

# BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## *Rebecca Valentine*

Couturier and Costume Designer

Conducted by Sophie Pitman in 2011 at Ely, Cambridge, England

Rebecca Valentine was born in Cambridge, England, in 1962. After attending British Army primary schools, she took her O-levels at a boarding school in England. She matriculated from high school in South Africa and then took a pattern and drafting course, which led to employment in a bridal boutique. She returned to the United Kingdom in 1982 and spent ten years juggling private sewing work, waitressing, and curtain making in a workshop. In 1992, a chance meeting with couturier Brigid Warner, who worked for Zandra Rhodes, Bruce Oldfield and Amanda Wakeley, led to her learning couture techniques and a four year job. In 1998, Valentine became a client fitter and workroom manager for Robinson Valentine (Antonia Robinson and Anna Valentine), a London couture house made famous in 2005 for dressing the Duchess of Cornwall, Camilla Parker-Bowles, for her wedding to Prince Charles. Rebecca Valentine now works for Anna Valentine (no relation) on a self-employed basis, and also makes custom pieces for her own private clientele. Since 2005 she has been making costumes for the Lantern Dance Theatre Company, a mixed-ability company with both able-bodied and disabled dancers from Ely and Cambridgeshire. She is also a dancer with the company.

In this interview, Rebecca Valentine speaks of her background and education, choice of career, and learning her profession on the job. She discusses her problem-solving approach to her work, including clothing design and construction, sewing techniques, fabrics, and fittings. She also comments upon pricing and recycling, and compares working for couturiers and private clients versus designing costumes for dance.

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This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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[This interview was conducted by Skype while Rebecca Valentine was in Ely, Cambridge, England, and Sophie Pitman was in New York, New York]

**Sophie Pitman [SP]:** So how did you get started?

**Rebecca Valentine [RV]:** I started sewing when I was six years old, my grandmother was a seamstress and my great-grandmother used to make military uniforms for the First World War soldiers and I just loved making things. I used to make dolls clothes for my dolls, and that's how I started. I was always interested in construction. From an early age I wanted to know how things were put together. I liked making things. At six years old I started sewing and my grandmother still has my first piece [laughs]. And we were quite, we were very short of money so if I wanted anything for my dolls, dolls clothes, I needed to make it for myself basically and I was very interested in how things were put together.

**SP:** And was it something that you were taught to do, or was it something that you saw happening and wanted to get involved with?

**RV:** I think I saw it happening and, 'cos my grandmother wasn't very adventurous, she—I wanted to take it a bit further. I liked making things fit properly, and that's sort of why it still interests me, I like the technical side.

**SP:** And you mentioned to me earlier that your grandmother and great-grandmother were seamstresses.

**RV:** Yes, yeah.

**SP:** So, how did they get into it? Did they talk about it much with you, or was it something—

**RV:** Well I know that for my great-grandmother it was her means of work, so she earned money that way. They—I think again they weren't very wealthy so it would have been her job and she used to make military uniforms. My grandmother—again they were short of money, and she used to make a lot—but they did, you know, they did in the forties, fifties, sixties, you did. You made the clothes for your girls, your children, yourself, because there wasn't that much around, and that's how it started.

**SP:** So did you always know that you wanted to sew as part of a career, or was it just something that you enjoyed doing and it just turned into a career?

**RV:** Turned into a career. My education wasn't very good. I was army background, so I had a different primary school every year up until the age of ten, and then I was sent to a boarding

school but the teaching wasn't that brilliant and academically, I wasn't challenged so I came out with four O-Levels and tried to get into technical college to do art, but I just didn't have the—they didn't prepare us, it was quite lax, in those days—quite a long time ago now [laughs]. So what did I do first of all? I always, I've always liked making things so it didn't become a career until later on, which I sort of outlined in that sheet I sent you.

**SP:** Yes.

**RV:** Yep, it wasn't until I met key people that they then took me from being a home dressmaker to something much more.

**SP:** I am interested about the influence of certain people on your life. Is it Brigid [Warner] you were talking about? So how did you meet her and could you just explain a little bit about what she does?

