



## Rants and Randomness with Luvvie Ajayi

Learn the Craft (with Ruth E. Carter) - Episode 30

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Yo, my peoples. Welcome to Rants & Randomness. I'm Luvvie Ajayi, your side-eye sorceress, and this is my podcast where I'm talking about the things I'm loving, the things that I'm judging, and having great conversation with really, really great people. I'm here at the Chicago Recording Company bringing y'all the radio voice as always.

On this episode, I'm feeling good about Myleik Teele's [MyTaughtYou Retreat](#). I'm ranting about how it's important for us to work just as hard for black women and our friends; and I'm spotlighting the [Do Better Academy](#), which is my online school where I teach people how to do better in professional and business ways. My interview is with [Ruth Carter](#), costume designer extraordinaire, legendary costume designer. So let's jump in. It's going to be a good episode.

### Feel Good

[00:00:48]

Yo, I'm feeling so good about the all the Noir pixie dust goodness that I was sprinkled in, and sprinkled on by my fellow boss sisters at my Myleik's [MyTaughtYou Retreat](#) in Cancun, Mexico. Yo, it was popping. So, [Myleik Teele](#) is the founder of a company called [Curl Box](#). The subscription company that makes sure they send products to help black women's hair every month. So, [Myleik was also the second guest ever on Rants and Randomness](#). She's a good friend of mine. And last year she started doing this retreat to create a luxury event and luxury experience for black women. They don't have to be bloggers. They don't have to be influencers. They don't have to work for themselves. Just black women who have something of value to bring into a room.

And it is bar none. It is bar none in terms of the events that I've gone to. I go to many events every year, like both luxury and non-luxury. And I have to say that Myleik's retreat, there is not one like it because there's very few spaces that allow black women to revel in really, really nice things. We typically not in these spaces. We're typically not given access to the spaces where there is luxury. So, for her to curate this space is so important. And she hired [the Vanity Group](#), [Karleen Roy](#) and her amazing team. [Karleen was also a guest on my podcast, episode 24, to do it](#). And what Karleen specializes in is making dreams come true.

What's amazing about the retreat is that the women there all come really open to learn, to empower each other, to be inspired, to have a good time. And over the weekend what we did was there was like a boat party with Myleik's name on it. Talk about a flex, okay? We just had a good time. [DJ Olivia Dope](#)

gave us some good music and it also happened to be a celebration of Myleik's 40th birthday. [The retreat](#), I posted about it all over Instagram. You can go to [my Instagram page](#), you'll see it under highlights MTY Retreat. And I think it's really important for us to amplify things like that because I wanted people to see what it was like when you gave yourself permission to have nice things, even if only for four days. Because I was a speaker, I ended up staying in a villa. And let me tell you, that villa was sick. I've never stayed in a villa before in my life. I had my own private pool. I had an outside shower, which I used seven times because I was just like, "This is the bomb."

And we just had one of those spots where it was like I was constantly thankful that I was there because something that'd done had put me in that room. So, yeah, it was just an amazing time. And we talked about squading up, about the Black girl mafia, about the importance of what happens when boss Black women, women who are powerful get together and show that we can absolutely rock with each other without problem. And one point that I wanted to make was that a lot of people are like, "Oh my God. I want to be a part of y'all's squad." And I think it's really important that people understand that don't try to be a part of our squad. Build the squad with the people who are next to you. I've known Myleik for seven years. Another squad member, [Yvonne Orji](#), I've known her for seven years. And the reason why we can rock with each other now is because we remember when the grinding come, with no accolades and money. I mean, we were just working hard because we knew we had a vision and a mission and we was going to just see what happens.

Squad up with the people next to you so y'all can all roll up together. And then, you can form your fire squad. Yeah, man. And by the way, one of the mornings, [Sarah Jakes Roberts](#), actually opened it with a sunrise prayer as we all stood on the beach in all white. It recharged my spirit. It affirmed my soul. It was one of those things that I needed more than I even realized I needed. It was one of those experiences that let me know that I don't have to wait once a year to do really nice things for myself. And it also triggers my need to chase joy. This is the second [MTY Retreat](#) and like I said, while I was on stage there it makes me pause and say, "You know what? Life is more than the work. Life is also really about the play." And if we can play with the people we love, that's even better.

So, for all who were asking how to get more information on Milek's retreat, go to the website. It's [MTYRetreat.com](#). Apply and hopefully you'll be there next year and just, look at people's Insta Stories about it. Look at the [hashtag MTY Retreat](#). And soak up some of the joy that we experienced there. So, yeah, I'm feeling good about that.

## Rant

[00:05:51]

Now, my rant this week is related to the [MTY Retreat](#) in that a big topic there was about how important it is to work just as hard for our friends, or for young people, or for black women who are our bosses. This is important because one thing that a big narrative, and a big idea that people don't realize they have is that when they have a boss who's a black woman, they really don't show up as they should, even if they're black themselves. Oftentimes we also hold unconscious bias, even about our people. So, a lot of us have experienced hiring people who talk a good game, and then, on the job you can tell they only bring their half game. And they'll show up late and not hold themselves accountable.

They'll just do sloppy work and not worry about the fact that they do sloppy work. They're perfectly fine with it.

But those same people will work for white men and white women and show up correct. Or if they make mistakes they instantly press to fix it. Karleen was the event producer for Myleik's Retreat and she made this point that I loved. She said, "Friends or not, when someone gives you the opportunity to work, you stick to your word. You show up and you kill that shit. Let's stop the narrative that it is acceptable to be less professional when working with friends, a black owned business, a young CEO or women alike. We don't deserve less and we are stronger and more powerful as a unit."

This is clutch, y'all. As somebody who's a black woman, who is young and who's been running her own company. I know I've dealt with people who've just showed up in awful ways. And I always wonder, "Will they do this if I was not young, black or female?" We take people who are familiar to us for granted in business. So, we show up all half ass. You are absolutely disrespecting the person who is paying you for your job. If you are just being an employee who does not live up to regular standards of business. And we have to look around and check ourselves when we are working for anybody. Clients, friends, black women. I've had friends work with me and who showed up real sloppy or they dropped major balls and felt no qualms about it. And in those moments I'm always like, "If I'm your friend, you should actually want to come even more correct because you should have even more respect and you should even want to root for me even more."

