

“AN EXERCISE IN TRUST”

## TOM BROECKER '84

by CHRISTINA EGBERT

**T**om Broecker '84 has memorized the floorplan of almost every department store in Manhattan.

In Urban Outfitters on Fifth Avenue on a Sunday afternoon, he makes his way through the maze of displays until he's standing in front of these bright, floral-patterned, men's button downs.

“Sometimes ugly clothes make more of a statement than pretty clothes,” he says, whipping through the shirts on the rack.

The smell of Chanel overwhelms Saks Fifth Avenue, where he finds a women's white T-shirt-style crop top with a white racerback tank on top. He needs one that is revealing but not overly exposing. Is this the right one? How much will he have to alter the shirt to make it what he needs? If it's too much work, it's not worth it.



As he moves briskly from rack to rack, Broecker explains that fashion designers have a specific ideal for their clothes; but as a costume designer, he always has a specific person in mind. Today he's shopping for characters on *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City*, which will premiere on Netflix in 2019. Sometimes though, something else will catch his eye and he'll pick it up for his other job as the head costumer—and now producer—for NBC's *Saturday Night Live*.

"The psychology of the clothes and the people I'm dressing are more interesting to me than the actual garment. Fashion is more about making someone look pretty, whereas costume design is telling a story with clothes, reinforced with text."

Broecker might as well call himself a part-time therapist, given the nature of his job.

"I had two actors break down in front of me just this week," Broecker says. "But that's what I'm there for."

"When you shut the door, it's a safe zone. You take your clothes off, both physically and emotionally. That's a really quick, intimate experience. It's an exercise of trust. They have to know that I will take care of them and that they're in good hands. I have to make them to feel comfortable."

"THEY HAVE TO KNOW THAT I WILL TAKE CARE OF THEM AND THAT THEY'RE IN GOOD HANDS."



## THE DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEE

When Broecker was younger, he thought he wanted to be a performer. After Wabash, he interned at Juilliard part time as both a costume designer and a dancer.

One problem: He didn't like performing.

Tina Fey didn't care. She asked him to play Lee, a costume designer on her show *30 Rock*, where he was also the real costume designer.

"I'm really proud of *30 Rock*," Broecker says. "Because I was in the show, it was happening so fast, and it really seemed like a part of me. It was an amazing experience."

Broecker's favorite thing about the role is that he rarely had lines.

"I spoke in two episodes... the very first two." He smiles. "But after that, I just rolled my eyes."

He calls his character "the disgruntled employee."

"Once I started doing the show, I realized I rolled my eyes in real life more than I thought. We all have unconscious behavior. One of Tina's really great gifts is that she can see something like that, and magnify it [for the character]. When someone points it out, you realize how much you do it.

"I actually started trying to change my everyday behavior to do less eye-rolling."



Jack McBrayer, Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, and Jana Krakowski from *30 Rock*.  
Everett Collection / Shutterstock.com

## TOM BROECKER'S HARDEST DAY AT WORK

It's 4 a.m. on Saturday, May 19, 2018.

People from all over the world are glued to their televisions watching guests and the royal family arrive at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

Tom Broecker was no exception... except that he wasn't watching for fun.

A *Saturday Night Live* sketch about the royal wedding had been planned for that night. It was set at the reception, which meant that the cast members would need to be in the family's wedding attire.

"We got into work by 8 a.m.," says Broecker. "And we made 10 outfits in nine hours—eight of them were re-creations.

"It's not like you can make them up. Everyone would say, 'That's not what they wore to the wedding,' because they had seen it that morning."



SNL cast member Cecily Strong wears the re-creation of Kate Middleton's buckram hat.  
Photo by: Will Heath/NBC/NBCU  
Photo Bank via Getty Images



photo by Kim Johnson

“YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO CHANGE, MOVE, THROW SOMETHING UPSIDE DOWN.”

Broecker has worked on shows from *House of Cards* to *30 Rock* and even the *Emmys*, but nothing compares to the craziness of *SNL*. Inside the NBC Studios he may create a safe place for cast members to be vulnerable, but he can't get attached to his own work. He might start costuming a sketch featuring *SNL* veteran Keenan Thompson, but by the end of the week, that sketch could change with Kate McKinnon in Thompson's role.

"You have to be able to throw your designs out. The best thing the show has taught me is to be able to throw out whatever I'm working on at any given moment and start over. You have to be able to change, move, throw something upside down.

"Life will always bring you a problem, and you have to solve it. The more you hold it tight, the harder it will be to really think about it." ■