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Regina Evans

FASHION'S RETRO DIVA

ISSN 1328-9225

9 771328 922015 08

$7.95 AUD AUG-SEPT 2004

RETURN TO SPLENDOUR

It's every woman's fantasy: her very own secret closet, stuffed full of divine, one-off vintage couture clothing. Regina Evans has realised this with her private service to the stars, The Diva's Closet—by appointment, of course.

STORY **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**
PORTRAIT **NADJA BERNHARDT**

When it comes to fashion, time is the enemy. Old bodies are traded in for new and older men for younger, but there's one place where older is better: in the wardrobe. These days, vintage is the new black. Julia Roberts wore vintage Christian Dior to accept her Best Actress Oscar in 2000, Jennifer Garner was seen at last year's Academy Awards in vintage Valentino and the girls from *Sex and the City* regularly donned vintage pieces for the trend-setting series.

Of course, it's easy for American and European women to access vintage haute couture with boutiques such as New York's Chelsea Girl and areas such as London's Notting Hill. Australian women, however, have struggled to get big vintage names, such as Schiaparelli, Chanel and Yves St Laurent, into their wardrobes.

Step into the spotlight Regina Evans, proprietor of The Diva's Closet, a vintage clothing company set up in October 2003 to dress Australian women in search of the latest international look, but without the time to peruse the shops of Paris, Milan, London and New York.

Evans does the travelling for you, eight times a year, sourcing one-off items from hairclips to 1960s Schiaparelli furs. Dressing Australian celebrities—Claudia Karvan, Georgie Parker and Cate Shortland—and fashion columnist Melissa Hoyer, The Diva's Closet does vintage the discreet way: by appointment.

My appointment is for 5pm sharp. I am late and wearing nouveau. Evans is gracious as she releases the security gate to her home, which is tucked away among townhouses in the backstreets of Sydney's Paddington.

She's wearing vintage, designer unknown, though one that I suspect peaked in the 1970s. Evans manages to pull off the look and is effortlessly glamorous. Her skin is chocolate and flawless; her voice is deep, with southern American intonations; her good old-fashioned manners she, no doubt, picked up from her mother's Alabama roots.

I am surprised to enter a contemporary living space, minimalist and white with parquet floors. The closest her home gets to vintage is the photographs of her brother and his family, circa 1990.

The 'closet' is an attic room above her living space, its entrance via a secret door and staircase. A world away from the rest of the house's clean lines, The Diva's Closet is a boudoir designed to delight: perfume bottles from the 1940s, a dressing screen, a brass bed and sofa and a table set for high tea with Art Deco crockery and a cake made by one of her clients. Racks of clothes and boxes fill the rest of the space.

Born in 1961, in Oakland, California, Evans is the youngest of four. Her mother grew up in an upper-middle-class home; her father grew up poor in a family of nine. Her parents met at high school and fell in love. Both high achievers (her father was the first black parole officer in California; her mother a college dean), the marriage was not to last. They divorced when Evans was six, which was when her love of clothes and cupboards began.

"I used to sit in my mom's closet and fantasise," Evans recalls. "I still remember how it was laid out. She had a small walk-in closet and her clothes were what made me happy. They were the things that I connected to. I was always trying on my mom's clothes; I even wore one of her dresses to my senior ball.

"Old sisters from the church, they would take me home and cook food. I could play with their handbags; I used to go through their drawers. Mrs Hawthorn had a chest for me with all her old stuff in it. I remember putting on all her jewellery, and it was always a good feeling."

Evans's mother can be seen in framed black-and-white photographs around the room and Evans still has some of her mother's clothes in her own wardrobe.

"My mother is amazing," says Evans. "She is my idol. There was one

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point, she was working on her masters, on a teaching career, raising us, and she still got straight A's and went to Berkeley [University of California]. She has very high moral standards. Her motto is 'do right by people'. Dressing was, for her, a sense of pride. When she would go out, she would be really happy and part of that was getting dressed, when we would all help her."

But it wasn't until she was much older that Evans allowed her creative side to blossom. Her career began in Washington DC as a political journalist. She worked as a legislative assistant and correspondent on Capitol Hill and was known for her flamboyant style in a traditionally conservative industry.