**RV:** Mmhm. Yes, she is the most incredible person. I met her in a ballet class. You see ballet class has taken me through, into all my major employment and interests actually, all through meeting people. 'Cos its an area where you would meet people you wouldn't normally meet in, say, the job you were doing at the time, so she—I can't remember how it happened. I think she knew I sewed and asked me to—she needed help. She started off working for Zandra Rhodes, she did a lot for Zandra Rhodes, she actually worked in London. She lived in London for a while and worked for Bruce Oldfield and Isabella Blow—I think she worked for for a bit. Then she got married and moved out to North Norfolk, and had her own workroom there and I used to help her. And she started—she could see that I was quite good at what I was doing, but she, all it really is is technique. It is knowing how to use things and be accurate. You know, you need, you need to have the foundations of general construction before you can then start going that bit further. Uh-uh. Which is where people fall back. They think they—you do need quite a lot of grounding knowledge, which you learn when you make things at an early age from scratch and you make mistakes and then you rectify them which is, you know, the normal learning process. So I worked with her for a few years now—how many was it?—it was about three, I think? And she then knew that I was needing, that I had gone beyond what she was doing, and passed me on, sent me off to meet Anna and Antonia who, that was in '90—I can't remember now, I think it was in '92, yeah, I think I have written it down there as '92, have I?

**SP:** Yes I think so [actually 1998].

**RV:** I was terrified! 'Cos I knew that they were really something bit, and they were what I wanted to do. And I had to go and do a test, which was terrifying. I had to go and make a jacket. You have to go into a completely alien workroom, use a machine that you have never worked with before, and it's not like the patterns you buy in the shops. You just get a pattern with no markings on it really—there's a few notches but there isn't much information. There is no sheet as to how to make it. You just know from experience. And you have to put it together—and they liked my work, so I started working for them.

**SP:** And when you started working for them, were you working in their workroom in London, or were you getting pieces sent to you in Ely?

**RV:** I was still an outworker, see, it's classed as an outworker.

**SP:** Mmhmm.

**RV:** I started off as an outworker—I've swapped around so much I forget in which sequence actually [laughs]. I did that for a while, so they, which is basically what I do now, they post stuff to me and you have what they call a 'topsheet' with the name of the client, the number of the garment, and if you're lucky you get a drawing. You don't always get a drawing, so sometimes you don't know what you're doing [laughs]. And sometimes I cut it, sometimes I don't—sometimes it is ready-cut, all depends. If it's lace or something, or something that you are draping, there is no pattern, you drape it onto the garment—you use the dress dummy, and you work on that. And then you have to get it done, and pack it up, and send it back again. If we're short of time, then I take it in personally, and I did that for a while. And then they wanted me to go and do the fitting, and work in the workroom, which I did for a bit as well. But it proved to be a bit difficult, staying two nights in London and then—'cos the hours are terribly long—I'd start at eight and finish at eight, which you're probably used to [both laugh].

**SP:** So how much input, then, do you get in the work that is sent to you? Is it incredibly prescribed or do you have some leeway in the design of those pieces?

**RV:** In the beginning—what they often do is they will often send you a sample—and the pictures I will be sending you are of a sample I have in the workroom at the moment—and then that's as a guideline for me to look at. But then they would like me to make it differently. Now I've been working with them for such a long time now that they often just say now "Just do what you like." They don't mind how you make it, as long as it looks good.

**SP:** Right, so it has to look like the image they are sending you? Or it just has to look good in itself?

**RV:** If it's a sample—a copy from a sample—it needs to look like the sample. But often with them it is completely bespoke. So somebody will come in and say "I want a dress like this, in this color," and we've never made it before. And a lot of our stuff is like that. So they will—I will discuss or I will have a picture of an idea—and there's an illustration done by the designer, who doesn't always think about the technical side. So the job—my job—is to look at the picture, look at the pattern, and work out the best way to make it. And sometimes the best way to facilitate a kind of look. They'll maybe say "I want a skirt that stands away from the bodice a bit more," so you then have to think about, do I put something under the skirt to push it out, and what kind of fabric do I need? So a lot of that is left to me because I've had quite a lot of experience. So they send me the stuff that they know I have done a lot of. They often send me the rubbish stuff that no one else wants to do! [laughs].

**SP:** Is that because you're not in the workroom, so you can't argue? [laughs].

**RV:** There's a bit of that! [laughs]. But also I'm a good fixer. I like fixing things. I'm a good technician. I like—I like working out something that doesn't work, and making it work. That's my, my biggest strength I would say, and what I enjoy the most. I like things that are fiddly, and precision as well. I can spot a millimeter when something is a millimeter out. I like that precision, it suits my nature [laughs].

