

Meet



Tim Gunn

A Man Born with

Style

by Ruth Bashinsky

When Tim Gunn of *Project Runway* fame started his teaching career nearly 30 years ago, he was so terrified to speak in front of a room full of students that he had to stand against a wall just to keep from falling over because his knees shook so badly. "I thought this was either going to kill me or cure me and I am not going to let it kill me," says Gunn, who is best known as the poised on-air mentor to the designers from the hit Bravo show *Project Runway* and for his bold catchphrases "Make it work!" and "Carry on!"

Gunn knows firsthand how to make it work and to carry on. As a young boy growing up in Washington, DC, Gunn described himself as a problem kid and a terrible introvert, which stemmed from a debilitating stutter he had suffered from for most of his childhood. Through years of therapy, Gunn eventually overcame his stuttering problem and gained self-confidence and today serves as an inspiration to all of his students and colleagues, encouraging them to follow the motto he has lived by: "Make it work!" and "Carry on!"

As one of the most admired figures on television Gunn is truly having the time of his life. Besides *Project Runway*, he is also host of his own reality show on Bravo, *Tim Gunn's Guide to Style*, a show in which Gunn gives advice to the fashion-challenged, and author of the book *A Guide to Quality, Taste and Style*.

Earlier in the year, Gunn made his acting debut, playing a reporter for the ABC television series *Ugly Betty*. It was an experience he truly enjoyed and one that he compared with taking a kid to Disney World. "I have never worked on a big budget show, so just the scale of the crew was staggering to me, as was the whole scale of the set. It was the only time I did scripted television and I have such respect for the actors. I am not an actor, for sure," he laughs. "I loved it!"

It was just last month, Gunn hosted the Academy Awards for the *Today* show interviewing all the A-listers on the red carpet. He also appeared on *Oprah* and her new show, *The Big Give*, donating 500 pairs of shoes to the Henry Street Settlement, one of their causes on behalf of Liz Claiborne. And most recently, was featured on the NBC reality show *The Biggest Loser: Couples*, providing fashion makeovers for the contestants.

For the 54-year-old Gunn, who had contemplated retirement when he turned 50, he is amazed at the stunning twist of events his life took when *Project Runway* contacted him while he was still the acting chair of the department of fashion design at Parsons. "It has been the most phenomenal, phenomenal path and a very serendipitous one. That is why I say to people all the time, young people in particular, never make assumptions about what lies ahead for you ... you just don't know," says Gunn enthusiastically.

Gunn truly is having the time of his life and it

shows. In 2006, *People* magazine named him one of the sexiest men alive, a surprise even for the normally shy Gunn, who doesn't mind poking fun at himself. "It was totally surreal. I thought, 'What is wrong with them. Are they crazy?'" he declares.

When Gunn is not offering his fashion and style wisdom on the air he is doing it in the boardroom as chief operating officer at Liz Claiborne Inc., a position he has held since March of 2007 and one that he calls his most challenging professionally. Working alongside Bill McComb, chief executive at Liz Claiborne, the duo is striving to put Liz Claiborne on the map as a company that not only knows the pulse of fashion, but also as a leader in product and design. Working at one of the nation's largest apparel companies, Gunn's day-to-day duties include overseeing a number of brands – DKNY Jeans, Juicy Couture, Lucky Brand Jeans, Kate Spade, Jack Spade, Liz Claiborne Apparel, Claiborne (the menswear line) and Cesar Rodriguez (this brand actually walked the red carpet).

"When I came here a year ago the company was in a very, very different place, including structurally, in a very different place," says Gunn. "I'll use Liz Claiborne the brand as an example. We had jewelry happening in one place. Handbags happening elsewhere. We had apparel happening, yet again, somewhere else, and none of these silos were talking to each other so you had product being developed that wasn't for the same customer. We've taken these silos apart. All of those parts are now under the same creative director so there is a cohesiveness being brought to the brand." Gunn also leads a team of 275 people that he describes as "extraordinarily talented" who are all working together to create what he calls "irresistible product." In fact, much of what Gunn accomplishes at Liz Claiborne often mirrors what he does in front of millions of viewers each week. "I am a mentor to the designers. I am a sounding board. I am a therapist. I am a truth-teller. And I am an absolute advocate for the designers and their needs at the executive level," says Gunn, who just celebrated his one year anniversary with the company last month. "I am thrilled to be here. I look forward to many more years to come."