So, ultimately, it's huge. It's huge and a lot of us insist on hiring other black people. So, if we're finding that people are showing up not correct for us, as we're actively trying to do stuff for the culture, it's disappointing. And it makes it harder for us to build these Noir pixie-dust businesses if we constantly come across this type of behavior. Myleik even said, "How are you going to have our black girl mafia if you don't even respect your CEO who's paying you to do your job?" And that's real. We got to show up for each other. If you have a friend that you're working with that does not mean you are giving her half of what she should get. It does not mean you're not giving her a contract for your services. It does not mean that you can skip your regular processes and just be sloppy. Yo, do better. Do not take for granted whoever it paying you for your job. It does not matter if they're 24. It doesn't matter if they're black. It doesn't matter if they're a woman. Do better for everybody because if you're going to show up for the white person in this way, why are you not showing up for your skin folk in this way?

In fact, show up even better than you would. So, yeah, let's do better y'all.

## Randomness Spotlight

[00:09:53]

Yo, my spotlight this week [the Do Better Academy](#). It is something I am really, really excited about. And it is my new venture. For years, I have been passionate about teaching people the things that I know. I've been a digital strategist for the last 10 years and I have been a speaker for the last nine years. And one of my gifts is my ability to relay big information in understandable bites to people in ways that allows them to connect. And as a speaker, I've gotten a chance to do some really amazing things. The

biggest thing I'll say probably is one of my Ted Talks. [My official Ted Talk, Getting Comfortable With Being Uncomfortable, which now has four million views.](#)

Now, I've been thinking about this for such a long time and I finally decided to make this happen. Because I feel like now is the time for people to understand that we have to be constant student. Constant students in this world. As a speaker, as a strategist, anything that I do, I always strive to get better. But not just that, I want to pass on information that I know to people so they can also find ways to make their dreams come true.

So, the [Do Better Academy](#) is a school that I'm launching, an online school that you can take from anywhere in the world that teaches people business development and career things, and concrete takeaways that they can use starting today to better their professional lives. And the first class that I'm actually teaching for the [Do Better Academy](#) is one on public speaking. It's a [public speaking master class](#) where I'm going to teach people how to essentially write the talks that allow them to charge a lot of money. Because me being a black girl who has built this career without any formal training, and I can command five figures for the jobs that I do, for the keynotes that I give. It's because I've gotten really good at just public speaking. And just getting people information that hits and that's useful, that's valuable to them.

So, I'm spotlighting this to y'all because I really think you would love to be a part of this. It's going to be really valuable. Join the waiting list for the Do Better Academy at [DoBetterAcademy.com](#). Go there, sign up. If you're on the waiting list you're going to get the first dibs to the courses in the [Do Better Academy](#), including this public speaking course. Because I'm going to be limiting student enrollment. I want to make sure, especially with this first group of students that I have, that I'm able to pay a lot of attention to you, that I'm able to engage with you. And you'll be able to get feedback from me, from other students in the [Do Better Academy](#). So, join the waiting list. [DoBetterAcademy.com](#). It's been a long time coming and I'm so excited that it's finally here. Let's do it, let's... I want to help more people in these rooms, like we often see classes from white men about how to become a speaker. But how does a black girl do it? A black girl who actually didn't have formal training and now, speaks all over the world. I just got back from Barcelona, Spain. I was in Dublin in March.

So, yeah, join the Do Better Academy and I hope to see you in there. And come get this dope information. [DoBetterAcademy.com](#).

## Interview with Ruth E. Carter

[00:13:07]

Luvvie: Ruth, this is Luvvie.

Ruth: Hi Luvvie, how are you?

Luvvie: I'm doing well. So, first, I'll give people your bio because they know that you're epic, but you're super, super epic. [Ruth E. Carter's](#) unparalleled ability to develop an authentic story through costume and character has made her one of the most sought after and

renowned costume designers today. She's the 2019 Academy Award winner for best costume design for her work on [Black Panther](#). Making history as the first African American to win in that category. She's also garnered two additional Academy Award nominations for [Spike Lee's, Malcolm X](#). And [Steven Spielberg's, Amistad](#), as well as an Emmy Nomination for 2016 for the reboot of [Roots](#), which was amazing.

Luvvie: She's worked in the industry for over three decades and has been created with over 40 films and counting. Collaborated with [Spike Lee](#) on over 10 films. Ruth, you received the Career Achievement Award in excellence in scifi fantasy film from the Costume Designer's Guild. And the Critics Choice Award for best costume design. Thank you for being on Rants and Randomness. You are amazing.

Ruth: Oh, thank you. My pleasure to be here.

Luvvie: Oh my goodness. So, first I like to start by asking my guests, what did you want to be or do when you were growing up?

Ruth: Actually I wanted to be a dermatologist. I spent a lot of time steaming my face in the sink in the bathroom. And sort of going through my Mademoiselle Magazine and learning all those tips of keeping your face clean. And I just loved it. So, my first thought was, "I'm going to be a dermatologist."

Luvvie: And how old were you then?

Ruth: Oh, I was probably 12, 13. But I remember that well. I perfected how to do a deep cleaning and... From there, I thought, because I'd been doing a lot of summer programs at IB Arts, I grew up in the inner city of Springfield, Mass and there were lots of college programs, [inaudible 00:15:09] and Upward Bound. And I was a member of both of those programs. And they had black arts, they had African drumming, folk and word, which we just called it poetry reading. And I loved doing the folk and word. I loved the African dance and drumming.

Ruth: So, I then realized that I loved performing so much I wanted to be an actress. But I felt that it wasn't an actual profession. I felt like you had to pick doctor, lawyer, teacher, dentist, kind of a thing. And so, when I went to Hampton University I majored in elementary education with a specialty in special ed. That just came out of nowhere-

Luvvie: Wait, so you went from I want to be a dermatologist, to then actress and then, you went to teacher, essentially.

