

THE MYTH OF THE DRESS

And so arises the Myth of the DRESS which has come down to us in various guises in the stories we read as girls....In them an ordinary mother assumes the form of the Fairy Godmother and makes a DRESS for her daughter by cutting up the curtains of the family home of Scarlett's emerald BALLGOWN made from the curtains of Tara. And from this humble otherwise unremarkable stuff, she with her work-worn hands, by sheer skill and great love makes the DRESS that transforms her daughter into a woman.

I know this DRESS is miraculous. Wearing it I am charmed. It armours me against the world as it reveals me to it. When I make my entrance standing at the top of a high staircase, you will recognise me - I have become myself. I am invincible. On this night, in this DRESS I command all gazes.

FROCKS..SIMPLE FROCKS, GOOD FROCKS, OLD FROCKS, NEW FROCKS, EXPENSIVE FROCKS, HOME-MADE FROCKS, BOUGHT FROCKS, SCHOOL DRESSES, PARTY FROCKS, DEB DRESSES, BALL GOWNS, COCKTAIL FROCKS...WEDDING GOWNS AND L. B. D.s

A DRESS IS A DRESS IS A DRESS...A FROCK IS A FROCK BUT A GOWN IS.....

I cannot recall a time I have not been in the thrall of the Myth of the DRESS. I was inducted into the myth at an impressionable age by my mother. We lived on a farm and my mother was always sewing - matching outfits for us three girls and rich, fantastic, extravagant creations exquisitely executed in expensive fabrics for herself - "If you're making it yourself, you can afford good materials," she always said. Her most outlandish creation was a Pumpkin Line EVENING GOWN in Old Gold Paper Taffeta which she made and wore to the Fire Brigade Dinner Dance.

In Primary school I was always writing compositions about My Trip to Paris - to become Christian Dior's understudy. The fuel for these exotic dreams came from my mother's copies of The Vogue Sewing Book. As well as the chicest Parisian Haute Couture by Dior, Balmain, Gres, Bohan and Chanel there were always pages of fabrics with poetic names like Plisse, Pongee, Moire, Crepe de Chine, Lame, Panne, Peau de Sole, Shantung, Slipper satin, Sharkskin, Shot Silk....and when my mother was finished with them I was allowed to cut them up. I used the paper fabric swatches to Clag on to designs I drew over a series of Prestige lingerie and underwear ads I'd saved from the pages of the Womens Weekly. The ads were sophisticated artistic fashion sketches: the models wore hats and gloves and were posed at the races or at a cocktail party - everything was sketched in detail except their clothes. Over slips, step ins, brunch coats and nighties, I designed and pasted, EVENING GOWNS and matching opera coats.

A seminal text at this point in my life was PARTY FROCKS by Noel Streatfield. Published in 1946 it is set in immediate postwar rationed Britain and tells the story of a teenage girl who receives a parcel from America.

Selina lifted the tissue paper. There lay THE FROCK. She held it by the shoulders and gaped at it, and so did everybody else. It was long. Down to the ground. Cream organdie over a cream satin slip. It had ruched square shoulders and short puffed sleeves.

THE FROCK propels the narrative. Selina must find a reason and an occasion to present the PARTY FROCK to the world, ultimately she writes a script and organises the whole village into creating a massive pageant, and she appears in the Prologue and Epilogue wearing THE FROCK.

My mother was full of stories of how she and her sisters managed during the war when there were no materials available in the shops; about how entire wedding parties were outfitted in mosquito netting (which you didn't need coupons for) - the bride in pristine white and her maids in variously dyed hues, and of trousseaux made of parachute silk.

Another image from my teenage years is the Moddessa ads; nothing factual, informative or vaguely useful about menstruation could be gleaned from, but THE FROCKS, THE GOWNS, THE DRESSES those women wore were spectacular - Movie Star DRESSES worn with "feminine confidence", whatever that meant. So that inevitably the idea of growing up and entering the realm of womanhood was conflated with wearing such a DRESS.

The dream of THE DRESS persisted in High School, I chose Coco Chanel for my "Famous Frenchman"(sic) project, devoured Mary Quant's biography, Quant by Quant and followed the emergence of the young Australian designer, Prue Acton in the pages of Teenagers Weekly, and was allowed to miss school and accompany my grandmother to Oaks Day at Flemington for Fashions on the Field, the year Jean Shrimpton shocked the VRC and Australia in a mini DRESS.

Perhaps I am so affected by The Myth of the DRESS because I was born in the Fifties when DRESSES were really DRESSES. They had form fitting and detailed bodices, scooped necklines, tight waists, capped sleeves and the fullest, biggest gathered skirts that swirled when you twirled in whizzy circles. They were curtains to hide behind when strangers came to the door. They took yards and yards of fabric and yards more if they were cut on the cross or had checks and stripes to match up.

