

High couture in Charlestown: Shirley Straface

by Alexandra Bowers

In an airy apartment where a sewing machine takes center stage on an polished dining room table and a dressmaker's mannequin draped in white muslin stands nearby, Charlestown designer Shirley Straface makes custom clothing, especially evening dresses, for women who love clothes.

Most clients find Straface through word of mouth, seeing her work at fashion shows or by viewing her designs at her Web site. Designing a piece of custom clothing is a personal process.

"What I would do is take her measurements and then make up a muslin," said Straface, referring to a "draft" made of inexpensive cotton. "Then she comes back and we fit it to her perfectly so she's 100 percent happy. Then, I take the muslin and make it into pattern pieces."

The next step is to choose the fabric and color for the piece.

"I buy fabric in New York City or in some stores around here, like Windmill and Sewfisticated," said Straface. "I'll often sit down with a customer and talk about ideas, sketch and talk about color, and then, I'll go to New York and find what I can find."

Straface said a skirt may be three or four layers of fabric. For a strapless dress that includes intricate sewing and complex construction like boning—once made of whalebone in Victorian times but today made of slender flexible strips of plastic—there are more

fittings to ensure a perfect fit.

Looking closely at the dresses, the difference between Straface's work and a dress off the rack at a department store is immediate. There are tight seams, linings that help shape the dress and the dressmaker's art that support the drape of the fabric in the full skirt of a ball gown.

Straface has been designing clothes for two years. She had a career in the high tech industry but wanted to do something more creative. Ultimately, Straface attended The School of Fashion Design on Newbury Street in Boston.

"There are some incredible teachers...[including] Daniel Faucher, one of the top courtier designers in Boston," she said, adding that she apprenticed at his firm for several months. "He's like a mentor, and I've learned the best way to do things."

While French couture is a specific standard of dressmaking, Straface has a more generous definition.

"In our mind couture is something made to fit one person, and no one else has [the same piece]," said Straface, adding that recent clients have wanted clothes for formal parties and cocktail parties and also for corporate suits.

Custom clothing is not inexpensive, but Straface said that the price depends on the amount of embellishment and how labor intensive, and uses several pieces she is currently creating as examples.

"The customer has a sweater



Designer Shirley Straface in her Charlestown home, which doubles as her designer's studio.

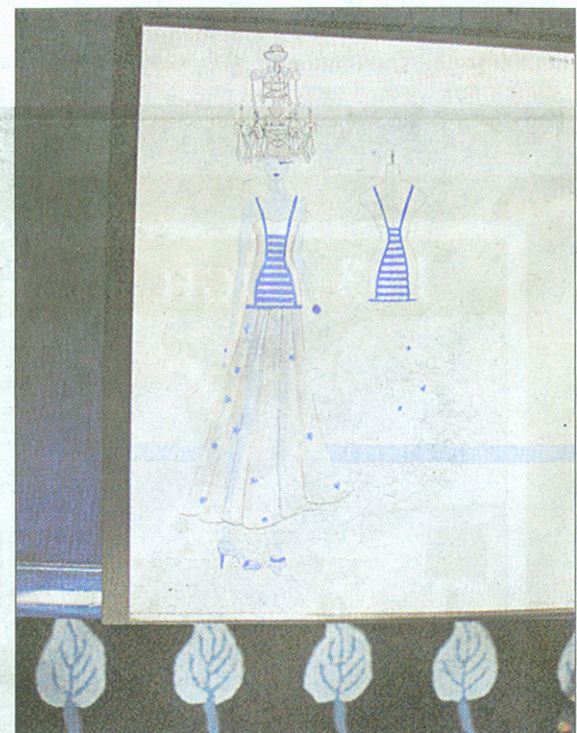
top and she wants a funky skirt," said Straface. The cost will be comparable with a department store, with the advantages of a perfect fit and a unique design.

A dress that satisfies both the

elegant and the avant-garde is a slim black strapless sheath dress, fitted through the bodice with a modern version of a corset and with vertical silver stitching at the seams and along the hem.



Hand-sewn and painted lace on an evening gown, a variation on the original drawing.



The dress began as a simple sketch.

"It's a special fabric that fits a lot of body shapes and could be made in different colors for bridesmaid dresses," said Straface, adding that its simple lines will keep it in style for years.

The large table is strewn with pattern pieces in a deep red color, while a fitted white muslin version is pinned to the mannequin.

"This dress that I'm making is wool, a fine wool, with a beautiful feel and beautiful texture," said Straface, adding that because she grew on a sheep farm in Australia, she knows how versatile wool can be and she uses it for many of her designs. "[Modern wools] look expensive and they can be tailored really nicely."

"This is actually similar to the original design of my wedding dress 10 years ago," said Straface with a smile. "I ended up going for a traditional dress." ♦

Straface is available by appointment for custom clothing requests and can be reached at 617-407-4766 or www.shirleystraface.com.