Ruth: Yeah, to teaching. Well, I came from a legacy of teachers. My aunts, and my great aunts were all teachers in the south. That's part of our history and our legacy as African Americans. We had to open the schools and teach the children when others wouldn't

educate us. We educated our own. So, because of that family legacy that I had, I decided to follow my mom's dream to study education.

Luvvie: And how did that go? Did you end up getting your degree in education?

Ruth: No, that didn't go that well. I found out early on that I was still in love with theater. Even at Hampton I would audition and hang out with all the other theater students. So, about halfway through college my junior year I changed my major to speech and drama is what it was called but it's theater arts.

Luvvie: Did you have the feeling that that was going to be the right thing for you or you were just like, "I'll just try it"?

Ruth: Oh, it was the right thing. I had a lot of instructors that encouraged me, that felt that I had talent, that cast me. And I was Banetha in Raisin in the Sun. I was Alberta in Sight of the Blind Pig. I landed the parts and I loved it. And I dedicated myself to studying my lines before everyone else. And really giving it my full on attention. And then, there was a play that I actually didn't make the audition for and the instructor asked me if I wanted to do the costumes for it.

Luvvie: And what play? Do you remember what play that was?

Ruth: Yeah, it was Moultyer, The Would Be Gentleman.

Luvvie: So-

Ruth: It was a Moultyer piece.

Luvvie: Ah. All right, so you had to do the costume for it. What was the learning curve?

Ruth: The learning curve was, well I went to the library, way back when when we could go to the library to research. And I got a book on costume design and it kind of went through the steps. So, I had dabbled in sewing in my room as a kid. I had an old sewing machine in my bedroom that was kind of like my desk. It was a little console type of a machine where you opened it up and you crank the sewing machine up. And it became this whole moment.

Ruth: So, I taught myself how to sew and I knew that. So, I just didn't know the other parts. And what I discovered was, through my library book, that I had to illustrate the characters. So, I started to do that. And I also drew as a kid. I had brothers that are artists, well older brother who's a fine artist. And my closest brother to my age and I, we always drew all kinds of characters and we just had fun drawing. And so, I was actually able to design the costumes like in a real pure way of textbook style. Draw the characters, and then create what you have drawn.

Luvvie: It's almost like you already had all the tools to be this person.

Ruth: Yeah. It was crazy. That's what I say, this is like a sum of all of my parts. And even the teaching part, I feel like, is. The education part has helped me in that I learned how to research, I learned about people, how to communicate with people. I mean, that's what teachers do.

Luvvie: So, when you graduated from college, how did you then get your first gig? What was your first job?

Ruth: When I graduated from college I was a little afraid because I had taught myself costumes designs my last two years. I didn't really have an instructor that was an expert at costume design. I really didn't have a mentor that could say, "This costume design is correct."

Luvvie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ruth: So, I sought out internships and I knew in theater they have pretty intense internships out around the country. And there was one that happened to be in my hometown of Springfield, Mass. And I applied for it and I got it. And it was a brand new theater in my hometown, and they rented out apartments across the street from the theater that were also brand new. I mean, the downtown area had gone through a reconstruction or an upgrade. So, these apartments that they rented for the casts were also extended to the interns. And we doubled up in an apartment. So, we had free housing. I applied for food stamps, and so I had free food. And I didn't have to actually take an outside job. Plus, I was in my hometown. So, I could drive to my mom's house and get my laundry done if I needed to.

Luvvie: Right.

Ruth: Or get a meal. So, it was a pretty great internship, that I had my own apartment, downtown. It was in a nice, new area and I had an awesome internship. And that internship led me to a second one where I wanted to intern at one of the best internships in the country at the [Santa Fe Opera](#) in New Mexico. And the only way that you can be received there is my recommendation. And it just so happened that a woman who I was working for had been there and she recommended me to go by sending a letter. And I was accepted and I went to AAA and got a trip tick, which I don't think people know what that is. But it's like a map that they give you and it outlines your driving path.

Ruth: For me, it was from Massachusetts to New Mexico. So, it was a pretty long drive. But I got in my Volkswagen Rabbit and I drove across country. And landed at the Santa Fe Opera and did another internship there.

Luvvie: Wow. And through all this, did your mom support your dream or was she like, "Hey, what are you up to?"

Ruth: She supported me. She didn't understand what costume design was. I remember her attending one of the plays that I was involved with in my hometown and because I was an intern you had to do all of the grunt work. So, after the play she was kind of waiting on me and she was sitting in the costume shop while I was collecting the laundry from the dressing rooms and sorting it and putting it in the washer. And I remember she said, "You mean to tell me, you went to four years of college to come back home and do laundry?" And I was like, "This is not laundry mother. These are costumes!"

Ruth: But eventually, she began to understand my part. And she was always very supportive of me, always very loving towards me.

Luvvie: So, seems that every job that you got begot another job. What did you think made you stand out? Why were you essentially the person who somebody was like, "You know what? I have something else for you."

Ruth: I think there weren't very many black girls. I was that black girl that was doing costume. And even at Hampton it was nobody else really doing costume. So, I was very popular on campus as the costume designer. And as I went from place to place I still was the only black girl doing costumes. And I think that's kind of what made I guess the focus come upon me. And then, there is the art that I was able to express. Whenever there was a special project being some kind of bead work or anything that required some artistic abilities I was the first to volunteer. I loved it and could focus on it and I think that others may have seen that.

Luvvie: I mean, it's clear that you stand out in the work that you do and your first film doing costume design for was [School Days](#), correct?

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: By Spike Lee?

Ruth: Yes.

Luvvie: How did you meet Spike Lee? How did that opportunity come about?

Ruth: Well, Spike was a friend of my dear friend, [Robi Reed](#), here in Los Angeles. And I had moved to Los Angeles and had a studio apartment in Korea Town. And I was working at the Los Angeles Theater Center. I wasn't making a lot but I still loved what I was doing, so I was there every day. And Robi and I had went to Hampton together, and so she was my friend here. Through working freelance I was the costume designer for a dance performance called Otis Sculley's Night for Dancing.



