Oral History: CSA Fellow Howard Vincent Kurtz
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Host
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Guest
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During his twenty-five-year career at George Mason University, Mr. Kurtz directed mainstage productions and designed sets, costumes, hair, and makeup for over 75 productions for the School of Theater, School of Dance, and the School of Music. His previous experience includes creating costumes for Broadway, Hollywood films, and television. For his work in Washington, D.C., he was honored to receive the Helen Hayes Outstanding Costume Design Award. In addition to his academic and professional career, Mr. Kurtz served as the Associate Curator of Costumes and Textiles at the Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C., the former residence of the Post cereal heiress, Marjorie Merriweather Post.

• Carmen Keist

Welcome, everyone. The Costume Society of America thanks you for joining today’s oral History Webinar in our series Conversations on Dress. I am your host, Carmen Keist. Should you have general questions regarding CSA digital content, please contact conversationsondress@costumesocietyamerica.com. I want to introduce our esteemed guest for tonight’s Oral History Goes Live event, Howard Vincent Kurtz. Howard is one of our newest CSA fellows.
Howard, you mentioned to me earlier that you have 40 years of experience with designing costumes, 30 years of teaching experience, 20 years as a curator, 10 years as a costume shop manager, and five years in the New York City costume shops. That, Howard, makes you at least 105 years old. Please turn on your camera so we can see how good you look for your age.

Let me give you some background on Howard before we get into the questions. During his 25-year tenure at George Mason University, Mr. Kurtz directed main stage productions and designed sets, costumes, hair and makeup for over 75 productions for the School of Theater, School of Design, and School of Music. His previous experience includes designing costumes for Broadway, Hollywood films, and television. For his work in New York City, he was honored to receive the Helen Hayes Outstanding Costume Design Award. In addition to his academic and professional career, Mr. Kurtz served as Associate Curator of Costumes and Textiles at the Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, DC., the former residence of the Post Cereal Heiress Marjorie Meriwether Post.

So Howard Vincent Kurtz, you done so much in your previous careers—can you please give a couple of your favorite moments?

- Howard

Sure. I, I've done a lot in my career, and no, I'm not 100 years old.

- Carmen

It was a 105.

- Howard

Right.
Well, I've done a lot of the things at the same time. While I was at George Mason University, I was also working at Hillwood and I was still professionally designing. But I think my favorite moments are seeing the people that I've helped achieve their goals. For example, a student came to me at George Mason. She was a freshman, and she said, “I want to work on a Broadway show." And I said, Well, in 30 years, maybe you'll get that opportunity. She said, “I'd like to do it while I'm in school." I was able to secure a position with her to work with William Ivey Long on _Bronx Tale_. And so, her senior year, she went from the Paper Mill Playhouse to a Broadway show. Being with her there to see the production was my favorite moment. Students that have achieved things, I think, is my biggest contribution that I've given. I just want to say, at Hillwood, I think I had over 36 interns, that were working on their master's programs, and helping them reach their goals (and I know some of them are listening tonight) has been my biggest thing that I have to give back. It's been my biggest accomplishment.

- Carmen

What challenges have you encountered and what have you learned from them?

- Howard
I don't think I've gotten this far if I saw them as challenges. For me, everything is an opportunity. I take every opportunity that has been given to me. Maybe that's why I've had so many different and diverse careers. I've done a lot of different projects, but every opportunity I have taken has informed me to the next one. Or maybe even while I'm working on something, I go, huh, why don't I use this tactic and see if it will work in this situation. My joke is that I can't fix the car, but I know a lot of different areas of costume, so they always inform one another, whether it's curation, education, or designing. I just try to take every opportunity.

• Carmen

Do you have a specific example that you can think of that, in the last couple of years, that maybe you thought this was going to be something that would be challenging, and how you turned it into an opportunity?