Before joining Liz Claiborne, Gunn had spent 24 years at Parsons The New School for Design serving in a variety of roles including admissions director, associate dean and department chair of fashion design. As department chair, Gunn was credited with invigorating a curriculum that had not changed since 1952. Under his leadership, the department strengthened its position as a leader in fashion design education in America and as one of only a handful of leading programs in the world. Although Gunn is no longer at Parsons, he still has a title - Honorary Chair of the Department of Fashion Design - and a scholarship in his name endowed by Liz Claiborne.

With auditions for season five of *Project Runway*

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underway, Gunn looks back with fondness at 2004, when the show first began. "Never in a million years did I think the show would be this popular," says Gunn, who calls it "...gritty, daunting and demanding ... you have to love it!" "I thought it was great fun doing season one. I thought that this is a chapter that will be behind me and I will just carry on with other things. I never dreamed this could be a cultural phenomenon."

Gunn explains that he easily could have cast two more seasons from the number of quality people



who showed up for season four. "We never had such a consistently high level of designers in terms of point of view and in terms of quality of execution. I said it at the beginning of the season [that] any one of the 15 designers could have won the entire season. I had never said that before."

As Gunn prepares for a new season and working

with a whole new set of designers, the question that begs to be answered, though, is how do the designers truly perceive Gunn? Intimidating? Critical? Or just plain fierce? Gunn pauses, then sums it up. "As an ally. As a confidante, of sorts. I mean, most of them... there are those who have an antipathy for me ... and as someone they can trust."

And for all those *Project Runway* fans who are wondering what happened with all the designers from season 4, particularly, the final five: Christian, Jillian, Chris, Rami and even Sweet Pea, Gunn still keeps in touch with them. "We are very close. I am lucky to know them. They are an inspiration for me and I learn a lot from them."

That being said, how does Gunn manage to do it all ... do it all so well ... and do it with such finesse? "There are times I feel like I am one hair shy of a psychotic breakdown," admits Gunn, laughing out loud. "For instance, today I am all over the city and it requires synchronization where if anything goes wrong, it throws the whole schedule off."


However, Gunn wouldn't change a thing. "I pinch myself everyday because I am the luckiest guy in the world. The wonderful thing about what I do is that I don't have to be anyone else other than me."

POINTS FROM THE MASTER OF FASHION

On Feb 29, Tim Gunn was the honored guest at Nassau Community College. Dressed in a black pinstriped suit, crisp, white tailored shirt and classic red tie, Gunn looked positively stylish. After signing copies of his book, *A Guide to Quality, Taste & Style*, he spoke to an audience of apparel design students, faculty, administration and industry guests about all things fashion.

Some of the topics he discussed included his love and respect for American designers; his favorite *Project Runway* challenge (season one: episode one); what fashion means to him ("For me it is the barometer gauge of our culture. I am a big champion of the semiotics of clothing, that the clothes we wear sends a message to the world on how we want to be perceived and how the world will accept us. And I really believe that we are ultimately responsible for how we dress."); and who his fashion icon is (Cary Grant).

Gunn, who has worked in academia most of his life, told the crowd, "You can never take the teacher out of me," and offered some valuable words of advice to students entering the workforce and to anyone, for that matter. After the event, the chairperson and faculty from the apparel design program presented him with a citation from Nassau County proclaiming "Tim Gunn Day" as well as sterling silver cufflinks from Tiffany engraved with the words: "Make it work!" Gunn was surprised and moved, and said he was "farklempf" by the act of kindness. ●

A man with short, light-colored hair and glasses, wearing a black suit jacket, a black button-down shirt, and black trousers, stands on a white, modern staircase. He has his right hand on his hip and his left hand resting on a white ledge. The background is a minimalist, brightly lit space with white walls and a grey horizontal line near the top.

“Make it Work”

HIS ADVICE INCLUDED:

TREAT EVERYONE AS IF THEY ARE GOING TO BE YOUR NEXT BOSS.

IT IS BETTER TO ALWAYS LOOK A LITTLE OVERDRESSED FOR AN INTERVIEW THAN UNDERDRESSED. IT SHOWS RESPECT.

LOVE, PASSION AND DRIVE ARE WHAT A PERSON NEEDS TO SURVIVE ON SEVENTH AVENUE.

WHATEVER CIRCUMSTANCES ARE PRESENTED TO YOU, TAKE THE HIGH ROAD.

BE THE BEST YOU CAN BE. IT IS A CONSTANT AUDITION.

IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU. KNOCK THEIR SOCKS OFF. BE CONFIDENT. DO YOUR HOMEWORK.