Ruth: And it became a very popular show and Robi Reed was visited by Spike Lee and she took him to see the show. And at intermission she introduced him to me, and we all started hanging out. So, he saw that I was the costume designer for this dance show. I had my portfolio with me at that time. So, he started to kind of tutor me on how to get more film experience and he advised that I go to USC or UCLA and go to their film department and sign up to volunteer on the student piece project.

Ruth: And I did. So, not long after I was on a set of a USC student on the weekend. I remember thinking, "Is that all there is?" I actually didn't understand the film, actually the film medium. But I felt like I had been doing all of these big productions. At the Opera we were doing the Tempest and English Cat and in theater we were doing, No Place to be Somebody and Amos Behaven and we were building costumes for these troops that were built from threads. And I saw this very simple thing that was being filmed. It was two people sitting out in a field and I thought, "They have on regular clothes. They're not in big period pieces. I think I can do this."

Luvvie: And you did. So, for [School Days](#), being on that first set, what was that learning curve like?

Ruth: Well, Spike had called me out of nowhere and asked me if I would do the costumes for [School Days](#). I began sketching right away. That was, say, it was like in January and we didn't really start prep until the fall. I didn't realize how it was a whole timeline of things. When people asked me to do something I went right in to it. So, I actually went to my brother's studio in New Hampshire and I spent time with him learning how to break down a script. And how to do a budget. And he had never done a film before but he saw that I had a script, a story and he kind of guided me in that way by telling me to create file folders for each character. And anytime I had an idea, whether it's in a magazine or any kind of idea that you would maybe right it down and put it in the folder under that character's name.

Ruth: And so, I worked with him for a long time doing all of the costumes, designing all of the costumes for every character. And then, Spike calls me to come to Brooklyn. He was in a little basement apartment in Brooklyn and he said, "Let's have a meeting about [School Days](#)." So my brother packed up all of my drawings in New Hampshire and I flew from Boston to New York, LaGuardia. And Spike gave me directions of how to get from the airport to Brooklyn on the train. And I did. I mean, I had no fear. I had no knowledge of any other way to do things but the way that I was being instructed.

Ruth: So, I took the train from the airport. I got to Bedstuy and I laid out all of these designs for Spike. And my brother said, have him sign the ones that he approves. My brother was working for IBM and other companies as a freelance artist in New Hampshire. And he kind of knew the process, his process. So, I had the sketches signed by Spike and we took pictures and stuff. And then, before long I was on the set of School Days. And it was really hard for me because it felt... There were jigaboos and want-to-be's and there

were the Gamines, the Gamma Rays. There were a lot of those down there. We were all the same age. We all had some kind of college experience and there was a rivalry between the jigaboos and the want-to-be's, which kind of Spike set up.

Ruth: He had the dark skin, kinky haired girls thing in a lesser hotel than the light skinned, kind of girls with the longer hair. They were in a better hotel. So, he set up this whole-

Luvvie: Oh, so he actually set it up behind the scenes also?

Ruth: Yeah, he set it up behind the scenes as well.

Luvvie: Ah.

Ruth: And yeah, so that kind of rivalry kind of extended itself into wardrobe where they were conscious of getting good clothes now. And they were making sure that they had what they needed. I mean, this is like 30, 40 girls and I had to dress them all. So, it actually was one of my bigger projects and it was the first project. So, it was stressful in that way. I had to have something for everyone and at the same time, learn this medium and be on schedule and on time.

Luvvie: So, you were thrown into the deep end essentially with [School Days](#).

Ruth: Yes, I was. Yes, indeed.

Luvvie: And clearly, sink or swim and you swam because you ended up doing [Do the Right Thing](#) and [House Party](#) and [Malcolm X](#) and [What's Love Got to Do With It](#). Your designs end up actually driving some piece of culture because even now I'm going to a House Party themed party in like three weeks and I'm like, "What am I going to wear?" Now I've got to watch the movie again.

Ruth: Oh, you've got to wear pajamas.

Luvvie: I've got to... Oh, you know what? I already did the House Party one-

Ruth: You've got to wear your little shorts with... Yeah, shorts with suspenders and a crop top. You could do that.

Luvvie: Yes, and I'm doing one, I think I'm going to a [Do The Right Thing](#) party. But essentially, the films that you've designed are still relevant today. How do you approach your design when you are like, "Okay, I'm working on this film." What is the first thing that you do?

Ruth: Well, the first thing I do is I understand the spirit of film, and if it's a comedy or if it's a dramatic piece, is it significant and it has super deep meaning like the [Black Panther](#) does. I recognize that first. And by recognizing that, it tells me whether what kind of

approach I take to it, whether I take a more serious approach or I can be light hearted and look for colors and patterns that feel like they address the spirit of a film. And I'm motivated by that. I'm motivated by, when I read it, what colors come to mind? What do I kind of see? Do I see a sunset? Do I see a bright sky? Do I see a party of color and pattern? Or do I see subdued tones?

Ruth: And I let that kind of emotion be the driving force to where I start with my research. And I might, if it's contemporary, I start looking at contemporary things like today we've broadened our search to Instagram and Tumblr. But I also look at magazines. I'm online more now than I ever was, which is kind of great because I was collecting so many magazines in the past. But I start putting together files that sort of feel right. And I examine them and you make decisions whether I'm not influenced by what other people are doing at addressing that topic. Or is it a true, authentic addressing of the topic?

Ruth: So, I usually lean into the authenticity and try to create my own aesthetic from there. So, if it's an ancient African tribes, I'll look at the beauty of the antiquely and what the original heritage look like and lean for that. If it's something that's contemporary and I have to be inspired by something I start from a shape of clothing, be it a big bomber jacket, some [Missy Elliott](#).

Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: And I try not to copy it. I try to be inspired by it and start there. But then, ultimately create a look that's unique to the story.

Luvvie: There's some films that you've done that are just really fun like [B\\*A\\*P\\*S](#), and [I'm Going to Git You Sucka](#). When it's that fun, how do you approach that? Which one of those is actually one of your funnest?

Ruth: Oh my God! Ah, they're equal but I think... Okay, [I'm Going to Git You Sucka](#) was my second film.

