accurately. "It seemed to encapsulate everything I'd been speaking about," says Sophie of the design. "It feels very much of nature, and it's so detailed and extraordinary that I'm still trying to get my head around how beautiful it is."

As a practical guard against England's weather, a monastic cape of silk velvet was added in the exquisite pale gray of a misty seascape—the view, in fact, from the church itself.

"I find you very much like a fairy tale," says Chiuri, admiring the effect of dress and cape during the fitting as the seamstresses fuss at the hem to accommodate the height of the custom Manolo Blahnik shoes. "Like Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast.*" Just as well Benedict isn't here, but Sophie does indeed look as though she should be tending a milk-white unicorn.

The bride originally planned to wear her 200-year-old family wedding veil but felt "it was just not right at all. It's very ornate." In the end, the simplest silk tulle was appliquéd with elements of the dress's lace. Sophie's "something blue" was the fragile sapphire Tiffany engagement ring that Benedict, to her delight, picked out himself; it looks convincingly eighteenth century. "It has that delicacy," she notes. "It's certainly not 'in your face.' " Sophie's brother Sam Hunter, an award-winning jewelry designer, was entrusted with making the wedding bands.

The stage was set for Sophie to arrive at the church on a rain-swept Valentine's Day bearing an untamed bouquet of jasmine, trailed by her five bridesmaids and three pages, also dressed by Valentino, the girls in pale tea-stained lace dresses, and the boys in little capes like so many tin soldiers. To complement the rustic woodland decor Sophie envisaged, Valentino designed fragile tendrils of sparkling paste to thread like ivy as a bandeau and anchor her hair, caught in a romantically disheveled chignon to emphasize her swanlike neck. And then there was the dress, resonant with memories of those hours spent witnessing the miracle of the haute couture in the ateliers of Rome and Paris. "Watching it evolve, I now have a concept of how many people made it and worked on its history," Sophie says. "It's humbling, actually."

For her day of days, all was orchestrated to perfection. And most important of all, the bride herself, says her uncle and wedding maestro Nicholas Drake, "looked glorious." □