

# DRESSMAKING FOR DIVERSITY

Rebecca Cole, Sewing Producer on Channel 4's TV show *Unique Boutique*, reveals how the show empowered both herself and the participants...

Written by Michelle Rowley



Corsetry. Bridal gowns. Costumes for television. Rebecca Cole has sewn it all. In a fascinating career putting her sewing talents to great use both in front of and behind the camera, Becky found the team and atmosphere she needed to let her autistic strengths shine in her role as Sewing Producer on Channel 4's groundbreaking series, *Unique Boutique*.

Anyone with a love of sewing will be excited by this newly-commissioned show set to be a powerful programme demonstrating how sewing skills can create clothing which empowers people and enables them to live more comfortably. At the Unique Boutique, a highly skilled team of expert designers and tailors hear from 12 individuals whose clothing needs have not been met by mainstream fashion for either physical, psychological, or financial reasons.

After hearing each contributor's candid story, the team create a specially adapted outfit to match the individual's taste and needs. Kate Thomas, a Commissioning Editor at Channel 4 describes the production as: "a joyous and moving series featuring a diverse range of personal stories and suitably diverse fashions. We hope the brilliant team, both in front of and behind the camera, will kick-start a real-world revolution in fashion for all bodies." As the Sewing Producer of the series, Rebecca is a key member of this brilliant

team of which the vast majority have a disability. As Becky says, "if you're going to make a show challenging the fashion industry's lack of inclusivity, you need to walk the walk as well as talk the talk." Her sewing journey which has led her to this role is also one of self-discovery and self-acceptance, so fitting to the ethos of the show.

## LEARNING CURVE

At the age of seven, armed with a second-hand copy of the *Reader's Digest Complete Guide to Sewing* and a small electric mustard sewing machine bought at a car boot sale, Becky quickly taught herself how to sew clothes for her dolls. Her ability to learn a new skill quickly and to hyperfocus on a task aided Becky in going on to study for a Bachelor of Arts in Costume for the Performing Arts at the London College of Fashion. She'd chosen costume over fashion in part due to her obsession with corsetry, "if they just teach me

how to make corsets, I'll be happy," she thought.

Thankfully she did learn the art of sewing corsets but also much more besides, including how to pattern cut period costumes and sew period pieces, such as crinolines, bustles and doublets. She was to become a proficient sewer with an impressive repertoire of skills, which earned her one of the very few places on a BBC apprentice scheme in the costume department.

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Photo: Deb Burrows Photography

(Clockwise from top left) The TV studio; Rebecca Cole; threads heaven; Fats Timbo modelling Rebecca's creations at Victoria Jenkins Unhidden show at LFW (Left) The *Unique Boutique* team.





Photo: Deb Burrows Photography

(Clockwise from top left) Behind the scenes at *Unique Boutique*; Kate Stansforth modelling garments at Victoria Jenkins Unhidden show at LFW; Rebecca sewed a sensory friendly get-up.

With costume designer Sally Plum as her mentor, Rebecca went from a costume runner, to costume standby and later costume supervisor. However, despite it being an “amazing time” and “an incredible experience” for which Rebecca was technically well equipped, she would come away from a busy workday feeling completely overwhelmed and exhausted. After several years working in the industry, she decided to take a complete break to raise her family. During this time Rebecca was still able to put her costume making skills to great use by running her own dressmaking and bridal wear business around family life.

However, just two years ago Rebecca made the realisation that there was more to her extreme exhaustion whilst working in costume production than she had known. Having often felt like she was falling short no matter how hard she tried or as if she was an outsider not in on a shared joke, she began to

piece the pieces together. In doing so, the puzzle revealed a picture of someone who had been living as an undiagnosed autistic person trying to survive in a world and workplace designed for the neurotypical. “I was trying to live in a world in which not even I realised there was something different about myself,” explains Rebecca.

Her extreme fatigue and burnout had been a result of days spent masking her autistic traits whilst also trying to deal with the sensory overload she was experiencing working in a fast-paced and stressful industry often subject to last-minute changes. Her autism diagnosis led to not only a much better understanding of herself, but also the way in which she needed to work in

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order to best play to her strengths.

Following a season working on *The Great British Sewing Bee* as an assistant sewing producer, Rebecca saw that there was a different way to combine her love of sewing and working in television. The role of a sewing producer requires bridging the gap between those who know how to sew and those who know how to produce a television series, for which a key skill required is organisation.



(Above) The colourful *Unique Boutique* television set-come-sewing studio this four-part Channel 4 series takes place in, creating garments for those let down by high street brands.

Here one of Rebecca’s many autistic strengths could be put to fantastic use, along with her intuitive problem solving skills and ability to find quicker solutions.

#### WORKPLACE SUPPORT

Now able to explain her needs and provide a list of necessary accommodations, Becky was supported by the team at BBC Studios Channel 4 from her very first interview. Simple things such as requesting that all information is put in an email meant she wasn’t left second guessing what was expected of her. Her requests, such as having ear defenders readily available on set and not to have loud background music playing whilst she was concentrating were met with understanding, making Rebecca feel valued and that she didn’t have to spend her time masking who she was. “I could be my completely true honest autistic self, which gave me the space and energy to absolutely

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smash the logistical challenge of organising a complex television show with really tight deadlines.” Her work involved organising the fabric, sewing teams, fittings for the 12 participants, the sewing production, and the filming schedule. A logistical challenge indeed, but what Rebecca describes as “a beautiful thing to be part of.” As all the fittings had been done blindfolded, the final reveal of the contributor’s outfits was truly their first time seeing the garments. Knowing how much trust each of the 12 contributors had put in the show, it was vital to Rebecca that the team did a good job for them. Judging by the genuine reactions to their work they certainly did. “I cried like nothing else doing the show; I hadn’t anticipated

how emotional it would be.” Rebecca’s personal favourite moment was seeing the reaction of an inspirational young woman learning to fly when given a surprise pilot’s uniform. She had organised the modified uniform which had been adapted to be worn comfortably by a wheelchair user and enabled the wearer to access a feeding tube without getting undressed. Providing the contributors with clothing that empowered

them was not a question of complicated alterations but of the ability to truly listen to their individual needs.

Rebecca is hoping that the *Unique Boutique* will raise awareness of the need to provide accessible clothing for people who don’t fit the standardised norm that high street fashion caters for. She is currently working on creating a sensory friendly capsule wardrobe for herself and strongly believes that more should be being done to support the one in five people in the UK living with a disability to feel good in their clothes. After all she explains, “if you know how to put a zip in, you can easily put one in the bottom of a pair of trousers to help someone get them on/off or more easily.” ***Unique Boutique* first aired on Thurs 24 July. Watch the whole series at channel4.com**

**Rebecca Cole is a sewing producer, having sewed most of her life. For many years she has worked in the costume and fashion industry. She demonstrates on Create and Craft TV and is a trained kinesiologist! Follow her on TikTok and Instagram @becky\_cole\_sensory\_sewer.**



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