Luvvie: Yep.

Ruth: And I remember Isaac Haze and Jim Brown. I remember Jim Brown giving me a hard time because he didn't like to wear shoes. I think through his athletic years he messed up his feet and he just wanted to wear flip flops in every scene. And I was like, "Ah man, you're killing me." You know? And I remember that the gold fish shoes-

Luvvie: Oh my God, yes.

Ruth: ... were happening. And Huggy Bear. Huggy Bear was Antonio Fargas, who he had played a pimp a lot. So, he had pimp culture down. And then he saw that outfit and he was like, "Wow. A pimp doesn't wear anything that big." And I was like, "Yeah, but this is a gag."

Luvvie: Right.

Ruth: This is a gag. And so, he gave it his best stride and now, it's like a classic.

Luvvie: I'm Going to Get You is like one of those films that I've got to watch once a year just to laugh because the costuming adds extra to it, just from the first scene of like the over gold.

Ruth: The over gold, oh my God. I remember bringing... Well, making the T-shirt, the crew T-shirt and I put the big gold hubcap on the front. Had it lamaze on the T-shirt with a big dookie chain and I wore it to Brooklyn to Spike when we did [Do The Right Thing](#). Right after that. He was like, "I don't even want to see that. I don't even want to see that."

Luvvie: I mean, some of these films are actually culture. And of course, [Love and Basketball](#).

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: So, [inaudible 00:36:27], [How Stella Got Her Groove Back](#). Your resume is literally like for the culture. Literally is like Ruth Carter has designed the culture. Do you sometimes watch the old films that you designed and think, "I should have done something different."? Or what do you think when you watch the old stuff?

Ruth: Occasionally, like when I watch [Thurgood](#) and I'll probably settle into it. Usually I settle into it and I'm like, "Hey, you know what? I did a good job back then." I was really working hard and so, sometimes outside influences create an aesthetic or a look and I have to forgive myself if I feel like it could have been something different. But it wasn't, it was that and then I get somebody who says, "But I loved it!" You know? And I go, "Okay, well then I'm going to settle down on that." But when I look at Thurgood sometimes I feel like the older Thurgood Marshall, who became the Supreme Court Justice, he pretty much was a simple guy. But the young Thurgood Marshall was the guy who really... In the 40s everybody was really; your mode of dress was so much a part of your identity. And guys were wearing those beautiful ties and shirts and they had the wide legged pants with the narrow ankles. And they really liked to look sharp. And so, I dressed Thurgood Marshall in that way, the way he was in the 40s.

Ruth: And I sometimes feel like it would have served the film a little bit better if I hadn't have done it that way. If I hadn't have made everyone look at the clothes and just simplified him. He was a traveling attorney for the people. He went from place to place. He was in the south. He was on the train. He had one suitcase. Maybe one or two suits would have been enough and maybe they could have been rumped and really shown the true

character of the man. So, that's the only one I can really think of and say if I were to do it over again that's the way I would have approached it.

Luvvie: That's interesting. So, how do you make sure you get better after being in this industry for, at this point, 30 years? What is your learning thing?

Ruth: Yeah, 32.

Luvvie: How are you getting better every day?

Ruth: It's really getting harder because I'm not so much in the independent film sector, even though I still love it. I did [Black Panther](#) and then, I did [Dolomite](#). And those are kind of big films, studio films. So, I'm constantly challenging myself to stay grounded and stay true to my cultural faith. And be as authentic as I can with who I am and I'm always challenging aesthetics that are thrown at me. Because we can easily be spell bound by glossy things, Hollywood things, hair and makeup and wardrobe and what designer is doing what. And how cool this is. And I just want to remind myself that the way I got here was from grassroots and it had an aesthetic that was real, that was about people and about their struggle. And I just want to remind myself of that on everything that I'm doing today.

Luvvie: Wow. So, with this career, I think everything has a cost, of course. What do you think is the cost of the work that you do every day?

Ruth: The cost?

Luvvie: Yeah. You are basically designing block busters. What is that process like for you as a person? Ruth, the actual person, not just the designer.

Ruth: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's laden with responsibility, not only to the craft but also to my structure and how other people work. So, I have to adjust sometimes to be able to do show and tells on a whim, to have appropriate crews that have the taste level or the experience level or a higher level of art. And people of color don't get a lot of opportunities to join the high level. So, I'm constantly challenged to mentor or find that gem who's out there who needs this kind of opportunity. So, it's a huge responsibility now that I'm here and it's always been a responsibility that I've stepped up to. I've always had interns, I've always been the collector of the alley cats. And I enjoyed it. Now, I can't collect so many alley cats. I've got to... But I'll have one or two always.

Luvvie: So, who did you... I know it was hard, well there was really... Not really many black costume designers for you to look to. I would say now you are amongst many but you're still too few.

Ruth: Yeah, there's few.

Luvvie: Too few. So, for the people who you do decide to mentee, what do you look for in them?

Ruth: I'm up for the passion. I look for the willingness. I'm not asking you to do anything for free. But I am asking you... I am looking to see if you're willing to stay late. You know? I'm looking to see if you are being analytical and not just being asked to, being shown everything. And so, I feel like I'm trying to tap into a little bit of the spirit that I had coming up because I feel like that's really missing for a lot of people. They want to either walk in the shadow and have a good time. And really not really learn about the craft. And this is really a craft you have to learn.

Luvvie: Yeah. I mean, the work that you do, you're essentially building worlds with costume and clothes. And you are finally an Academy Award winner. How does that feel?

Ruth: Whew, it feels great. It feels like I moved from the fifth floor to the penthouse.

Luvvie: Yes!

Ruth: Yeah. And the building was always nice but damn, the view in the penthouse is awesome.

Luvvie: And now, you know there's a butler.