**SP:** So what is a typical day like for you in your own workroom? Do you have a routine, or is every day different?

**RV:** It all depends how busy we are, because I am actually on a self-employed basis. I work mainly for Anna, but it is very seasonal, so some weeks there is very little work for her. At the moment we're very very busy, so I am doing as much as I can. So when we are busy—I'm trying to get up early, I'm trying to start work at eight, and it all depends—some of it is very quick turn-around. So the dress I have at the moment, I received yesterday morning, I cut it yesterday, I finished cutting a bit more today, I'm going to work on it more tomorrow, 'cos I lost time on it yesterday—I should have worked on it a bit more yesterday but other things happened. Then I have to finish working on it on Monday and send it off Monday night. It then gets fitted on Wednesday, and they maybe send it back to me for Thursday and I will get it, so I will have half made it, they'll fit it, they'll make the alterations, then I'll probably do a bit more on it, they'll fit it again, and I'll finish it. Now that could take up to two weeks, intermittently, or three weeks,

because of the days posting—we lose days posting—and if we are really pushed for time, I will deliver it personally, and I will go and work in the workroom. But typically I try and work between the hours of eight and four, cos I have to catch the post which has to be at the office at half-past four! [both laugh].

**SP:** So have you usually met the clients that you are making things for?

**RV:** No. No, I don't. No, but a lot of them I know because I have done the fitting. And I often call in to do the fitting, and there is a proposition that they want me to maybe do one day a week fitting because we, we've staff shortages. I've got quite a lot of experience in that, and because I am a technician, I probably—although I don't see it myself—but they are quite pleased with the way I do it, because I'm looking at it from a technician's point of view. Which is quite nice actually, its really nice to meet the clients, and its nice to go through the whole process. It's very interesting.

**SP:** In the current economic climate, do you think that there is a place for couture wear? Have you seen the business changing or do you think that people are looking for more bespoke pieces, and they'd rather have fewer pieces of higher quality?

**RV:** I think we are moving back to beautifully made better clothing, actually. I think the throwaway, buy and throwaway—people are realizing that if you buy one good piece of clothing or footwear—or anything really—and a classic piece, it will last. And what I have noticed with Anna's clothes—and I don't have very many which is pathetic, as I have been working with her for nearly, probably nearly fifteen years, but I never get time to make my own stuff, so long story! But when I put those pieces on, I feel fantastic, and the jacket I've got is ten years old and everyone says "That is beautiful." It's classic, there is a market. We haven't noticed—there was a dip in 2008, clients were ordering less, or fewer garments rather, but it's picked up. But what's happening is people are ordering later. So they are ordering later in the season, so they are not spending their money earlier on. So they are waiting until they really need something. But the business has survived, which I think for them is really good actually, but there isn't masses of money in it [laughs] I don't think!

**SP:** So in your own life, do you try to buy handmade products, both clothing, and furniture and other items? Is it something you value?

**RV:** I try to recycle, I recycle a lot. I'm very interested—I acquire things. People say 'We don't want this,' and I say, "Yes, we'll have it!" We've just acquired two plan chests from an independent printers in Cambridge, they were going to be thrown away, and they are beautiful. They are

proper big one meter six by eighty-six proper map chests, which are collectible! You know, so I am am very much, I love, I tend towards vintage things because I think, you know, that they were made better, and with more care. I do buy the most expensive things I can afford. So I have some boots that I paid a lot of money for twenty years ago and they are still, and they always look good. So, yeah, I don't part with my money easily! [laughs]. It has to be a classic, and well-made, and something that works well.

**SP:** And so is the process of making something that is important to you when you buy a product? Because you mentioned that it has got to be made with care. So is it important to you that you know where it has come from and who has made it?

**RV:** Yeah. I'm—I think we have lost that value in society of valuing people's time. People's time is hugely valuable and if something is made well and it works beautifully, you know that someone has taken care over it. It has to be like that for them to have. I think, yeah, that recycling things is very interesting, and I think it is quite interesting now, the way that people are taking older things and re-modeling them and re-styling them—which is basically the way things have been done for years and years and years, you know, with buildings, and furniture, and all sorts of things—changing them to the way that we are living now and it's like that with old clothes, with vintage clothes. You can, I've got two Chanel suits that I have changed the buttons on, just to bring them out, you know you dull the buttons and the bling comes back again and you put the gold buttons back, and you can change the way things look and you can and—sorry what was the question?

**SP:** Is it important to know who has made things and where something has come from?

**RV:** Yes, yes, it is. I just find it interesting actually. And I like to know how something works. If I know how something works, I can accept it. It is like machinery, if you are working with something you need to know so you can repair it or change it, if need be.

**SP:** So, I am also interested in the work you do on dance costumes, and that is how I came to know you, is through dance. Is there much of an overlap between the work you do with couture and the work you do with dance costumes? Do you see them as completely different spheres?

