

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 13, 1950

Description: In the interview segment, ER interviews fashion designer Sally Victor.

Participants: ER, Sally Victor

[ER:] It is often been said that, for a woman, a new hat will fix anything. For expert advice on this always interesting subject, I've invited Mrs. Sally Victor to be my guest. Mrs. Victor.

[Sally Victor:] I'm so glad to be here, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well, thank you, and I'm delighted to have you, Mrs. Victor. You have one of the outstanding reputations in the country for beautiful hats. But also, I seem to associate that reputation with very expensive hats. Are the ones you design available only at very high prices?

[Sally Victor:] Oh, I wouldn't feel like a good American if that were true and it's not true. While I do make very expensive models, a great many of my hats are available all over the country. Copies of them, that is, at lesser prices. And you know, Mrs. Roosevelt, I even make patterns that are available in case you want to make your own hats. (1:17)

[ER:] Do you? [Sally Victor: Yes.] I never knew that [Sally Victor: Yes.], that's interesting.

[Sally Victor:] Well I-- yes I do, and I feel like that's part of my job.

[ER:] Well I'm awfully glad to hear that, not that I ever have much time to make [SV laughs: No] anything but I'd just like to know that I might if I really decided to. Um it would be a shame to have your genius confined just to a lucky few, I think. But to talk about your most expensive designs for a moment, do you design a hat and then find a customer to fit it, or do you find the customer first and then design the hat?

[Sally Victor:] Well, that's really a question at the beginning of every season; we have four seasons a year. 'Course we keep designing fifty-two weeks a year, really. But at the beginning of the season, I do a collection of a hundred or two hundred hats, and in that collection I try to remember the tall woman and the short women, and the blond or the brunette, and all types and all kinds and people that live all kinds of lives. And then when after I've shown that to the press- I have a press party--and after I've shown that to the press and I see what the acceptance is, then I can better tell, which of them to take out and make into a larger collection and which just to forget about.

[ER:] Well now I'd to ask you something, do you ever have to design um something for a special person who doesn't want to see anybody else have the hat she has? (2:52)

[Sally Victor:] Yes, but she must be very special because I always have a very strong feeling that if it's good enough for one woman then other women should benefit by the design. And of course there are exceptions, like for women who do a great deal of traveling and live very hurried lives and they need something that will go with a lot of clothes in their wardrobe, and hats can be very awkward to pack, you know. And so for women like that I do things that are perhaps a conglomeration of color with a special design, like for Anna Rosenberg, for instance, [ER: Yes.] who's always running around, you know. I do

especially little hats for her, and I do-do special things like that for people that I really love. But, by and large I like my designs to go to the far corners of the country.

[ER:] I think that's a- a very nice idea, but I- I have known people, for instance I remember uh in forty-eight, I was in Paris and I thought well I won't have time to do much of anything, but I asked an old friend of mine, a French woman um if uh she would tell me what she did about hats. I knew she had very little money now because they'd lost a great deal during the war [Sally Victor: Mhm.]. What she did and she said, "Oh I will send you my little Milliner," who arrived with felt in her hand to bend around on my head, it wasn't a very good felt because you couldn't get very good materials [Sally Victor: No.], but she made me two hats that fitted almost every occasion and were very comfortable on my head and- and cheap too. (4:35)

[Sally Victor:] Well I'm sure she did that with love. I wish you'd let me do that someday [Sally Victor and ER laugh] I'd love to do that.

[ER:] But that was interesting [Sally Victor: Yes.] for me to see how a French woman did it. [SV: Yes, yes.] I was--I really thought that it was um uh a rather unique thing to just have someone walk into your living room and [Sally Victor: and--] say I'll try and fix a hat for you. [ER laughs] [Sally Victor: Well--] Now I think we have to go back and my son Elliott wants to speak for a minute. (5:00)

(Break 5:00-5:10)

[ER:] I'd like ask you something. When one hasn't someone like you to advise and to create, but has to choose for oneself, what are the most important things to remember in choosing a hat?