• Howard

Oh, sure. It's really interesting: I got an opportunity last year to design at the Orlando Shakespeare Theater, and I thought, oh, I hope I don't get a Shakespeare. I haven't done a Shakespearean play. I'm really good at these timeframes, like 1850, to 1950. Give me those shows, and I can do them. Well, the show that I was offered was Christmas at Pemberley. In my lifetime, I've never designed 1800, 1810 clothing. This is a shout out to Ann Wass, if she's listening, because the first thing I did was call her up and say “Can you help me? Can you give me some information to help direct me to this?” So, it turned out fine. I knew how to design a show, but I wasn't really versed in that time period, so I sought other people that had the knowledge in those areas. What book should I read? Where should I be looking? And that was just 4 or 5 months ago.

• Carmen

What are you currently working on? I think that you keep telling me you retired, and you always seem to have something going on.

• Howard

I never say, no. What I'm doing right now is I'm actually writing a major project right now. Something that just came to me one evening and I said, OK, I'm going to sit down and write. So, I've been doing interviews and a lot of writing on this project that I'm hoping to unveil very soon. Also, in my free time to get out of the house, I work at the Sewing Studio, and it is a major fabric and sewing machine store. I was just driving down the road one day, and it just happens to be three minutes from my house. Since Covid, I've been going in and filling online orders, I take care of the pattern inventory, and I teach a class on flat patterning. I've worked at the Shakespeare Theater, just in the costume shop stitching. I volunteer at the museum to catalog their clothing. Oh, and I spend two days at home sewing, so I'm just doing a couple of things in retirement.

• Carmen

It sounds like your days are filled. Can you give us any teasers on the writing project that you're working on?
• Howard

Well, I would like to submit it [to the CSA Symposium] on October 1st for a paper, so I can't say anything tonight.

• Carmen

No, no. We don't want to sway any of the potential jurors.

• Howard

So stay tuned.

• Carmen

Yes, perfect. So, I remember your first encounter with CSA. I don't know if you remember then, but you joined us at the 2010 National Conference in Kansas City. I guess I'd been on my master’s or my doctoral program (I can't even remember which) for a couple of years and come in, just loud and boisterous and you bought almost the entire silent auction inventory. I remember you going through and running and gathering things and telling people to go ahead and bid on everything and keep bidding.

So how had you heard about Costume Society of America and what made you want to join?

• Howard

Well, at this time, I was at Hillwood Museum and I was getting ready for my first exhibition. Remember, I'm coming from theater. An exhibition is sort of like a presentation, but it's different—it's at a museum, and not on the stage. But I thought to do something on fancy dress costumes and I was doing my research and working. I came across a book that Cynthia Cooper had written and, and so I contacted her. I should have guessed when the book said “Canadian” that she was probably in Canada. I talked to her on the phone, and she said, let's visit and let me show you some of our costumes that we have on fancy dress. And so, when I was there, I was talking to her about my career in theater and education and museum studies and costume history. And she said, “You know, there's an organization I think you should join. It's called Costume Society of America.” I said, “Oh, OK, it's in the states, but I'm coming to Canada to find this out.” And she said, “I think you should join.” And she gave me all the information. She was so kind that day, and gave me the information.

I came back home and said, “OK, if I'm going to see what CSA is all about, I'm going to a symposium.” And I went and I asked for a mentor, and in walks Joy Emery. Joy said to me, “Howard, I signed up to be a mentor, and I'm supposed to be your mentor. I don't think you need a mentor.” So, she spent that afternoon sitting together at the symposium, and she was telling me things as presenters were going on and how the organization worked. I met the President and the incoming President, and I met so many people there, and everybody made me feel so welcome. So, I said it was a fit for me. I just felt that because I was looking for costume design, museum curation, and costume history, I
wanted to find a group that had those fields covered. CSA had everybody there and it was love at
first sight. It really was.

- Carmen

Had you known Joy Emery before meeting her there?

- Howard

I did! I know her from USITT. And Whitney Blausen and I actually taught a class when I was in New
York working in the Costume Collection—she was there running it and she asked me to come in and
 teach a class. So, I had known both of them for 20 years earlier, but I did not get connection with
Costume Society of America until that meeting in the hallway in Kansas City when Joy walked in. It
was just great. It was a moment I'll always remember.

- Carmen

How much did you end up buying at the silent auction?