Ruth: Yeah! Yeah. There's a lot of amenities, you know? I'm weirded out a little bit because I go, "Is this a 15 minutes of fame kind of thing?" And I go, "No, no, no. I've been doing this a long time." But people are so enamored by the win of the Oscar. I have friends that have come over and they want to take pictures with the Oscar. Everybody, I took pictures with Eddie Murphy holding my Oscar. And it was... So, that kind of, it brings me a lot of pride and joy that people around the world cheered the night I won. And I'm being told that over and over again, every day. And how happy people were for me and how proud they were. And I've been told to look at the video again when I won to see the people in the room and their faces and how proud and excited they were for me, and happy.

Luvvie: Has anything really concretely changed since you won the Oscar about a month and a half ago?

Ruth: A few things have changed. I'm getting a lot of opportunities outside of costume design, getting opportunities to be creative producer. People want to see a Wakanda line of clothes.

Luvvie: Yes!

Ruth: I know. So, the offers are various and that's kind of nice. I really love that.

Luvvie: That's interesting. So, well, let's talk about [Black Panther](#) because I people are always curious about that life changing movie for a bunch of folks.

Ruth: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Luvvie: You were intentional about showing essentially what is kind of like our Garden of Eden, like what it would look like for us to dream up a world that was just ours alone. When you got that assignment, how did you approach costuming for [Black Panther](#)?

Ruth: Well, [Ryan Coogler](#) had a lot of really specific ideas about it. And so, my first step was to be a good listener. He was the film maker and I'm no good without him. He can be good without me because if his story is all that, costumes don't matter. So, I had to be a good listener and follow his lead. And he was very specific about certain things, like the Lesotho blankets we used for the boarder tribe. He was very specific about the Dora Milaje being covered and flat with N'Jobu.

Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: He was very specific about how is T'Challa going to look when he's just being a man in the kingdom, just being a king or a prince. And so, I just felt like from listening to him, that the aesthetic had to be so high.

Luvvie: Yeah.

Ruth: I also kind of keyed into what he told me about growing up in Oakland and his family and going to see [Malcolm X](#). And I realize that the same things that were important to his family, his mom and dad, is the same things that I experienced as a kid growing up celebrating. We didn't celebrate Kwanza in my house specifically but my neighbors did. The Muslims came to our door growing up selling [inaudible 00:47:08] and bean pies and I knew all about the nation of Islam. That was part of our community and I feel like his Oakland roots were similar in that, that African diaspora was alive. We knew about [Marcus Garvey](#). We knew about true African culture versus fake African culture. You know? We knew what fake Kente was and what real Kente was just by growing up with people who had that awareness of it.

Ruth: So, I realized very early on that that was the ideals that I was tapping into. And I need to do this for the culture. When you... I grew up listening to [Gil Scott-Heron](#) and the last poets, the revolution will not be televised, the revolution will be live. And I felt like we were in a live revolution and it was about showing the Tuareg and the Hembra and really extracting the beauty of the ancient African tribes and how do we reimagine this in a contemporary realm and a futuristic realm? How do we bring that aesthetic so forward that everybody gets it?

Luvvie: It was gorgeous. I felt like watching the film was a feast for my eyes.

Ruth: Yeah, it was.

Luvvie: And you ended up touching on basically every quadrant in the continent.

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: So, can you walk us through like what quadrants you had for different tribes in Black Panther?

Ruth: Yeah, well [Black Panther](#)... Well, Wakanda was a fictitiously situated right there in the northern middle section in Africa. So, it had the Northern Africa, the Mali and the Tuareg. That represented our merchant tribe. And so, the way that the Tuareg people embraced silver and the bedouin jewelry, that heavy silver was something that I had actually seen in Africa going there on [Malcolm X](#). And I bought a lot of bedouin jewelry and beautiful aesthetic. I felt like that was my Vibranium. And that I could bring that element to the Tuareg people.

Ruth: Things kept changing too as we went along, like we have the Zulu tribe of South Africa as the tribe of the royal family. And then, something would change and it wouldn't be that anymore. And so, we'd have to sort of make adjustments. So, a lot of the tribes that you see sometimes have a mixture, like for the mining tribe was base on the Trikana, the Maasai and the Himba. The Himba of Ethiopia and how they use the red clay and the shay butter and they put it all over their skin. And it's just like beauty for them. It's like when we get up in the morning and we have to put our makeup on before we leave the house. For them, adding the shay butter and the clay soil and having that beautiful red tone is attractive.

Ruth: People say that it was to ward of mosquitoes or to be sort of antiseptic during a drought but no, it was pure beauty.

Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: And so, we have our mining tribe elder with her Himba wig and we use that red clay color as their color pallet. And then, you can travel to the Surma tribe and they were of East Africa. And you see the River tribe. That's who we were inspired by to create the River Tribe. That's [Lupita Nyong'o](#)'s tribe.

Luvvie: Okay.

Ruth: And the children history and the Surma children where the flowers, you see these beautiful photographs of them with the flowers and sticks in their hair. And then, they paint their face and really beautiful images. And we were inspired by that to create her tribal look at the Warrior Falls where she had her beads and her cowry shells and all of that. Then you have her tribal elder, the River tribal elder with the lip plate.



Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: And the lip plate is of the Surma people as well. And usually the lip plate is worn by women and you know the bigger the lip plate the more beautiful you are.

Luvvie: Ah.

Ruth: But Ryan wanted the River tribe elder to wear the lip plate. So, in tribal council you see him sitting there with his lip plate. And that was a decision Ryan made. It was put on by the makeup department and he's sitting there proudly in green suits. The green suit we got from Ozwald Boateng in London.

Luvvie: His suits are crazy.

Ruth: He also had a tribal suit that he designed. It had a tribal pattern on it, a beautifully woven tribal pattern on it. I couldn't get that, even though I really wanted that one. But I got the... He said it took six months to weave the fabric, so I didn't have that kind of time.

Luvvie: Oh.

Ruth: So, I bought his green suit off the rack and gave it to the tribal elder in that scene. And he wore it proudly.

Luvvie: The Dora Milaje's were actually almost revolutionary in the way they were positioned as powerful women without necessarily being objectified. So, that costume and with the leather and the red, what went into that?