[Sally Victor:] Well, I think the most important thing to remember is not to find out what they are wearing or what Mrs. Jones is wearing because your life may be an entirely different one and you may just look altogether different than the hat that you admire so much on Mrs. Jones. I think that you must try to express your own individuality and your own im-personality, and I think, of course, one of the big things to do if you possibly can is take your husband with you.

[ER and Sally Victor slightly overlap]

[ER:] Take your husband with you? That's uh--

[Sally Victor:] I'm a great advocate of that because I do think they have good judgement and I do think that you will like the hat if he does. Don't take your girlfriend.

[ER:] Don't take the girlfriend? [ER laughs]

[Sally Victor:] No- no- no they, they, they don't do very well by you. And look in the mirror, full-length, when you're buying a hat and see how you look entirely.

[ER:] Oh, now, that's a very good idea, I think. But if one is inexperienced, Mrs. Victor, can--how can one know that one's choosing the right color because that's one of the important things. (6:30)

[Sally Victor:] Oh that's very important. And I think the only way you can really do it is by the process of elimination. You try the different colors on and the mirror will soon tell you what makes you look bright and alert. You know blue can be wonderful on you and it can be terrible on somebody else. Red can be- look just devastating on your friend and be horrible on you. I think you must try them and one important thing that I think women should remember is that just because red wasn't becoming twenty years ago

doesn't mean it might not be becoming now. You know our hair and our skin color changes and it's very important to take a little extra time and try them all. (7:11)

[ER:] My trouble is that I never have much time and so um whatever I get I get in a hurry. [ER laughs]

[Sally Victor:] Well you look awfully well in what you get in a hurry.

[ER laughs]

[ER:] Well that's very kind of you to say eh but um I- I do really think that probably the kind of life people lead um and whether it's a business life [Sally Victor: that's right.] or a life of social activities [Sally Victor: yes.] primarily must have a good deal to do with the choice of hats because one of the most important things I- I think but I may be wrong, is that what you wear should be appropriate for the time and place you're wearing it.

[Sally Victor:] Yes, that's the very important thing. You know a hat can be so pretty if you're wearing it to a dinner party, you know that isn't too formal, and it can look perfectly dreadful if you wear it to the office, or if you wear it in the subway, and I think that women should t-try to choose the happy medium if they can only have one or two. I don't think a woman who has to buy few hats or can only buy few hats, I should say, should go to extremes. She should be very careful to avoid fads. Fads are not fashions. And-- [ER: that's true] and fads are very expensive, even if they're very cheap, because they last such a little while.

[ER:] Isn't it wise, if you can afford it, to buy in preference, two hats of very good material than four hats of poor material?

[Sally Victor:] I have preached that for years, and really I have uh customers who have built up wardrobes of hats, I know the Milliners are going to hate me to say this, but you know, Mrs. Roosevelt, we have customers that have brought back their hats for four or five years just to have them steamed and reconditioned and they really look pretty today as they did the day they bought them. Because-because good fashion and becomingness are good fashion. (9:14)

[ER:] Well, I have, I have always thought that because I feel that same way about clothes [Sally Victor: I do too.] and I think that uh it does make a difference, first of all, to know what, how you're going to wear your things [Sally Victor: yes.], then what- what colors um are necessary, go well with you and um then really to have good material. That seems to me to be almost more important than anything else because um now and then you, if you're young, you may want to change often, but for an older person eh a quality is important I think.

[Sally Victor:] Well I think that's important for everyone and I think that no one remembers what you have in your closet, but it's the appearance that you make when you're wearing your hat that's that important.

[ER:] Well, now I think our sponsor wants to say something. (10:14)

(Break 10:14-10:24)

[ER:] Now, I'd like to ask you a few personal questions if you don't mind. What made you decide you wanted to design hats and how did you get started, Mrs. Victor?