In her late 30s, she headed to New York to start a make-up range for black women. But few manufacturing companies were willing to give her idea a try and she did not have the finances to do it herself. Then came the catastrophe of September 11, 2001.

"The year I turned 40 was the same year the buildings fell," Evans says. "I was living in Harlem and was at home on the computer. The TV was on and I actually thought it was a joke because I couldn't wrap my mind around it. My sister was working in Manhattan, I was just frantic."

It was a defining moment. "It's one of the reasons I ended up coming here. The first time I came to Australia was 10 years ago. And before the plane even touched down, I was like, 'My god, I want to live here.'

"My acupuncturist always said to me, 'You need to indulge your creative side,'" Evans explains. "I would say, 'I don't have a creative side.' But this was before the buildings fell. It's funny how quickly I found a creative side, isn't it?

"When I came here, I was always dressing in vintage and getting them altered," she explains. "I would go into [Double Bay clothing alterations specialist store] The Emergency Button and Mitzi [owner and former fashion designer Mitzi Skyring] would say, 'Where did you get that?' So we had a sale in her shop, just a small collection of vintage stuff—a lot of my own clothes! It just went from there—word of mouth—and I kept travelling and buying more things. Now I'm doing a business course at Randwick TAFE to help The Diva's Closet."

Not that it needs much help: Evans already has an established client base of Australian celebrities, as well as teenage girls who have recognised the charm of vintage for their school formals.

A true professional, she won't reveal her sources and always makes a personal connection with sellers and buyers alike.

"I don't think there is any other shop that is set up by appointment only. That's what I like: personal attention," she explains. "The shops that I go into are big on customer service. Sometimes I do dress parties. Last week, I had four girls over, we had four Italian dishes and salad, we sat downstairs and ate and then we came upstairs and they shopped.

"I have a search service called What A Diva Needs. So what is not here in the range, I can source for them specifically."

The Diva's Closet is less than a year old and already Evans has had to take on a staff member to help with the workload. Her years as a business journalist have taught her to do her research: each piece in her collection is tagged with its year and includes a meticulous, handwritten history. Her attention to detail and personal charm have secured her name in the cutthroat world of fashion, but, like all risk-takers, she still has her fears.

"I HAVE LEARNED TO PERSEVERE—that even in your bleakest moment, when you think things are too rough, there is always another side to it," she says. "I worry because I am new to it. Sometimes I don't know if I am doing the right thing, but if you are doing the wrong thing, you just switch your game plan.

"You have to say, 'I am going to make a profit', because when you set your sights to do something, that's what you are going to do. It's important to surround yourself with a group of really good people who will look you in the eye and tell you when you are wrong."

Entering a new industry is hard enough, but doing it in a new country has its own challenges. Once again, her mother's influence shines through.

"She used to take us to synagogues, to Catholic churches, and I have friends of all races and colours," says Evans. "She would say [about discrimination], 'That's their problem; it's not yours. Don't let it cut you off from people.' I can now go into so many different cultural settings and feel very comfortable."

Racism is something Evans has experienced throughout her life. When working in Capitol Hill, she was often mistaken for the elevator concierge simply because of her colour.

"My heritage is the first place I look to; it's where I get my sense [of myself]," she says. "The people who drew up the civil rights for us—I think: if they can do that, I have every door, every opportunity, open to me. I have no excuses. My motto is, 'Don't complain and if you don't know something, try to figure it out.'"

Evans is certainly not complaining and neither are her customers. In fact, many often don't breathe a word about her in order to keep her closet their own fashion secret.

It's the price you can sometimes pay for success, but thankfully, their desire to keep Evans's business a secret never lasts too long. The word of the diva is definitely out of the closet. ■

Clothes from The Diva's Closet are in three general price bands: the $60 to $375 price range, then $600 (Christian Dior dresses) to $1,700 (Schiaparelli fur coats, vintage evening dresses). Beyond that are items such as a numbered couture Jean Patou gown, or Victorian and 1920s beaded gowns, which sell for more than $2,000. Evans stocks sizes up to 14. Call (02) 9361 6659 or email regina@thedivascloset.com.au for an appointment.