**RV:** They are very different, and they have to be thought about very differently. When I first started doing it, I was thinking about couture techniques, which I need to switch off from, because dancewear has a complete—and the reason I like doing it is—as an antidote to couture. Because you are looking for the quickest, easiest way, but also you have to be aware that the costumes have to fit several different sizes, they have to be strong, they have to move, they have to be able

to be pulled on and taken off very quickly. The fabrics you are using are very different. The couture work is all natural fibers—silks, wools, cashmere. Dancewear is lycras, and a little bit of bling—I love bling. [laughs].

All the couture wear is terribly safe and very beautiful. But the dancewear is great, because you can use glitter and sequins [laughs]. You can go for all that lovely man-made fiber! [laughs]. Also the construction is very different, because you are using the overlocker to join things together, you are using very quick finishes. They are very different, that's what is so refreshing about it. And they're mine. They're mine, they're my designs, they're my ideas, and, yeah, it's really enjoyable.

**SP:** So how much do you collaborate with Helen, who is the choreographer of the dances you make costumes for? Do you collaborate with her on the costumes or is it entirely your own invention?

**RV:** No, we started off the project, we did a project last summer for the—it was the Children—no it wasn't for Children in Distress, we've just done that—it was the Arts Award. We had some funding from the Arts Award for, having new people doing dance, and the piece was called 'Kaleidoscope,' and what happens is Helen has the idea for the dance and as we do it, we do have meetings when we can grab time to talk to each other. She will pass on some ideas to me and then I will think about it, and just mull things over and just try to think of shapes and of something that will tie-in the idea. And then what I will do is have a look through my files, cos I have quite a lot of files of fabric samples of suppliers that I use for dance fabric, and see if I can find something that is suitable, and then make—do a drawing, and then take the drawing to her and say, "Oh, that's—" normally she says, "oh that's just what I had in mind!" 'Cos we think very alike. And then maybe I'll make a few, take down notes of the dancers, 'cos we do have a very wide range of shapes and sizes. The most difficult being maybe the shortest, and the tallest, and the thinnest, and the largest person, so you have to do several costumes for those. But all the others maybe I can do "one-size-fits-all," you know for the in-between people.

**SP:** So the dance company is a mixed ability dance company. Do you have to take additional considerations to accommodate for that?

**RV:** Yes—they have to be simple costumes that can easily be put on, because some children have difficulty in moving arms, and getting trousers on is always difficult. So we often work with the mixed ability we often have one color base underneath, so we wear black jazz pants, a black leotard or a black top, some of the students who—the boys wear black tops and some of the girls

who find leotards too difficult to put on and off. And then for the 'Kaleidoscope,' I had an asymmetric one—shoulder tunic, that just went on over the head and one arm and I couldn't believe how effective it was in different colors, it was just so effective, and so easy—really easy to use. Tie-tops are very good, so you've got just two sleeves and it ties at the front, cos then it will fit a small person and it will fit a larger person, cos you can just adjust it with tying the knot tighter. And the boys—often we need to cover up so the base is good, having the black base with long sleeves is good. We've had a girl lately who had to wear, like a corset. She had a back problem and she had to wear this heavy corset which she was really sensitive about, so we've got leotards with high backs, and she wore a tie-top when she was performing, which made her feel more comfortable. But I have to say that they are very good actually. They do, they love wearing costumes, they love dressing up, and they love being all the same, so that's really satisfying when you see everyone working together and enjoying it together.

**SP:** The company often dances in unconventional spaces such as Ely Cathedral, sometimes we do outdoor performances, and often the dancers are dancing on stages that they have not come across before, if you go and do a performance in a new theatre. So how do you accommodate for the variation in venues and lighting and not knowing how the costumes will be seen—if they will be seen from one meter away if you are doing an outdoor performance, or from way back at the other end of the theatre, or in a huge space like the cathedral?

**RV:** I try and pick colors—quite strong colors—and a lot of the fabrics have a sheen on them, or there are some wonderful net meshes that have glitter all over them—they are just gorgeous, and they've, the joy is that they look different in every different setting. The cathedral gets a lot of light, and so you—often—they pick out a lot—I try to have costumes with a bit of sequin on them so they will reflect the light. And I do use, I sometimes go for tones of a color, or I mix up—with dance you need unless you are doing all white costumes—pastels don't work for dance unless it's, you know, it's the Royal Ballet and they are on the stage with all the wonderful lighting. But you stay clear of pastel colors so you probably, you need the primary colors, and I try to stay away—we try to stay away—from black because it gets very very tedious. And people like to wear, people like to see colors and people like to wear colors. We've also been quite mindful of, we don't use that much red, cos red is a color that is difficult for some people to wear. So the blues seem to suit—and also yellow. Red and yellow are quite difficult for people's coloring because they can be difficult colors. So Helen and I do discuss that. But sometimes I am inspired, sometimes I find some fabric that is really interesting, or, and then you can mix it with other fabrics and create, you can layer colors and get different effects when people are turning, or, so you are bearing in mind movement in costume as well, to create a different look.