[Sally Victor:] Well my mother was of that school of thought that thought that every girl must know how to sew, make button holes, scrub floors, wash dishes, and do everything and we had to learn. And when I made a dress it had to be as near perfect inside and out as it could be-- as could be. And I was very young and that was a very lengthy project and so when I started making hats, they were very quick, I didn't do them very expertly at first but I did know how to sew and the project was over so quickly and I was onto something new that I became just entranced with it. And I had a great many clients because all that it cost was thirty cents or forty cents for the straw, and then I made the hat and I became very popular because it was for free! [Sally Victor and ER laugh] And-- but I made up my mind then that I loved it and I went on studying the history of hats and old hats and men's hats and new hats and then I just left college and took a job for the summertime in one of our big stores and did very well and never went back. I hope you can't tell it by the way I talk. I did go to night school, though, afterward. And I did uh then go back and learn all the technicalities of making it for I always feel that if you're going to give orders, you should know how to do it yourself, and it stood me in very good stead. And I've never regretted it I've just loved every minute of it. (11:56)

[ER:] And you just gradually got to the point where you could have your own shop? [Sally Victor: Yes, mhm.] I think that's perfectly wonderful. Well now I wonder whether you ever have difficulty with your clients by uh having them not like what you've designed for them.

[Sally Victor:] Well, Mrs. Roosevelt, you can't do business with women and not have difficulties once in a while, let's face it. [ER chuckles] But- but they really are very nice people for the most part, and I don't have difficulties because I don't think a hat's worth its salt if the person who's wearing it doesn't carry her head high and is proud of it, and I don't think it's good for her unless it makes her happy. I think it should act like well uh vitamins, for instance, you know a sort of--[ER: mhm.] pep her up and if it doesn't do that and if she feels unhappy then I don't think the hat will do her any good and it wouldn't do me any good to have her wear it. So I would rather do something--

[ER:] Rather make her another hat?

[Sally Victor:] Yes, I really would, cause I think it's better--

[ER:] Well do you ever uh find that someone uh falls in love with one of your designs, something like that, and insists on having it when you know very well that design doesn't suit that person at all and you think she looks very badly in it. What happens in that case?

[Sally Victor:] Well I just lose a customer. (13:10)

[ER:] Do you tell her?!

[Sally Victor:] Well I certainly do. And if you don't believe I do, then I'll tell you some people you can ask. But I really do, because I don't think it does the woman any good and I don't think it does me any good. I think it's important that when she trusts a person like I am, that I should fulfill that trust to the nth degree, I really truly do.

[ER:] Oh, I think that's wonderful. I never thought that anyone would dare be that [Sally Victor: Yes.] honest. [ER laughs] I think that's wonderful.

[Sally Victor:] But, I- I am.

[ER:] Well, that's just wonderful. Well now you just spoke about the history of hats, or rather, I suppose, of hat fashions, and that made me think I never thought about it as history before, but it's quite fascinating I think because um as I go back even um to my mother and my grandmother's time and uh to some of the hats that I wore once upon a time. Um I don't-- not quite sure that I don't look upon them now as rather terrible monstrosities! [ER laughs] (14:14)

[Sally Victor:] Well, I don't think really that the hats were any worse than the clothes of that period. [ER: oh, that's true] They were so cumbersome, you remember all the petticoats and all the skirts [ER: Mhm] and all the dust catchers, and of course, the hats, I suppose, were made to complement those clothes, if you could complement them. But I think they were pretty horrible fashions. Don't you think the fashions today are so much prettier?

[ER:] Oh, I think now-a-days people will not be made uncomfortable and I think that that is one of the things which makes fashions today so much nicer--

[Sally Victor:] Nicer. That really is what makes fashions pretty.

[ER:] I think it makes them pretty. And then I think people are much more sensible in- in the kind of things they wear today.

[Sally Victor:] I do too, [ER: And--] I do too.

[ER:]—That makes a great deal of- of difference. You don't-- um you-- well you're not as much the slave as you used to be. That's really what it amounts to.

[Sally Victor:] Well I think that's just living today. Everybody wants to expand and be freer. (15:15)

[ER:] Well now I think my son, Elliott has something he wants to say.

(Break 15:19-15:34)

[Sally Victor speaks inaudibly in background]

[ER:] I've been wondering and perhaps this is a professional question that you won't want to answer. Uh where do you get your inspiration for the many designs that you make?