- Howard

Oh, I was young and naive. That was 10 years ago. I don't remember, but remember, I come from a
theater background. I like excitement—that last five minutes. There's nothing more of I thrill (oh, I
hope nobody knows this fact) to really be bidding on all these things to help get the bids up so that
we make a profit. So, I've scaled back in past years, OK? Last year, when we were in Seattle, I only
spent $10.

- Carmen

Oh, Howard, you gotta spend more.

- Howard

Well, I am retired. I don't need all of those things. I give things to the silent auction now; I don't take
 things anymore.

- Carmen

Well, I was just wondering—not necessarily about the monetary value of the items, but just
physically, have you got them back from Kansas City to the east coast.

- Howard

An extra suitcase, Honestly, we had to buy an extra suitcase to come home. You know, fabric weighs
a lot.
Yes, and books weigh even more. Yeah, the books will get you at the silent auction.

Why are your favorite parts about Costume Society of America?

• Howard

This diversity. The people. To have people that you really understand what you're talking about. I can be at a party and talk about costumes and they're like, yeah, yeah, they're just some clothes. I mean, people take costumes seriously in this organization and I love it. And we have the same mindset. I can be talking to a costume designer or a museum curator. There are so many diverse people and professions in this organization. And these colleagues that are people in the profession, they've turned out to be friends. It's not unusual for me just to call up and we just have a two-hour conversation. With me, it starts out 15 minutes, but it goes for about two hours. But I love it. I just love it.

• Carmen

Or the call turns into me driving down to Atlanta to you up at the airport.

• Howard

Oh, and trying to get all three of us in the car at the same time. That's the trick.

• Carmen

We talked about your couple of your favorite moments in terms of your career, but what got you into costume design and curation and the love of fabrics and textiles?

• Howard

Well, my mother was a teacher of home economics. There was always the sewing machine in a cabinet, and the cabinet was never closed. It always had the lid sitting on the top of the sewing machine. And she said, “Please don't touch it.” I was fascinated about how the thread would come together. That was my moment, and I said, “My gosh, how does this mechanical happened?” I was on that trajectory of mechanics and things like that.

A third-grade teacher (maybe this is why I feel so strongly about mentoring) took us to see a play that came to our school, *Hans Brinker, or the Silver Skates*. After the end of the play, the teachers gathered all the students up and said, “OK, bye, let's go back to the room,” and I asked her, “Why didn't the snow melt?” And she said, “It's not real.” I said, “Really?” And the art teacher was there, who said “Do you mind, Mrs. Boden, if I take Howard back stage? I'll bring him back to class.” And he took me back, and I got to meet the actors. I fell in love with theater in third grade. And I didn't want to be an actor. I didn't want to be a lighting designer; they have to climb ladders, and I'm not too good on heights. I went back and thought, I can use my mother's sewing machine. I mean, that was third grade. I thought, OK, and I started very young to do costumes. I was making costumes by fourth grade.
In high school, the boys were not allowed to be in the class to sew or cook. Females could take shop, but men could not sew. I had a great teacher in high school who said, “Come after school. I'll stay 30 minutes, and I'll help you.” She may need tear more out than I put together. I'm in contact with her today, and she's made me better than what I thought I could be, and I've just gone from there. I went to grad school for costume design. My professor said, “Have you ever tried construction?” I said, “Ah, construction. I know construction.” He said, “Well, I want to give you a challenge.” Then I left grad school and my first job in New York was, of course, working in the costume shop as a draper, so I spent my years making clothes. So, I thought I was going to be a designer, but I was making clothes, and that's how I started. I then I started to do design and then I became a designer.

How did I start working at the museum? Oh, that's such a long story, how can I make it short? A friend said to me, “Hey. Hillwood Museum has a lot of costumes in trunks and they don't know what they want to do with them. Do you want to come and look at them? I said, “Sure.” I pulled some of the trunks out and I started to date the clothes. And they said, “You know the dates of these? We are not even sure of the dates of these. So, they gave me a little test and I dated some of the costumes. The next week Hillwood Museum called me and said, “We'd like to hire you to catalog our collection.” I had catalogued it in three years but I stayed 20 years.

- Carmen

Well, that's a fun little way to get into the museum world. And I don't know if that happens that often, these days.