These DRESSES are THE DRESS qua DRESS. Nothing else compares. Sheaths have a certain appeal, but the Mu Mu, The Sack, The Shift, and The Mini are not real DRESSES. They don't swish and whoosh when you move and they don't transform you into someone you have always dreamed of becoming in the way that a real DRESS does. To put on such a DRESS and step into high heels is to put on and perform the Feminine and conquer the world at least for an evening.

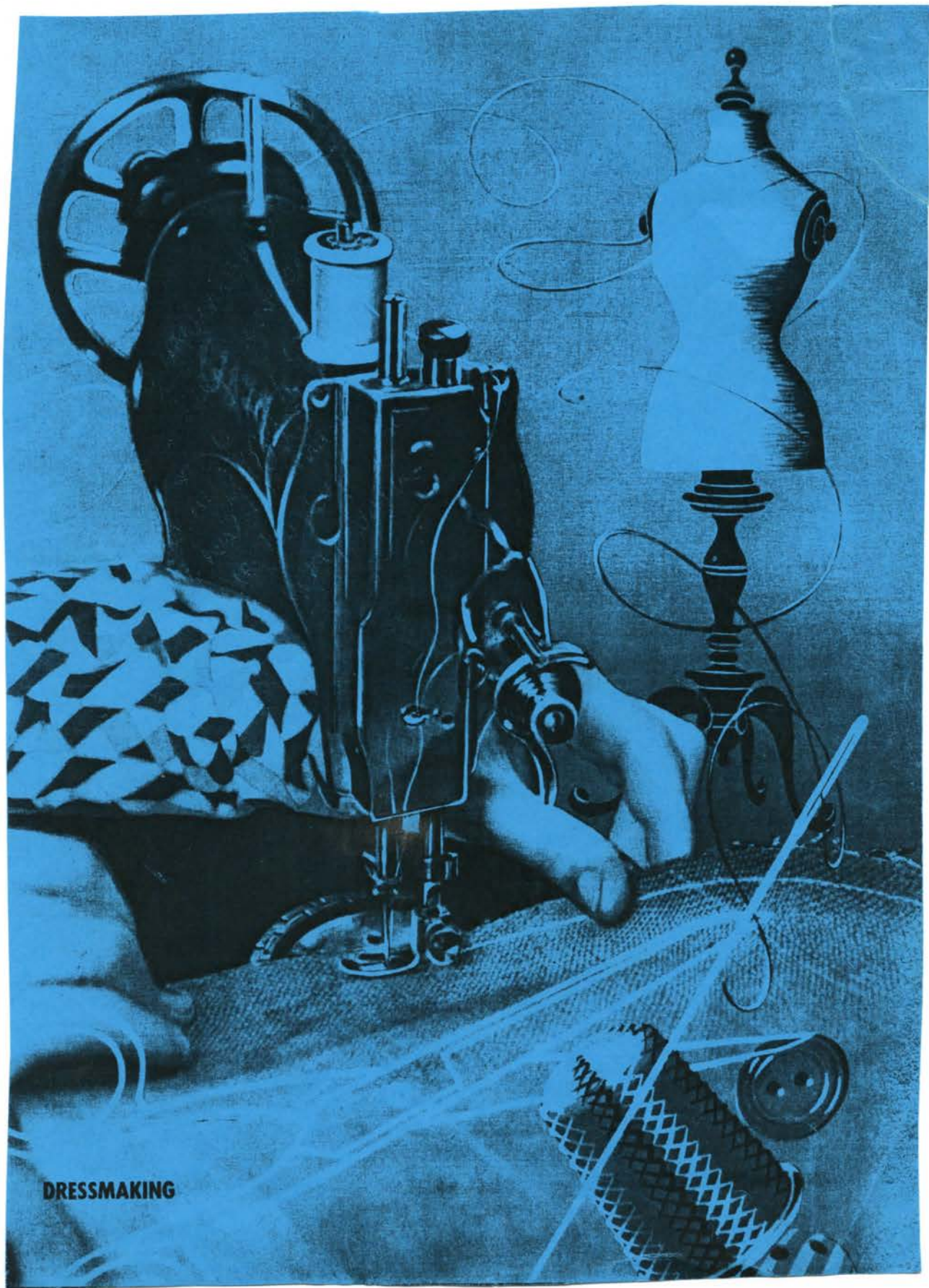
SUZANNE SPUNNER

SUZANNE SPUNNER wrote the play, RUNNING UP A DRESS.

Party Frock



NOEL STREATFEILD



DRESSMAKING