

That once-in-a-lifetime garment

Elisabeth Henry finds the Holy Grail of wedding dresses

THIS IS THE GARMENT THAT TAKES ON a life of its own while at the same time attaching itself to the bride's identity, creating a chimera of tulle and/or peau de soi and/or organza and/or button, bangles and beads, draped around a beaming, confident and/or grittily grinning young woman/hostage. It's important, and like all important things it evokes either awe or dread or some combination thereof.

It is of course the wedding dress.

The first designer to whom I spoke, Chris C., is a theater director with a flair for costuming. He said that he came to realize from his few bridal-gown creations that the most difficult thing was reconciling expectations with results. I had the keen sense he was leaving out the details of what happens when bride meets designer.

The second designer I consulted, young Stephen S., an up-and-coming artist based in the Hudson Valley, had this to say: "Never again."

It's an emotional time.

"Not so," protests Barbara Kerner of Style de Reves in Accord. "I love working with the bride. I relish the chance to work with a woman who has the ability to envision what she wants, and my job is to get her from point A to point Z."

At Style De Reves, Kerner custom-creates, custom-alter and custom-fits bridal gowns, as well as other garments. For example, she also crafts the robes for the Brothers at Holy Name Monastery. At the time we spoke, her dressmaker's manikin had held a reproduction of the character Elsa's dress from the Disney animated film *Frozen*, created for a precocious four-year-old who was planning to sing the title song to her birthday party guests. Another of Kerner's cutting tables was piled high with custom-designed boxing shorts for a professional boxer.

But it is the challenge of the bride and the dress that sets Kerner apart. "Planning a wedding comes at a challenging time for most young women," she explains. "They are launching careers. They may be trying to buy a home. They care about the quality of the occasion, because the guests will be their most beloved friends and family. There are budgetary concerns. And of course many have dreamed of this day and this dress all their lives. One hopes it's a once-in-a-lifetime event. All this preys on her peace of mind, and I am fully aware of that. I care as much about the relationship with the bride as I care about the final product. My space is very intentionally relaxing, and secluded."

The process can take from three to six months.

"I listen, listen, listen at our first consultation," Kerner says. "That helps me to draw out the whole concept. The bride may be vague in her articula-



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tion, but I can help get her to actualize the idea once we talk it through. Elements may need tweaking. My role is not to say 'don't.' I find ways to take her vision and make it work."

Kerner's own training as a seamstress started early. Her grandmother taught her to sew when she was five. She pursued a degree in fine art at the Hartford School of Art at the University of Hartford in Connecticut. Her focus was sculpture and printmaking. She finds it satisfying to employ her pattern-making skills when creating a dress by calling upon her experience with sculpting. "I create a two-dimensional thing that will grow into a three-dimensional thing," she says. "There is something so magical about that."

She says her printmaking background has deepened her understanding of herself. "If one is to be successful at printmaking, one must love the process. One must love process. And creating a wedding dress is a complicated, but wonderful, process. I love it. I love design, and I love to sew. The cerebral and the hands-on, the imagining and the creating. All necessary."

Is every client one who wishes to create a dress from pattern paper to final tuck?

"Oh, not at all," responds Kerner. "A lot of my clients have found something, but it's not exactly what they want. They wish to change this or that. A hemline. A neckline. They bring in things that are off-the-rack, or were worn by a relative, or they found something at an antique store, or thrift store. I encourage all of them, whether I am designing their dress or altering something they bring in, to also bring in images they find in maga-

zine or on-line. This helps, especially since few of them have the designer or dress maker vocabulary that would instantly translate their wishes to me. I love it that so many young women feel empowered to make their dreams come true this way. That's why I named my studio Style De Reves. It means Style of Dreams. I want my clients to love their dreams, and I want to make them real."

Another important element that contributes to the success of the studio is that it's woman-centered. "Women come here, and we work with the body," Kerner said. "Of course, for some, strong emotions arise. I enjoy how the collaboration results in the bride trusting me when I say to her that she will look beautiful, no matter what. That's my job. To make that promise, and to keep it."

Kerner has a love of beautiful things, and a love of making beautiful things. Her deft hands know well how to craft with silk, and silk ottoman, silk organza, tulle, chiffon, re-embroidered lace. She knows well bridal trends from the earliest days (Queen Victoria was the trendsetter who declared the dress should be white!) to now, when young women makes choices that have to do with the market for pre-owned. However, the greatest trend she has seen in the 25 years she has been doing this, is that young women feel more and more empowered to create their own look, to ignore rumblings from the undercurrents of haute couture, and take charge.

"In essence, they are the designers of their own look," she says, "even on this day, when tradition undoubtedly plays a role. They feel empowered. And that's good."