- Howard

Well, I don't think it does. I don't have a degree, you know. I don't have a fine arts degree from the program that is taught in the area in Washington, DC. It was a museum that was (well, I wouldn't say new), but the current curator there was a person who was just labeling linens and stuff. She didn't know about clothing. And so, they brought me in to help her date things. She retired, and I continued on. I learned and grew through the museum. I learned a lot more. I didn't know what an exhibition was, and then by the time I started with CSA (maybe this is a good thing to say here) I hadn't done an exhibition until I joined CSA. Once I joined CSA, I did four exhibitions and two books and it was all the help of the members of CSA. I wasn't going to get that from my theater background. I really needed other professionals that could guide and lead me through the process.

- Carmen

This is a side question, kind of personal for me. I have a six-year old son and I want to get him interested in sewing. What can I do to get him wanting to get on my machine without taping them to the desk?

- Howard

Does he know how to hand sew? Does he know how to do those little cards that you put thread through? Have you done any crafts with him?
Carmen

We do crafts, but I don't think he's done this sewing, like the threading, in a while. He used my machine once to put a pocket on a piece of fabric and he was pretty good at it, but he hasn't been interested from that point.

Howard

Oh, well, don't force him or he'll never do it. I would introduce him to some sort of crafts that have some hand sewing projects. I mean it's amazing how many different stitches you can learn. I got through Boy Scouts because I could sew—that's how I learned how to do all the knots to get my badges. I figured out that the ropes that I were tying as knots—if they were just thread, this is how they would work, or how they would release or whatever. That's how I got all my badges in, in Boy Scouts—I knew how to sew. They didn't know that, but that's how I learned all my knots. Introduce him to it slowly, and see how he takes to it.

Carmen

Maybe I need to tell him not touch the sewing machine. I will convince him reverse psychology. “Please don't do it. Please don't do it.”

Howard

I took my mother to the Helen Hayes Awards, and they were going to announce Best Costuming. My mother was there, and she was holding my hand, and she said, “Oh, honey, your hand is so cold!” And I said, “Mom, I'm nervous.” She said, “Oh, I hope you win.” I said, “Mother, you didn't let me sew and you could have ruined my career.” And then they called my name. I sort of got her back at that moment.

Carmen

Right. You said you had sewn after school. Did she let you use her machine?

Howard

She did, she did. By the time I was in high school, I was making gowns. I made a whole wedding party the year after I graduated from high school. I made all the wedding gowns. Oh, God, 1978—fashions were very interesting that year. They were all pastel, and they were all made out of eyelet, and they all laced up the front. By high school, I was known as the sewer. My yearbook mentioned it. My legacy for my life in high school was that I was going to own my own jumpsuit company. I was also wearing them at the time. I was making them - making all my jumpsuits.

Carmen

How did that end up working out for you—your jumpsuit company?

Howard
It didn't, but I remember, I was in district chorus and I wore one of my jumpsuits. I was talking to the guy next to me about something and the conductor stopped and said, “Hey, you in the jumpsuit. Can you be quiet?” I don't think I wore them ever since.

- Carmen

Well, when disco died so did the jumpsuit, but they're coming back. They're popular again. You could turn it around. That could be a retirement job, the jumpsuit company.

- Howard


- Carmen

That's perfect. Aprons for anybody or aprons for special activities?

- Howard

I just make a butcher's apron. One pattern, one style, with some great fabrics that I get at the sewing studio. So, I'm good.

- Carmen

I just was curious, I will have to check that out, “Fit to be Tied?”

- Howard

Ha-ha, it's a number 2, it's a letter B.

- Carmen

Perfect. What advice would you give to young professionals trying to break out in the field? We know it is so difficult these days to find a job in clothing curation or in academia. What would you advise young professionals?