**SP:** I am interested in movement myself, actually. As somebody who dances yourself, and often dances in your own costumes, how do you think about movement when you are designing. Is it important that you know what the choreography is like? Do you work from the music? So what inspires you about a costume and how do you accommodate for the movement?

**RV:** They're all important. They're all part of my consideration, the Philip Glass piece which I think you did?

**SP:** Mmhmm, yep.

**RV:** Which was all about water. I found some fabric which was like, which had been dipped in—a blue fabric which had sequins on it and the sequin fabric wouldn't have moved well on its own, and I wanted, I wanted to get that movement when we were turning, that movement of water, so I made a tunic, and asymmetric tunic and I made wide leg trousers which had the volume in them, and they were in a softer fabric, so, although you had the glittery top bit, you had the movement on the bottom. Also you need to consider, you want costumes to work for more than one piece, so with those costumes we used the trousers with a plain leotard for something else, and we used the tunics on their own with flesh-colored tights for a more contemporary piece which also looked very good. They have to be comfortable and they have—unless it's a tutu or unless it's a corset—they have to be loose-fitting, because obviously you do not want to be restricted when you are dancing. You need a costume that is going to work with you. It is useful to have a dress rehearsal because obviously we are not used to having to wear long skirts or something like that. If you are kneeling down you need, you end up kneeling on your skirt and you can't get up again, so things like that come into consideration. But that's part of rehearsal. I think from where I'm coming from, and Helen as well, we wanted to go into more romantic, classical dresses, flowing dresses, volumes of fabrics. Which do really—people—the feedback we get is lovely actually, they love it, they love the femininity, especially the girls in lovely flowing skirts and also when you are doing some of the choreography that has all those turns in. So when we wear all those dresses, all those skirts, you get this wonderful volume of fabric that moves with the dancer, just creates an added something for the eye, which is so much more interesting than having somebody in a black all-in-one—which has its place—but if you are dealing with quite different sizes as well, so you are not going to want to put a girl in a white all-in-one and she's large, its not fair, and it's—so we are very conscious about having costumes that are suitable for the people who are dancing it, the dance itself, and the music, and the choreography. So it is all considered.

**SP:** And do you think that your own dance practice, and your own development as a dancer has changed the way you design costumes, even in the past five or ten years?

**RV:** Yes, it's always good to wear them. It's always good to put them on and you realise faults, you think, "Ah! That's difficult to get on." Or, "I don't like the way that flops around." So I'll often revisit costumes and make just slight alterations to them maybe, so fixing something down that was loose. I noticed with tutu skirts, with the layer over the top—the top softer layer didn't want to fall with the rest of it, so they had to be attached, with one of the really good gadgets. And the clothes ticket—ticketing plastic things?—clothes guns we use a lot in costuming, cos you can attach things and they can also be released quite quickly. Things that attach to your arms, yeah I realized some of those were a bit tight and you end up feeling like you are going to lose your hand, don't you? [laughs]. So, yeah, testing. I think everyone should do that when they design something is work with it, live with it for a bit yourself. It gives you a great insight into what could be improved, and what could be taken away or added.

**SP:** And you reuse the costumes a lot. Do you take them apart and remake them, or do you like to leave the pieces intact and mix and match? Are you happy to take apart costumes you've made, or do you like to think of them as finished pieces?

**RV:** They're mainly finished pieces—but they are mixed up and so we thought long and hard right at the very beginning, in 2005, about the colors we were using and what we were gonna use, what we were gonna make, and we have built on that, we have definitely built on those colors and added tops to skirts that maybe didn't have them, and follow through ideas—lengthening, shortening, using tunics in a different way. So you can use tunics that maybe just had a leotard underneath, you could then put a shirt under them, or you could put a belt, you can accessorize a bit more and change the look. It's always quite interesting to use—what are those?—the Grecian dresses we used. They can be put over trousers and then you get a layering effect, so they're—I do think quite carefully about what can be used with which, and sometimes Helen will come up with an idea and say, "Well why don't we use that with that?" and so yeah, you can, you can. Or you can just use one piece of a costume, so we've had lots of little accessories, so you use maybe one arm of a costume, so we've used lots of gloves for a different effect, yeah.

