



'03

Alix Verley Pietrafesa

Clothing with a Story

She is a highly regarded designer of one-of-a-kind and limited edition women's clothing, but Alix Verley Pietrafesa '03 originally thought her career path might lead her to the stage. She was active in fine arts, dance, and drama at Choate Rosemary Hall, taking roles ranging from the young Antigone in Sophocles' tragedy to an 80-year-old woman in Noel Coward's *Waiting in the Wings*. "But, one day, I realized that, to act professionally, you have to audition and wait for someone to hire you," Alix says. "And I never wanted to be in a position where I have to rely on someone else in order to do my work."

Alix also loved the visuals of theater – especially the transformative power of costuming. Working with her hands has always come naturally – perhaps not surprising, given a father (Robert Pietrafesa '73) who comes from 10 generations in textiles and tailoring (and who made his own wedding jacket) and a mother from a long line of artists (and who made her own wedding dress). Now very much her own boss, Alix creates clothes that resemble works of art.

Although Alix grew up in Cazenovia, N.Y., having a French mother meant a fair amount of time spent in Europe. She also went overseas for college, graduating from Scotland's University of Saint Andrews with a degree in art history. At university, Alix began sewing in earnest, inspired by her dissertation research on Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti and his time period. Intrigued with the idea that clothing could tell a story about a person, and fascinated by the style of the Bohemians of Paris, the Bloomsbury group, and her mother's clothing from the 1970s – "I've always been a bit of a hippie," Alix confesses – she used garment-making as a creative outlet.

After graduation, Alix worked briefly in New York's garment industry – and hated the environment. So she went home every night and sewed her own creations. She sold her first collection out of her apartment and, with the proceeds, traveled to London, where Alix of Bohemia (alixofbohemia.com) – a name conjured by a comment from Alix's mother – was established in 2009.

For the next few years, Alix shuttled between London, Hong Kong, and New York. In London, she bartered with Roma by mending their clothes in return for fabrics. She became intrigued with old textiles, and the idea of incorporating into her creations what she refers to as "items that have had a life." Each one-of-a-kind item was like a painting – a colorful, textured composition that might include cutouts from vintage quilts, appliqués, and materials and embellishments gathered during her travels.

A trunk show in Greenwich Village in late 2014 became a turning point for the business. "All of a sudden, Vogue and Bergdorf Goodman were contacting me," Alix says. She was working 14 to 16 hours a day, selling garments faster than she could make them. When Bergdorf wanted to place an order, Alix told them that she didn't do production work. Instead, she made 40 one-of-a-kind jackets, worked Bergdorf's floor, and sold virtually all within a couple of hours. "When they put one of the last few in their window, with my name visible," she remembers, "I realized that I had come into my own as a designer."

Although Alix continues to produce one-of-a-kind and custom work, Alix of Bohemia clothing is now sold in boutiques stateside and overseas, as well as online. Six women work with Alix in a spacious studio in Brooklyn's Red Hook section. One, a master tailor, generates the patterns from Alix's original creations so that her designs can be replicated, but Alix's hands touch every garment and write each personalized tag. With a rich background in the arts but no formal training in fashion design, Alix says, "I do everything backward from what you learn in fashion school. Instead of starting with a sketch, I use the materials as my palette."

Those materials range from Afghan blankets to Bulgarian embroideries, Japanese boro, and Mexican textiles. Alix travels widely and spends months sourcing fabrics. She uses only natural fibers – no leather or fur. Attentive to sustainability, she is always on the lookout for old and antique textiles. Her satellite studio in Mallorca, Spain, puts Alix between New York and India, where she has been working with local artisans to develop original fabric designs. Alix's next collection will be created entirely from fabrics featuring her original artwork.

Sometimes, Alix has a hard time parting with the fabrics she has collected. But, she says, "I chose to work in this medium because it has a real life. When someone buys a garment from us, it becomes part of their story, and I'm happy to see it go to a good home."

RHEA HIRSHMAN

Rhea Hirshman is a freelance writer based in New Haven. She also teaches women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Connecticut in Stamford, and is a former member of the Choate Rosemary Hall English Department.