- Howard

I think my motto: never say no. I've never said no. I look at everything as an opportunity. One opportunity takes me to the next opportunity. And you can be wrong. You can say, “Yes, sure, I'll do that” and find out it's not right for you. Great! Change directions. Life is long, and you can do many things. I would say try it. See if it fits. I went to graduate school and I wanted to be a costume designer. They trained me to be a costume technician. It made me survive for 3 to 5 years working in New York. That's what I did. I wasn't going to go to New York and design. I wasn't known; I didn't have a big, something behind me to do that. But boy could I make patterns. I love that to this day; I'm still teaching pattern drafting. I got to work at some of the greatest shops in New York.
meet some of the greatest stars. I'm not going to start name dropping, but, it because, somehow, when my professor said we're gonna (I guess it kind of made me too), but he said, we're gonna have you build the show and not design it. He gave me an opportunity, I took it, and it paid the rent, and started my whole career. So, I would say to everybody who's young and listening, try it. Don't say no.

I knew fashion history, I knew costume history. Hillwood hired me on my knowledge of costume history. They weren't looking for somebody with an MFA in costumes. They were looking for somebody just to help. And I said, “I'm here to help”, and I did. So, just try. Try whatever you can and see what happens. If it's not right, you'll know. And you can do something else. But it's going to come back later in life. I guess that I want to tell everybody that. If you do something that is outside of your comfort zone or not something that you think you want to do in life, don't ever say that you're not going to do it, because you're going to use that 20 years later. You will use it, again. Trust me on this one. It's happened to me over and over again.

- Carmen

Are you thinking of a couple of specific examples right now of something that you tried that maybe with which you were uncomfortable that has come around and been helpful?

- Howard

Yeah, I was. I actually was working a day job in New York, working on building in the shop, and then the evening, and they needed somebody to fill it not as a dresser but they had an opening for someone to do wigs. And I thought, well, this would be my...

[phone rings] Well, that's interesting. I have a fan calling right now. My secretary is picking the phone up right now.

So, what I was going to say is that I did wigs. Was that something I wanted to do? I had done a little bit of it, but I was doing wigs on Broadway and I was a swing—I was filling in on shows. And it was really something that was out of my comfort zone. Somebody needed somebody to do wigs on The Miser on Broadway, with Carole Shelley and Philip Bosco. And a friend said, “Could you do this? I just need help.” I met the next person, who was Michael Kahn, and who when I moved to D.C. said, “We need a draper at the Shakespeare Theater. Could you come and work for me?” I would have never met Michael Kahn in Washington, D.C. if he wasn't working on the Broadway show where I was doing wigs. I didn't want to do wigs for my whole life. The opportunity opened for me to do something else and I came to Washington D.C. and draped it to Shakespeare Theater for two years.

- Carmen

What skills do you think that you've gathered over the years that aren't necessarily tied to costume design or museums that you find that have been really helpful? So, if you're saying yes to everything, it might not have thought it was applicable.

- Howard
Oh, I'm a good baker. I know costume shop people work really hard, and I can take them in a good snack! I have a large career in costumes, but I joke with people that I can't fix the car. Everything that I do in some way revolves around costumes. It, it just does for me. I don't see anything that doesn't inform clothing. What we look like, what we wear. I can't think of anything really. As I said, I'm a good baker.

- Carmen

Do your hobbies now that you're retired always kind of revolve around costume and textiles in some way?

- Howard

It does. It does. Like, we were driving to the grocery store one evening, and I didn't need another job—I was retired. I told myself I was going to retire at 59 and I did. I left Hillwood first, and then spent a semester at George Mason to say goodbye there and I was done and we were moving off to Florida. I would say I was here probably a month and we were driving to the grocery store, and my husband Howard said to me, “Ooh, look, there's a sewing store.” And so, we went to groceries. And then he said, “Don't look. Don't look, I've never said anything. Forget it.” So, I took him home and then went back and said hello. And they said, “Can you sew?” and I said, “Sure I can.” They said, “Do you want to?” And I just fell into it. Working at the sewing studio, the costume shop manager from the Orlando Shakes walked in, said the same question: “Can you sew?” And I started to work at the Shakespeare Theater. “Can you design?” “Sure.” One thing leads to another. Yes, my whole life revolves around costume.

- Carmen

I'm surprised that Howard pointed out a sewing studio to you because I'm not allowed to go to a fabric store, a yarn shop, or any sort of bead store. I'm not allowed. My husband does not encourage this behavior.