Ruth: Well, the Dora Milaje, for me, they represent all the quadrants around Africa because any tribe in the Adora your head is shaven and you kind of become the identity of the Dora uniform. And so, what I did was I took the idea and I upped the... I kind of gave it its story. The red was intensified to be much more vibrant so that when you saw three Dora it felt like five or five felt like 10. That intense red that you see a lot around the ancient African tribe of Africa, the Maasai, the Trikana and so, that was important.

Ruth: The wearing of the leather skirts was important. I was inspired by the Himba women, how they take the calves' skin and they stretch the edges. They soak it down and they stretch it. And it sort of has a ruffling affect. Then, they adorn it with metal trinkets and beads and then, they wrap it around their waste and it kind of has the image of a wrap skirt, a ruffle skirt. And I loved that so much. And so, we made the Dora have their leather calf skins and we decorated the edges in the same way with rings and studs.

Ruth: They wore neck rings and arm rings the same as the Ndebele tribe of South Africa. When you see Ester, picture the Vester Milango and she has on... She's a South African

painter. She's probably 100 years old and she's still painting in South Africa but she wears her tribal costume and she wears the neck rings. She also wears the blankets, the South African blanket with these bold colors. And when you look at her it looks like she's fully armored. You can not penetrate this woman. And I loved that aspect as well of how this tribal costume could also feel like armor. And I experienced that with Thelma and the Thelma marchers

Luvvie: Yeah.

Ruth: ... when dressed them and we layered them underneath their trench coats so that, you know, clothing can be armor. And so, back to the Dora, they also had scarification printed on their costumes. You see it around their chest and their arms where we actually did the fabrication lines but we gave it a pattern and a print so that it would also enhance the beauty of that idea. And then, we honored the female form. There's a, what I call a harness, that travels around the Dora Milaje costume. We arranged the lines in the leather work so that it would travel around the bust, it would hug the waist, it would extenuate the hips and it would elongate the female form.

Ruth: And that was our way of honoring women as opposed to exposing them.

Luvvie: Yes. And that was clear because they were, the moment you saw the Dora Milaje you just spoke of power.

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: So, now that you've done all this. You've gotten this award, what is next for you? What do you want to do now that you've kind of gotten the apex of career in terms of the Oscar?

Ruth: Yeah. I want to do more costume design. I definitely love it. I could do it until the day I die. But, I also want to produce. I'd like to produce some really rich stories. I have so many stories in my whole life, in my journey and my family. I'd like to address some of those issues because I think they're the same issues that we all deal with every day. Just relationship issues, mental illness, career building. Coming to a city alone as a black female and striving for greatness. You know, there are stories. I have stories. Growing up in a single parent home and watching my mom, who I felt not many women today want to raise eight children by themselves and have a job.

Luvvie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). She's a Dora Milaje herself.

Ruth: I feel like I have stories... Yeah she was. She still is. And I just feel like I have so many stories in me, and how can I tell them? I can't tell them all the same way. I want to tell some of them in producing.

Luvvie: So, I know people are calling for you to do a clothing line. Is that something you actually want to do?

Ruth: I'm on the fence about that because I know all that glitters ain't gold.

Luvvie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ruth: And it's a lot of work to doing a clothing line. It's like eight seasons in a year and I just don't want to be that person on Overstock.com trying to sell their stuff.

Luvvie: I don't think you would have to. I don't think you would have to be on Overstock. If you did do one, would you do a high end one or would you do one that is mid range?

Ruth: I fluctuate. Most of the time I go, "You know what? I want to be the girl for that Walmart shopper. I want to see my stuff on everybody, affordable, on the kids, on the grandma. I want to find something that will fly off the shelves because it's special and it's affordable." And then, I go, "Ooh, but if I could be like Off-White that would be amazing."

Luvvie: Look, if you could make us more like... If you could make Dora Milaje come to life, I'll buy the whole line.

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: I'd buy the whole line. I'd be like, "Wait, how much? I will save my coins." Now, I'm always wondering, who is your squad? Who did you call first the day after you got your Oscar? Who is the person that you usually go to or who are the people?

Ruth: The day after I got my Oscar I really wanted to talk to my brother, Robert, who was the artist who I admired my whole life. He wasn't able to come out to Los Angeles and I wanted to know what he felt when he saw me get the Oscar. And so, he was the person in my heart that I wanted to know, they were right there with me cheering me on.

Luvvie: That is... And who are your girls?

Ruth: Oh, my girls. They was all there. Let's see, let's see that's Robi, and Cassandra, and yeah, my girls. And my nieces. Everybody was at my house celebrating and waiting for me to come back and I went to two parties. So, I didn't get here until like 2:00 in the morning but they were still up drinking. And partying in my house. They were like, "Yeah, your house is great for a party."

Luvvie: Look.

Ruth: We walked up and people were in the living room still and all the lights were on. And laughing. And so, then I walked in with the Oscar and everybody wanted to take a picture with it. Everybody wanted to hold it. So, the party started all over again at 2:00 AM but I was tired. I had been through a whole day starting at like 7:00 AM with hair and makeup.

Luvvie: Ooh, 7:00 AM?

Ruth: Yes. Yeah, I had to be on the red carpet by 2:00.

Luvvie: Oh my God. That is a long day. So you're probably like, "Get out my house, y'all."

Ruth: That is a long... And you know, I was like, "I'm happy as you guys are but I am tired!"

Luvvie: You know what? I would have just gone to bed and let them keep the party going.

Ruth: I had a little bit of an energy based on that win. There was definitely a feeling of triumph and joy.

Luvvie: And then, you started a really cool thing for Women's History Month that's really blown up on social media. I just got tagged to it twice today. So, I've got to do my honor.

Ruth: Oh my God.

Luvvie: And it's been on Entertainment Tonight. It is your Women Dancing Together contest where you're asking women to tag a friend in a song where they lip sync or sing so they can virtually sing together. And essentially unite-

Ruth: Yes, sing and dance together.

Luvvie: And dance together. And so far, Gabrielle Union, Tracee Ellis Ross, Halle Berry, Tasha Smith, Angela Bassett. The list is growing. What inspired you to do that challenge?

