

# AVENUE THEMISFIT

A slew of new books explores Marilyn Monroe's style legacy, 50 years after her death  
By *Nathalie Atkinson*

Between Michelle Williams and *Smash*, NBC's backstage musical TV show, you can't escape Marilyn Monroe. Particularly this week, when Sunday marks the 50th anniversary of the star's death, at 36, of a barbiturate overdose. Accordingly, there are a slew of new coffee-table tomes and books, including Adam Braver's novel *Misfit* (Tin House, \$18.50), which elides fact and fiction in the last weekend of Monroe's life, spent at Frank Sinatra's Lake Tahoe resort.

Conspiracy theories still abound, but for those who like it haute, Christopher Nickens and George Zeno looked into the vixen's closet, not affairs, for their exhaustive *Marilyn in Fashion* (Perseus, \$34.50). It follows Monroe's style influences as they alternate from

bookish to elegantly sexy to bodacious bombshell.

For example, Academy Award-winning costumer Charles LeMaire may have buttoned Monroe up to the neck in a forgettable frumpy brown suit for her 1954 wedding to Joe DiMaggio, but an earlier movie costume choice he made helped shape her iconic image. LeMaire draped Monroe in white ermine for her scene in 1950's *All About Eve* and the accessorizing stuck; she used mink stoles and satin wraps as vampy props later on, both onscreen and off.

*Marilyn in Fashion* also looks at the designers behind Monroe's wardrobe choices — costumers such as Norman Norell and Jax and Jean Louis, who created the “JFK dress,” the infamous clingy rhinestone-studded nude slip. (It cost her US\$5,000 and sold at Christies auction in 1999 for US\$1,267,500.) There are other studio costumers in the mix, too, such as Orry-Kelly, Dorothy Jeakins and William Travilla. The latter is the subject of his own new book, *Dressing Marilyn* (Applause Books, \$29.99). Andrew Hansford, manager of Travilla's archives, shows sketches, rare costume test shots and

patterns, including the billowing white halter dress of *The Seven Year Itch*, immortalized thanks to a well-placed subway grate.

As much as the slinking in white mink or the rustle of a taffeta gown tied in a girlish pink bow, the images of Monroe in casual tomboy style are memorable: her demure sweater-girl poses between takes while filming *River of No Return* in Banff; frolicking on the chilly Santa Monica beach swaddled in a bulky Mexican cardigan; the oversized Aran she wore to sing in *Let's Make Love*.

*Marilyn & Me* (Taschen, \$1,000), Lawrence Schiller's new photographic memoir, captures some of these later, poignant and often unguarded images behind the scenes, as Monroe's makeup artist fluffs her coif or she gleefully celebrates her last birthday, wearing an au courant Op-Art-patterned Jax outfit.

Although as Schiller's gatefold photograph of the blonde Venus emerging from a swimming pool shows, her incandescence was innate — the wardrobe was just window dressing.

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