- Howard

Well, Howard said, “I didn't say anything, I didn't see anything.” I love it. My biggest trick is that the garage walks into a mud room and from the mudroom I have a sewing room, so the fabric I buy I bring from the car, to the mud room, to the sewing room. It never comes into the house, so he never sees it.

- Carmen

I have good hiding spots.

- Howard

If you're making costumes, clothing, you have to find a good hiding place the fabric.
• Carmen

Mine is fabric and books. You will find books stashed all over this house.

• Howard

Well, and I'm giving a lot of books back to the silent auction now, because I'm a hoarder. I had a costume library at George Mason, a costume Library at Hillwood, and my own personal costume library. When it came time to move, I went, “Why do I have 3, 4, 5 copies of this book?” When I had all those different offices, I just didn't want to carry a book from one to another. So, yes, tons of books.

• Carmen

Perfect, So, expect that at the next CSA silent auction. When we can finally be together again, there will be five copies of the same book from Howard.

• Howard

Well, I hope so. Oh, did you see I dressed up tonight? I was ready to dress up for this symposium and this is the first time I've been dressed up—like, maybe out to dinner once since I moved. So, I thought I had to dress up.

• Carmen

I forgot, I was going to comment on your outfit earlier.

• Howard

I haven't dressed up. I'm in T-shirts and shorts down here.

• Carmen

Right. I'm wearing a t-shirt, but it's a fancy t-shirt, so I'm considering myself dressed up, too.

• Howard

Ok, you look great.

• Carmen

Thank you, you do, too. I was going to ask you CSA has helped you throughout your career. You joined kind of late in the game, career wise, but it's still helped you.
It has. Yes, oh, would I have loved to have been in my twenties or thirties and been with this organization. Who knows they would have created? Maybe not. Maybe I found it at the right time. It was so funny because at Kansas City I had met so many people and we had friends there and we went to dinner and we sat there and watched everybody going down to the board meeting. And I said, “Someday, I hope...”. And every year, I presented a paper. Costume Society has given me the opportunity to do so much. I packed a lot in the last 10 years. It's because I think I came in very late. And, so, I don't know if I'm making up for lost time, but I'm just saying, anytime I did an exhibition, I would ask somebody about how and how they did it, what I should and shouldn't do. I was doing an exhibition and I called up Newbie Richardson and said “We're doing a new exhibition and the museum has a lot of money (well, maybe I shouldn't say it that way). They had significant amount of money, and they said they're thinking about new mannequin. I didn't know anything about mannequins. I used the mannequins that they had when I came into the job. So, I called Newbie who told me where to get them. I called June Bové and said, “How do you dress a mannequin?”

The people in the organization are the ones that have helped me the most. They just have. I don't know if that answers your question, but they've given back so much. In these 10 years, I've just gotten so much from everyone. It's great—they're my friends.

• Carmen

You had mentioned that because of CSA you've done exhibitions and written books. So, I think you answered the question perfectly.

• Howard

So you see this little book on Oldrich Royce? Do you remember that 20-minute paper I gave on Oldrich Royce?

• Carmen

I am sorry, I can't say that I do.

• Howard

You were at another session—you missed that one. And that paper that 20-minute paper turned out to be a 269-page book. Just in giving a 10-minute, 20-minute presentation, people talked to me afterwards and asked me questions, and I knew those questions needed to be answered, and I started to write the book. And that's how CSA has helped.

• Carmen

Before we get to any audience questions, where do you see the future of CSA?

• Howard

Well, I'll know I'm 62 this year, and I'm not going to be around forever. I think CSA's future is with the young professionals. That is who is going to lead and guide this organization. I remember sitting on the endowment board and asking if I could Skype into a meeting, because I was doing an exhibition
at Hillwood and could not fly out until Thursday while they had the meeting on Wednesday for the endowment. I suggested that I come into the meeting electronically. That was something new for CSA. That was something that they didn't know how to deal with it. We had to invent new ways of communication. If somebody from the endowment could not be there who wanted to be there, but just couldn't. And look what we're doing tonight. It's amazing. And we're talking maybe 5, 6 years ago that this was a conversation. We're moving fast with technology and everything, It's going to be the youth, the young professionals, who are in CSA, who are going to lead us to the next decade. Who knows what that's going to be? It's going to be great, but as I said, what has happened to us electronically in six years is amazing. And how quickly CSA has adapted. I have to say, under Kristen Miller Zohn's leadership, we have gone leaps and bounds. Who knows where CSA is going—it's going to be great. That's all I know.