**SP:** And do you get inspired by other dance performances you see, or where do your inspirations come from more broadly? Do they come from music and dance, or art, or places you've visited? How do you become inspired?

**RV:** I do make notes of things I like, and that I think will be translated quite easily. Yeah, I've seen quite a lot of productions and I think, "Well that's a really good idea of how to do something." I always look through the catalogues, you know the dancewear catalogues that are available, just for different takes on things. What's a very good source of material is shops like New Look,

Select, Topshop, H&M, they're always good to see—I often do buy costumes from them. I will buy—one of my best favorite costumes are the Charleston dresses.

**SP:** Mmhmm.

**RV:** And they were sequined tops with a zigzag hem and I just added fringing to them. And they look stunning, and everyone always says how wonderful they are. And they were—for that kind of costume—they were relatively inexpensive. And it saves, sometimes it's not worth me making something from scratch and I can buy, say a top or a pair of trousers and add to it, it makes more sense economically to do that—saves a lot of time. 'Cos often my sewing time is limited. I'm not able to spend hours and hours and hours on things.

**SP:** So the Charleston dress is one of your favorites. Do you have an ultimate favorite costume you've designed or does it change all the time?

**RV:** Ooh, let's think—I think the Spanish skirts, which I am sending you a picture of.

**SP:** Great, I know exactly which ones you mean.

**RV:** Yep, in Ely Cathedral. They are beautiful, 'cos I made them reversible. It's a fabric that is matte one side and shiny on the other, and I did take quite a while making those because I wanted them—I made them—they don't have a gathered waist line because I didn't want people to feel fat, especially girls, with big skirts, so I put them onto an elastic waistband and stretched it so that you can get into them but so you get a flat look. They're circular and they have a flounce on the bottom so that is also circular. There is masses of fabric in them and they look stunning. You feel—when we do the 'Spanish Dance', you can swish them around your ankles. They're wonderful.

**SP:** Yes, I agree. They are really fun to dance in, that's for sure.

**RV:** Yeah, they are, aren't they?

**SP:** And to swirl around in. That's what I think.

**RV:** Which is what everyone wants to do. You want lots of fabric that feels opulent and comfortable, and, it—you dance differently when you've got a really nice costume on, actually, it makes a really huge difference.

**SP:** It's an interesting part of dance that perhaps costumes designed for one of the major companies are rigid and make you feel rather uncomfortable, the difference between that and creating costumes that actually encourage and facilitate movement. So do you think you design more for the dancer than the audience or—

**RV:** No—I design with the dancer in mind, but it's the effect I have in mind. The most satisfying thing is—like I think with all of us we design something and then you very rarely get to see it come together until the performance and I'm so pleased. I think there was only one set of costumes that I didn't like, and other than that I've been really pleased, remembering that we are very restricted. We are restricted on cost, on body shape, time involved. So they have to be simple and effective and that's really really tricky. 'Cos a lot of people can make you a really intricate costume, but if you say, "Okay, you've got one pound per person, and it has to look good, and it has to be easy to get on and off," it's quite tricky actually. And sometimes it's, you know, we are restricted to that tight budget where you have to—the 'Kaleidoscope' costumes, that costume was two pounds a meter and I got two out of a meter [laughs] so I did pretty well with that.

**SP:** So, what do you enjoy more—working on couture with incredibly luxurious expensive fabrics, or designing for dance, or perhaps working for private clients?

**RV:** Private clients are my least favorite.

**SP:** Why?

**RV:** It's very difficult to price high enough. Because it's unfortunate that artists in general aren't recognized for the time that it takes to do something. Also if you haven't got a name behind you—the designers tend to be, "Oh, well we'll pay anything for them," but if you're just making something, well it doesn't—a lot of people don't understand, because everything has become so cheap and available. So I limit my private work to people I know quite well, who understand the process and who are prepared to pay the proper price, which you know there's more and more people actually now who are valuing, yeah, who understand what it entails. And it's very enjoyable when you get the right person. I made something for an acquaintance a couple of years ago, and it cost her probably six hundred pounds, with the fabric and she tells me every time she wears it—because she gets complemented on it the whole evening—she says she just loves it, so I think there needs to be that understanding of how a garment can change the way you feel, which again is part of the dance ethic, and why women who are in the spotlight will pay huge amounts of money for a dress that fits them properly, that works properly. So it not only has to fit,

it has to be able to, you know, sit in it, walk in it, and it has to look good for the whole day. That's why people will pay. And I enjoy all of it, but I wouldn't enjoy one so much if I didn't have the other, because they, they do cancel each other out. So when I'm fed up with couture, I can then do a costume and I feel really good about myself, and then too many costumes and I'm thinking, "I need some proper work now. I need something that really taxes my brain, and makes me think and makes me work." 'Cos sometimes it takes me two days to work out something that's really intricate.