Ruth: Well, I wanted to do something for Women's History Month. I didn't want the month to pass before I did something. And then, I was just talking to a friend and we were just laughing about how when they play the song for like Electric Slide or any of those group dances, you know all the women who've been wanting to dance all night long, they get up and they dance together. And we were just laughing about that, how that is just in the way that we can unify. And even though some of us don't have a partner or don't have a man in our lives, or the cute guy in the room ain't asking us to dance. We've been sitting there for hours, but as soon as they play that song that all of us can get up and dance together. We all get up!

Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: And it felt like as we were talking with it, it felt like that's how women commune and support. Let's do that as a challenge. Let's talk about unity, let's talk about supporting each other. Let's talk about being beautiful, being whatever your empower song is. And dance and we can all dance together. We can all have that unified dance.

Luvvie: Yes, I'm excited. So, I've got to figure out what song I'm going to do. So, I'm going to do my video today because today... Yeah.

Ruth: Awesome.

Luvvie: I'm going to make it happen. I'll be like yes, I'm doing the Ruth Carter challenge.

Ruth: Nice.

Luvvie: I recently saw you at the-

Ruth: [#WomenDancingTogether](#).

Luvvie: [#WomenDancingTogether](#).

Ruth: That's the hashtag.

Luvvie: So, if you're listening to this, do this challenge. Challenge five of your friends and dance and sing. I recently saw you at [BET Leader Women Defined](#) and I asked you a question that I'm going to ask you again here, which is when you are not in the room, what do you want people to say about you?

Ruth: I like her.

Luvvie: Mm.

Ruth: We all want to be liked and you realize that not everybody's going to like you. But I hope that something that I've done or something that I've said or meant something to someone that when I left the room they said, "I like her."

Luvvie: That's on point. And I always ask my guests, when you are world dominating and costume designing and doing all this thing and following your passion, how are you taking care of yourself?

Ruth: Yeah, it's tough. Ooh. It's tough. Time ticks by, you realize three years have passed and you haven't taken a vacation or a month has passed and you haven't started that diet you wanted to start. Taking care of yourself is work, and usually when I'm doing it the best I'm not working because I have to focus on it. I've got to prepare my food the night before and I'm on all kinds of programs. I go the Pelaton and I've got-

Luvvie: Which I've been trying to get.

Ruth: ... figure out which classes I'm going to take. But in general, I feel like if I leave my life with a positive spirit and I remind myself not to get into degrading people or gossip because I think those are the things when you can't take as good of yourself as you'd like to, with nutrition and exercise, that when you add the toxic mental things it makes it worse. So, on a daily basis I have affirmations and I try to stay positive about people. I learned from my mom to stay on the positive side of things when you see a person. Think of them in a positive light as opposed to a negative one. And then, I feel kind of grounding. Even in my relationships with my guy, I really want to stay energized by the support that I can give to others.

Luvvie: Yes. And the young Ruth that wanted to be a dermatologist, are you still into skin care?

Ruth: No. But I do my routine but I loved it as a kid. I loved it because those magazines told you step by step and all that stuff. So, I just loved it. So, I mean I still do the routines that you're supposed to do, you know take off your makeup before you go to bed and all that good stuff.

Luvvie: I mean, I've seen your skin up close. Your skin is bomb. So, give us some secrets. What are you doing? What products are you using? We love to know that here.

Ruth: Yeah, no I discovered that Farm Fresh, that Farm Fresh product. It's amazing.

Luvvie: What's that one?

Ruth: It's all natural. Farm to Farm.

Luvvie: Farm to Farm, okay.

Ruth: Let me look at it right now because it is awesome. Off the chain.

Luvvie: Are you using the whole line?

Ruth: Smells good, feels good, they have a whole line of products that they put out. It's called [Farmhouse Fresh](#).

Luvvie: [Farmhouse Fresh](#). Okay.

Ruth: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Luvvie: So, you're using the face wash and everything?

Ruth: Face wash, lotion, loom. Everything. I have a whole product line.

Luvvie: Do you exfoliate also weekly? What are you doing with that?

Ruth: Yeah, no. I exfoliate weekly. Yeah, I love exfoliating though. I have tubes in the shower and I might be doing it three times a week far as I know.

Luvvie: Because I was like, oh no, Ruth's skin is popping. So, I need to know. I always try to collect all the skin care secrets because I'm like, "What do I need to be doing to make sure my black does not crack?"

Ruth: Yeah! Thank you. Yeah, no, I keep something in the shower. Something that smells good and has some exfoliating in the shower. For my body and my face.

Luvvie: And then, after a big project, do you go away for a couple of months? Or do you jump right into something-

Ruth: I should. I always say I'm going to but I'm always going away on projects and shooting in other states. So, staying home is like... Stay-cation is like a really great vacation. You just have... On a stay-cation you can't answer the phone because then people want to put you back to work. And so, then I'll take little jaunts to Mexico. I have a favorite place there and it's [Pueblo Bonito Pacifica](#). And it's a holistic spa and retreat and you can go there for the weekend. And they give you massages on the beach and you do yoga in the morning. And beautiful, beautiful place.

Luvvie: Well, that's helpful to know. I'm a great fan of vacations and just tapping out of life sometimes.

Ruth: Yeah.

Luvvie: I am really excited for your existence, actually. I think you have consistently done great work over these decades and you deserve all the awards and all the props and all the accolades. So, thank you so much for just being a great person.

Ruth: Thank you. And thanks for a lovely talk and a lovely interview. I appreciated your question at Women Leading Define.

Luvvie: Yes.

Ruth: And good luck to you in the future and thank you for this time.

Luvvie: Thank you for being on Rants. It's been a pleasure.

Ruth: All right. Bye, bye.

Luvvie: Bye.

Shout out to [Ruth Carter](#) for joining me. She's amazing. Please follow her on social media. Show her some love there. She is [@TheRealRuthECarter](#) on Instagram. That's [The Real Ruth E Carter](#). And then, she is [@IamRuthECarter](#) on Twitter. What I want y'all to do, if you love these gems that she's dropping, go send her some comments and some love. Tell her you listened to Rants and Randomness and you appreciate her time. Our guests love when you do that, so please continue to do that.

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