



“YOU CAN’T TEACH GOOD TASTE.” —BETTY HALBREICH

“There’s a whole sad world out there,” says 87-year-old Betty Halbreich. “And sometimes, people fritter their time away at Bergdorf Goodman. It’s a free institution, you know.” Maybe so, but Halbreich, who founded the 114-year-old Manhattan luxury store’s Solutions personal shopping department nearly four decades ago, does not fritter. On this particular Wednesday, she walked into Bergdorf’s at 8:30 AM, surveyed each floor’s inventory, and dressed a handful of clients, including Candice Bergen, with whom she’s worked since 1979. “She used to only wear beige and couldn’t walk in heels,” Halbreich recalls. “She’s branched out since then.” Now, Halbreich is sitting for a portrait. But she’d rather be working, tidying her Park Avenue apartment (which boasts 10 closets filled with everything from Libertine to the first jumpsuit designed by her former boss Geoffrey Beene), or sipping vodka, her favorite drink. “Wouldn’t I be good in a vodka ad?” she jokes. In all seriousness, she would.

Halbreich arrived at BG in 1976 after her marriage to a wealthy New York businessman disintegrated. The split, among other things, led to a suicide attempt and a stint in a psychiatric ward. But Halbreich’s tenure at BG has served as its own form of rehabilitation. Often described as a “fashion therapist,” the inimitable octogenarian has outfitted the most extraordinary (and extraordinarily wealthy) women of the last 40 years—Babe Paley, the Lauder ladies, and the late Joan Rivers, a close friend, among them. Regardless of fame or finances, she treats each customer with the same firm but

loving hand. And from within the confines of her third-floor office, which, overlooking Central Park, is adorned with orchids and photos of her clients’ families, Halbreich soothes all sartorial and emotional troubles. **KATHARINE K. ZARRELLA**

Where did you get your sense of style?

BETTY HALBREICH My grandmother didn’t have it. My mother did. I was in her closet from the time I was a little girl. If she went out the door, I went in. I think you’re born with it. It’s an eye—it’s a feeling. You can’t teach good taste.

What kind of women do you enjoy working with?

BH I’m an intellectual snob. I love the people that come in to see me, whether they buy or not, but I have to be able to intellectualize with them and talk about cooking, what’s happening in the world, what happened in Bangladesh, what’s happening in Baltimore. That’s all part of living, as is dressing.

Is retail therapy a legitimate means of coping?

BH It should be. It’s important. I’m sequestered in a very pretty office with a view of Central Park. It’s therapy heaven, and it’s comfortable. Because of that, people talk about a lot of things that they generally wouldn’t. I’m a good listener. Somewhere in my life, someone said, “Be a good listener and maybe you’ll get along.”

In your book, *I’ll Drink to That: A Life in Style, With a Twist* [2014, Penguin Press], you wrote that some of your clients remind you of your younger, unhappily married self. Is that difficult?

BH No, because I’m much more secure. I was very nervous as a girl and I don’t carry all those insecurities anymore. I don’t care if I don’t look the best, because I do. I’m not buying with my best friend because we’re going to El Morocco with our husbands. I’m a free agent. It took a long time.

Do you want to shake the women you see making the same mistakes you did?

BH Absolutely not. They have to find that out for themselves. They’ve got to go through the same craziness and go down as far as they can to come back up.

What do you think of online shopping?

BH I see so many returns in my building. I walk out in the morning and I’m Zapped to death! I have to crawl over the boxes to get to my lobby. That’s lazy shopping. It’s like sitting at home drinking all day. I know it’s successful to a point, but I believe it will water itself out.

Have you ever bought anything online?

BH I buy vitamins online when I don’t go to Costco. I love Costco, and they carry my book, so I love them even more. There’s something fascinating about it—not only the shopping, but the people. Considering I see beautiful people five days a week, isn’t it kind of nice to see how the world really is?

I heard you have a celebrity crush...

BH Well, it was Johnny Depp, but he’s looking a little feeble. Then I fell in love with Mr. Cumberbatch, but he went and got someone pregnant and got married. So now there’s a new man, on channel 13, Mark Rylance. He’s the lawyer in *Wolf Hall*. He’s a fascinating, very silent, middle-aged man. I’ve decided the young are not for me. They’re disappointing.

How do you feel about today’s increasingly casual approach to dressing?

BH It comes out more in the summer. I have a loathing for white jeans. I’ve never worn a pair of jeans in my life. I still dress up to go to a restaurant.

You’re 87. Have you considered retiring?

BH Retirement? I’m way beyond that. Maybe I thought about it in my 60s or 70s, but now? The alternative would be sitting in a nursing home. I’d rather sit in my office and look out my window.

BETTY HALBREICH IN NEW YORK CITY, APRIL 2015
JACKET LIBERTINE JEWELRY HER OWN