**SP:** So you enjoy the puzzle and the difficulties?

**RV:** Yes. Yes [laughs]. Because I think what's so incredible is you're starting with a flat piece of fabric and you finish with a three-dimensional piece, of art, really, it's incredible the transformation, and it's incredibly satisfying. Especially when you see them—'cos a lot of the stuff I do for Anna—is in the papers, so we've got quite a lot of quite high profile clients, and I do see a lot of the stuff and think, "Ooh that looks great!" And you're normally really pleased actually, it's rare that I see something I'm not happy with, 'cos the quality control is quite high—

**SP:** Yes.

**RV:** So things do get caught before they ever get out to the public. You know it has to be, it has to be very beautiful.

**SP:** So with the high profile clients that commission pieces from Anna, are you made aware that you are making something for example, a member of the royal family, or a society lady, or a celebrity? Are you made aware of who that client is, or is that all anonymous?

**RV:** We know who they are because we have a sheet—we are sent the sheet with the name at the top of it. You tend not—like any professional really—you're not that fazed by it, because it's another job and it's made the same as it would be for anybody else, the same high quality. It makes me laugh, I have to say, that I'm making something in Ely that probably the next day or the next week is going to be in a palace somewhere. I think—I think it's wonderful actually. It makes me very happy to think that, and, yeah, I just think it's a really nice process. It's very satisfying—and you can't actually—you don't have time to be worried about things, because you have, often we are on such tight deadlines that, you know, it comes in—sometimes I get something in at ten o'clock in the morning and it has to leave me at four, so I have to do an alteration or, or try and finish something and it goes back again, you know, that same day. So there's not much time to worry [both laugh]. Which is good!

**SP:** So am I right in understanding that you're largely self-taught? Is that correct?

**RV:** Yes, yes.

**SP:** And do you think that you therefore approach work in a different way to somebody who has perhaps been trained through a formal training program?

**RV:** Yes, I think in a way it's been harder, because I haven't been able to ask for help, whereas if you're trained formally you'd have teachers who would say, "Oh no, that's the way to do it." I've tended to make mistakes and then learn the hard way, and it's a slower learning process, and I think yeah—all of us in the workroom tend to be a bit like that, we've all—there's not been all that much formal training and a lot of people came, or originally worked in factories. When there was a few more factories in this country. Then when the factories closed they would then go along and work for, you know, couture, and we all tell each other tips, and when we have new people come in and they do something, you know, that looks lovely, we go, "Oh how did you do that?" Because there's always another way to do something and it's very interesting. I also look at—there's a sewing magazine that I get, one of those, 'cos that's—they always have little tips in there of how to do things. You know, you might think that you know it all but actually somebody might come up with something and its, you know, and you think, "Oh, I might try it like that!" 'Cos we're always trying to be faster and more accurate, and I think people are shocked by how fast we are. It's incredible that when you have been doing it for a long time that you are, you know, you do get very quick, but there's—it would always be nice to do it that little bit faster. [laughs]. So I think it would have been helpful to have had—I did do a pattern cutting course which was very useful, 'cos again that's teaching you about construction and what happens if you take in a side seam and what happens to a garments, so you do need that technical knowledge—pattern knowledge is very good to have.

**SP:** And then when you started making couture pieces, was that a very steep learning curve—did you have to suddenly learn a lot of different techniques? Or was it something that you gradually accumulated?

**RV:** You just—they're not that difficult, to be honest. They're just a different way of approaching something. And often you will think, "That's so easy, why didn't I think of that?" But, it's—I think the difference between amateur and professional is that finished product. And couture is about achieving that finished product, so it is the process from the very beginning as how you approach something, what fabrics are used underneath it, what treatments it goes through as you're making it, what seam finishes and what types of seam you use, how you attach certain things, where you

press the seams makes a huge difference to a garment. Which way are they pressed? Are they open, are they closed, are they folded? And you can, the designers use, all those different techniques to create different looks obviously. It's very very interesting how apparently Hardy Amis, a lot of the original, you know, famous couture houses, they didn't always have their own workroom. They used to use people like myself, they used to use outworkers, and they would send a copy of the same garment to three different outworkers, without any instructions, and would just see what came back—how it had been made. And the person that made it the way they liked it best would get the job. And I think that's a really clever idea because you're getting an added input from somebody else, somebody else's translation of a piece of work, which I think is fascinating really.