[Sally Victor:] Well, that is one of the most fascinating parts of the work. For instance, this season I got the inspiration for a large proportion of my collection from a chest exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum. It was a beautiful exhibit of wonderful ivory chests meant from every country in the world. And I went up there and felt that they would just crown women's heads, made proportionally of course. Another time I get them from headline news. Many years ago, I remember, when they were in good old—I did hat, a hat that became famous for the one sided hat called the Chetnik. You remember, taken from one of those [ER: Yeah] caps. And, oh they were in the news so then. Then another time I get them from paintings. Sometimes I get them from men's hats, old hats; you know the men's old hats were just—I don't mean the old men's hats I mean—[ER: I know what you mean.] you know [ER: Yes.]. They were just fascinating, oh so beautiful, you know, with plumes and, and beautiful ribbons and everything, cause they wore beautiful hats long before we women ever dared wear them. And then I get them, of course, from paintings, and like the [Thomas] Gainsborough thing or the [Jean-Antoine] Watteau's, [ER: Yes] or people like that, and we also get our get our colors from there a great many times. But the biggest inspiration I think come from everyday living. Or, for instance, from the show "Million Dollar Baby" a few years ago, when I first did the little cut hair and I pulled a little closer down over the head, it made a

whole new feeling in hats for that year. And frequently we get them from the theater or a movie, or-- but mostly, I like to feel that we get them from everyday news and from living. (17:21)

[ER:] Well that's uh that's interesting. I wonder if you ever, in making a hat, think about um whether a man would like it for that particular woman. Do you ever think of a man's taste in connection with making a hat?

[Sally Victor:] I'm so sorry to admit this, you'll know I'm a weak thing, Mrs. Roosevelt, but I think about the men's likes all the time.

[ER:] You do?

[Sally Victor:] Yes, well in the final analysis most of them pay the bills, and most of them, I feel, have very good taste and very good judgement. And if they like a woman-- they love a woman, they want her to look as pretty as possible, and I think that's so much more important than just being fashionable, maybe, for once or twice. I think a thing of beauty just goes on and on, and I think men like pretty hats.

[ER:] Of course abroad uh a man takes much more interest in a woman's clothes [Sally Victor: Yes.] and I've often seen men in Europe um choosing their wives' hats and- and clothes with them [Sally Victor: Mhm.] and always thought that uh that was really fun in a way.

[Sally Victor:] It is, but fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know how to say this, you know, our men are much busier men than the men of the uh abroad—

[ER:] Well pers—so- so are a good many women in this country [Sally Victor: Yes] much bigger-- busier [Sally Victor: Yes]. Um and I- I- I don't myself know very much about the fashion world, but I would like to ask you whether it's true that we here in New York have developed as the hat fashion center now-a-days rather than in Paris.

[Sally Victor:] Oh I'm so pleased that you asked me that because I can't just shout that it is the hat center of the world, but it really truly is. We do make the most beautiful hats in the world. And you-- just look at our American girls, whether the hat is ten dollars or five dollars or fifty dollars. Nine-tenths of the women are so well-hatted in this country and look so pretty, especially when you compare them with people of their kind in other countries that do spend money for clothes. I think our whole theory is one of youth and freedom and beauty, and I think that we designers here have worked very hard toward that. (19:40)

[ER:] Well you just spoke about Anna Rosenberg, you must have made hats for a great many very interesting people.

[Sally Victor:] Well, I'd like to tell you about some of your- your-- the people that you know that I make them for, like Doris Fleischman.

[ER:] Oh, do you?

[Sally Victor:] Oh, I do all of Doris's hats.

[ER:] Oh I love Doris's hats.

[Sally Victor:] And she, she always looks so pretty in them [ER: Yes], don't you think? And of course I do them for a great many of the movie people like, oh, Joan Fontaine um oh, Lana Turner, I don't know, I--you know, I could just go on and on and on and on--

[ER:] Well, I wish you could but I'm afraid our time is drawing to a close and I do want uh thank you very much before we go on to the next part of our program. Uh you have been most kind, Mrs. Sally Victor, in coming here today, and I am interested myself and so I'm sure my listeners will be. Thank you very much.

[Sally Victor:] Thank you so much for asking me.

[ER:] And now we must get some news from our sponsors.

(20:41)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s) 72-30(24)

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