- Carmen

Any final thoughts before we go to audience questions?

- Howard

No, I want to know what they want to know.

- Carmen

41:52 - 41:55
Can Howard tell us about his Broadway career?

- Howard

Yes, my Broadway career. Um, I was a small boy in the.. No, I left graduate school, and I had already met my husband. We've been together now 33 years. He lived in New York. Ah, perfect. Somebody I knew lived in New York. He is a librarian, and I had no theatre connections to begin with. I fell on good times with Betty Williams at The Studio in New York. Betty, a good friend of Joy Emery, said, “Do you want to come and work for me?” That opened so many doors. One of the things I did for Betty Williams is: Liza Minelli was doing her show at Radio City Music Hall and while she was having all of her and all the female clothes done, and I took on doing all of the male orchestra's suit coats. They were purchased suit coats but Liza wanted them to fit a certain way. They had to be broader in the shoulder and they had to be narrow through the waist. So, all the coats were bought one size bigger and then tailored down to everybody in the orchestra. They were white coats, and they wore black pants. And that's what Liza wanted. That was her Stepping Out show in 91. They said, “Howard, can you tailor coats” and I said, “Yeah, sure.” They said, “OK, here are 72 suit coats. Good luck.”

I just got handed a note by my secretary. After the Liza Minelli show I did a couple of movies. Maybe you know a movie about a psychic with Whoopi Goldberg. She wears this hot pink suit to the bank. I got to build that. I got to do Saturday Night Live—I did Gumby. I don't know if anyone is old enough to remember that. The note from my secretary says “talk about Streisand.” Yes, I've worked for with Barbra Streisand I worked on The Prince of Tides and The Mirror Has Two Faces, and while doing that, she asked me if I would make her Oscar gown, which I did. Her Oscar gown from 1991, when
she was giving out the best picture award. Why did I make it for her? Because I had made something for her for *The Prince of Tides* that she wanted to adapt, and so it was just easier. I don't want to keep dropping names, but I had a great career. It was wonderful, and one door opened to another to another. And as I said, I was doing wigs and I got down to Washington DC. Then the actor (I know we're off New York now), but the actor that was working at the Shakespeare Theater happened to be at George Mason teaching acting and said that they're looking for somebody to run their costume shop. Ok, when do they need me? And then, from there, I went from a classified employee to assistant associate to full professor. I left George Mason after 25 years as emeritus. I don't do to myself. Doors have opened and I have had a very lucky life, just not saying no.

- Carmen

I don't think we have any other not like questions, but there were a couple of people that said they wanted names dropped.

- Howard

Ok, yeah, Liza Minnelli. She's a whole topic on her own. Barbra Streisand knows what she wants, she's very direct with what she wants. You don't make a misstep with her. Whoopi Goldberg could not be funnier. Holly Hunter. I do have to say I did the clothes for *Once Around*. It's probably not a very popular movie. You can Google it, everybody. She had a red polka dot dinner dress with very small polka dots. I had to make 12, and the polka dots had to be in the same spots on every single dress.

- Carmen

Why?

- Howard

Because what happens is it gets rained upon. She wears it a lot, and they needed it for different shots. I worked on *Quantum Leap*. Scott Bakula could not be a sweeter guy. When he was a female, I got to make his—usually just the upper half of his body was shown in the mirror so you could see that she was a women, and it would be the top so he would close the shaving mirror and then there would be him dressed, usually in just half of the costume. They didn't need the full costume. On Broadway I got to do, oh, I don't even know how many it was—it was moving so fast. I worked on *The Hard Nut* with Marty Pakledinaz—he did the Nutcracker version called *The Hard Nut*. I was given the total show of *Lost in Yonkers* with Irene Worth. She did also the movie, but I didn't do the movie, I did the stage play.