**SP:** It sounds a bit like the jacket project you were given.

**RV:** Yeah.

**SP:** What happened to the jacket? Do you know?

**RV:** It was sold in the sample—it was a sample—in the sample sale. It had got a fault on the fabric so it wasn't for a client, it was always going to be a sample. They gave me something that I could mess up, if I was going to [both laugh].

**SP:** So is there a piece of anything you've ever made that you are particularly proud of?

**RV:** Probably the wedding dresses that were, ooh, amazingly intricate. They were bias strips folded, so they would be an inch wide when they were folded, so you've got a clean edge and then the bodice, so you'd start from the waistline and you would layer them so that they would be overlapping by a centimeter, but you would have to mould these pieces, you would have to put more pieces in over the bust line because you've got more area, and then decrease them towards the back because there's less area. That was a technical impossibility really, but they are all hand done, so they were hand sewn on, each individual strip. I think they took forty hours to make and I was quite pleased with the result—they looked stunning actually, they were very beautiful dresses.

**SP:** And who were those dresses made for?

**RV:** One was a wedding dress—I made about three—one was an evening gown, and there was another wedding dress I think, yeah.

**SP:** And was that for Anna?

**RV:** Yeah, that was through Anna. Yeah. I haven't done that many privately. I used to do wedding dresses but they're very very big and there's a lot of work in them and they—I don't like projects that are too long. I just get a bit bored with them then and don't want to do any more. I'd rather the quick stuff. I don't mind a week's worth, but any longer than a week and they do get stale—they become stale in your mind and you, because there's just too much of them.

**SP:** And what are you working on at the moment?

**RV:** I'm working on a dress for a client which is a copy of the sample. And a double-faced cashmere coat which is very nice, very nice construction on those. They're, again, you have to work it out before you start it because you're—one seam is put into another and it looks the same from the inside and the outside. I could send you some samples, but I don't know when this has got to be—would samples be of any use?

**SP:** They would be. And Mum is coming out to visit me at the beginning of December, so she could bring them with her and—

**RV:** I'll do you a sample of the double face, so that you know what it looks like.

**SP:** That would be wonderful.

**RV:** 'Cos I think that's the most interesting bit is seeing what this terminology actually means and how, sort of, it's very clever and it's clean and it's interesting. There's those two I've got at the moment. I've got a hat to make for somebody, like a sort of beanie hat and, what else have I got coming up? Oh and a pin-tucked crepe de chine blouse that someone has ordered. That's as far as I know, but they've told me that it's gone completely mad and I'll probably be working every weekend up 'til Christmas [laughs]. 'Cos this is when a lot of the orders are coming in, and we need to get the money in 'cos that supports the designing of the new collection for the Spring/Summer 2012, so you need to get some funding in for that.

**SP:** And just a final question: do you have any hopes or plans for your work in the future?

**RV:** Just carry on really. I like working—it's satisfying and I think work is good for everybody. It's the interaction with other people, it's the starting and finishing of a project, it's seeing something through. I hope Anna will keep going, because we're all about the same age and I've been working with her for a long time and she's a lovely person to work for, she's—we're very good

friends as well as work colleagues. I just think I'll carry on working for her and I have thought about doing my own collection—a limited collection of dancewear—wrap skirts—that's an idea in the back of my mind, that could be sold on the Internet, because they seem to be very, very, expensive and you can make things cheaply and well actually. It's not that difficult. What I really want to do is go and spend a week with the Royal Ballet in their costume department, or a ballet company, again 'cos I'm interested in the construction, 'cos I know with formal Romantic classical ballet zips are never used, and I never use zips because they can break—it's hooks, big hooks and eyes are mainly used, buttons. So again, for me, it's that construction of—especially—as you were talking about—the sort of more formal garments are very interesting actually—how they fit a dance costume is very interesting actually, how they fit a dance costume is incredibly interesting, how they create the effects and how they do things that don't look—when you are looking at them from the audience's point of view, you don't pick up on those little tiny things that are done which are very effective—and that fascinates me. So that would be an ambition.

**SP:** Great. Well, thanks very much.

**RV:** Thank you.

[End of the interview]