

27 Dresses, and Then Some

By MARY PLESHETTE WILLIS
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IF you're lucky enough to catch a glimpse of Tziporah Salamon — who rides around the city on a bicycle wearing a little red fez of Moroccan mirrored fabric reminiscent of the call-for-Philip-Morris boy, a jacket of embroidered wool in cherry red paisley, glass earrings, beige caftan pants, pointy Turkish slippers and a purse that looks as if it were made from a flying carpet — you might ask, who is this woman?



Bill Cunningham/The New York Times

CLOTHESHORSE “When people ask me what I do,” Tziporah Salamon says, “the answer is I dress.”

A bird of paradise? A flying courtesan? A sartorial superwoman who will strut her stuff at Fashion Week, which begins Friday?

Ms. Salamon could probably teach the designers a thing or two, but her clothes won't be seen on a runway or featured in *Women's Wear Daily*. On the contrary. She is a 58-year-old New Yorker who has worked for 13 years checking coats at *Fresco by Scotto*, a restaurant on East 52nd Street, though she is better dressed than many of the patrons. Trained as a psychotherapist who didn't have the heart to interrupt her distraught patients when their time was up, Ms. Salamon has also been a saleswoman, a stylist, a teacher, a secretary and a cashier.

When not buried in a closet full of coats and umbrellas, she is preparing a one-woman show, “*The Fabric of My Life: A Sartorial Autobiography*,” which she has presented to

rapt audiences at her temple, B'nai Jeshurun, on West 89th Street. She hopes to develop it into an Off Off Broadway show.

“All my life I’ve been struggling to figure out what I was meant to do,” Ms. Salamon said one day not long ago, sipping hot water and lemon at the Fairway cafe. “And what I keep coming back to is clothes. I grew up with tailors. The single thread that runs through my life is clothing. So when people ask me what I do, the answer is I dress.”

From early childhood, Ms. Salamon dressed. She is a daughter of Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust and moved to Israel before coming to New York: her father was a tailor who worked for many years at Bergdorf Goodman; her mother, a dressmaker who made all her clothes.

“I used to go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning, and there would be clothes by my bed,” said Ms. Salamon, who this day was a standout in a black-and-white hat that fit her sleek head like a white chocolate candy kiss. “I owe my life to clothes. The only reason my father survived the war was because the Nazi commandant whose uniforms he tailored warned him of a roundup and let him go into hiding.”

The first of her family to be born in Israel (Tziporah means bird in Hebrew), Ms. Salamon grew up in and around her father’s tailoring shop, where she watched him produce custom suits. “He was like a magician,” she said. “And his shop was my magic kingdom.” In addition to her homemade wardrobe, she received care packages of exquisite dresses and party clothes from an aunt who married a vice president of Neiman Marcus and encouraged the family to move to New York in 1959, when Ms. Salamon was 9.

OVER the years, she accumulated various academic degrees, including all the course work for a doctorate in psychology.

“But no matter what else I was doing,” she said, “I always roamed the flea markets and vintage shops, even if all I could afford was to touch the fabrics.” She added that years ago, when she was teaching high school students in Berkeley, Calif., they would tell her: “ ‘Ms. Salamon, we cut all the other classes. The only reason we come to yours is to see what you’re wearing.’ ”

In 1980, she moved back to New York and from one job to the next, some of which honed her eye and skill, especially a stint as a waitress at Jezebel’s, then one of the city’s hottest restaurants.

“The place was extraordinarily beautiful,” Ms. Salamon said with a swoon. “The owner, Alberta Wright, furnished it with embroidered Chinese piano shawls, beaded lamps, antique dresses hanging from the rafters, crocheted napkins. She encouraged me to

wear antique clothing and gave me a different hat to wear every night. Finally I found someone who appreciated my sense of style and understood my art.”

Each outfit begins with a single item and can take years to complete. “I won’t wear the outfit until it’s perfect,” Ms. Salamon said emphatically. “When I’m out in the field, I keep in mind every item in my wardrobe.”

Given the quantity of her wardrobe, this is no mean feat. Ms. Salamon said she rents two storage bins to house off-season clothes, and she employs four seamstresses to mend, alter and sometimes copy a garment she particularly likes.

Every closet, shelf, nook and cranny of her tiny apartment on West 72nd Street, painted bordello red and festooned with beaded bags, glittering bangles, hat boxes and family photos, is crammed with shoes, gloves, hats, bags, shawls, coats, dresses, pants, sweaters, blouses or jewelry.

Like so many of Ms. Salamon’s outfits, her most recent creation began with a story. One day, en route to Central Park, she passed the [Ralph Lauren](#) store on Madison Avenue.

“What I saw in the window,” she said, “stopped me dead in my tracks.” It was a man’s sweater jacket composed of tiny squares in different colors and patterns stitched together like a quilt.

“In that instant, I saw the whole outfit,” she said. “I have a pair of tartan plaid pants identical to one of the squares, three strands of red cinnabar beads from China, two strands of hand-carved silver baubles from Baku, a black felt fez with embroidered flames in multicolored pearl, ruby and emerald rhinestones.”

She stopped to catch her breath. “No way could I not buy that jacket,” she concluded. “Even if it takes me a year in tips to pay off the bill.”

Her long-term ambition is to teach women through her one-woman show, along with lectures and private consultations, how to be chic without spending a fortune. “Fashion has become something to buy, not to create,” she said, wrapping herself in a crimson cashmere shawl and pulling on a pair of black-and-white kid gloves. “Where’s the joy? Where’s the play? Where’s the creativity?”