Yeah Names, names. Tons of names. They're just people. They really are. They're just people. I did a costume for one person, I won't mention. I was so enthralled and I wanted to meet her and I couldn't wait until I could get to do this costume for her. She got there, smoking a cigarette, and she said to me, “So where's the goddam costume.” My whole thinking of her changed in that moment,
and she remains nameless in my memoirs (and that's not what I'm writing, yet). You get this sort of impression, what you think about someone, and sometimes it's true, and sometimes it's not. But those are some of the names that I've worked with. And, again, it's making the clothes, it's making them feel good, creating a character. Again, when I was in New York, I was doing construction. I never designed in New York. So construction led me that led me to design later in my life.

- Carmen

Yvonne K. would like to know what show would be your dream show to costume.

- Howard

I can say that in one word: *A Little Night Music*. Anybody out there, if you're theater is doing *A Little Night Music* and needs a designer to do turn of the century, I'm there, I want to do that show so bad. I love the music. I have the poster. I sing all the songs. I would love to costume that show. It's my time period—I always say, my best years are 1850 to 1950. Give me that show and I can do it historically correct, while still giving it the theatrical flair it needs. *A Little Night Music*, also *Little Foxes*. 1900s—if anybody out needs a costumer, I won't say no.

- Carmen

What job or show has been your greatest challenge, and what has been the most gratifying?

- Howard

Challenge. At George Mason University, the show that was written was called *Tiger Tiger Tiger*. It was about these three tigers that come to life in a children's room. One is a tiger from New York. One is a tiger from out West where they tested nuclear bombs. And one was a tiger from the moon. Having actors who needed to move and play tag and dress appropriately—that was a challenge. It was out of my comfort zone. I find that when I get something out of my comfort zone, I somehow can make it work because I take all the other knowledge and go, no, I was never a zoo keeper in my life but I love to do research. So, that was a hard show to conceptualize and actually make it work, but we actually sprung loaded the tails so they actually bounced. They were put on to a belt and it's threaded through the costume. They looked really well, and it's on my website, howardvincentkurtz.com. You'll see a picture of *Tiger Tiger Tiger*. I think it turned out very successful, but it was a challenge.

Now, what was the other part of the question.

- Carmen

What's the most gratifying?
Howard

Oh, *Dream of a Common Language*. It was my first show at George Mason University. I was the costume shop manager and they said, “Can you design?” And I said, “Sure, what’s the show?” They said, “Well, it’s a new play by Heather McDonald, who is also going to come and direct it.” Gorgeous playwright and it’s about a woman from the 1880s who wants to be a painter. It’s a gorgeous show. If you want to read a good play, read *Dream of a Common Language*. It about understanding one another and listening. And so, I met with her and she said, “I don’t want bustles.” And I said, “But as a costume historian, in that period…” She said, “I don’t want a bustle.” I worked around it. I worked with colors and textures. There was a stripe that I had pin tucked so that the costume looked like it was all one color, but what I had done was pin tucked all the tan so that the red showed on the costume. And everybody thought it was a red costume, but it was all pin tuck stripes until it opened up. I won the Helen Hayes for that. I was more excited that night, that that show was winning every award. That was most gratifying because it was a challenge, but I was directed on how to design the show. When a director tells you they don't want a bustle, you don't say, “Well, you have to.” No, you have to figure it out. I worked with colors and textures.

I didn't really worry about the line that much, because that wasn't what the story was about. That what I find—for anybody out there that is a designer—you have to tell the story, but, at the same time, you have to be able to adapt. It was a challenge, but at the same time, most gratifying was to find another way to design that show.

Carmen

Thank you for that, Howard. I don't think we have any other questions. We can go ahead and wrap it up. So, thank you very much for this conversation, Howard Vincent Hertz. We would like to thank you again and all of you for attending. Please follow the Costume Society of America on Facebook and Instagram, to make sure you hear about all the upcoming episodes of “Conversations on Dress.”

If you enjoyed today's webinar, please consider making a small contribution to help keep this content free for all. Thank you, and goodnight.