Balaban

SICULAR: Ready?
CREW: Hold on.
SICULAR: If the other model comes in, we might have to start and stop.
CREW: Let me just close this door.
BALABAN: You have so much footage here -- my god.
SICULAR: This guy (inaudible) go on forever.
BALABAN: Yeah. It has gone on forever, exactly.
SICULAR: But think of all the generations in the future that are going to see this.
BALABAN: Yeah, I guess it’s good that I do this.
SICULAR: If Barbara comes in, we’ll stop and then finish his later. OK. Ready?
CREW: We’re rolling and -- action.
SICULAR: Hi. My name is Patty Sicular. I’m director of archiving for Ford Models, based in New York City, along with Professor Karen Trivette Cannell from Fashion Institute of Technology. We’re archiving the history of fashion, beauty, photography, and Ford Models. We’re at the Celebrity Vault in Beverly Hills, today. Today’s date is July 22nd, 2010, and we are interviewing Howard Balaban, a model that I was lucky enough to work with in the 1980s
and Howard Balaban’s era started in 1979, and he modeled through the 1990s. So, we’re so happy to have you with us today, Howard.

BALABAN: I’m so happy to see you; you’re one of my favorite people.

SICULAR: Thank you. So tell me, how did you come to Ford Models, or to even be -- start to model?

BALABAN: Well, I had done some school plays, and my big hit was I played Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof.

SICULAR: Right, they’re still talking about that on Broadway.

BALABAN: That’s true. “A fiddler on the roof, sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a simple pleasant tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy.” (laughter)

SICULAR: And moving right along -- then you became a Ford Model?

BALABAN: Anyway, so moving right along -- so there was a dinner theater that was doing Fiddler on the Roof, locally, and I thought, what a great idea. I can go work for the dinner theater. [02:00] So, I was making $112 working at Fiddler on the Roof. I wasn’t playing Tevye, because I was too young -- they’d only do that in high school, but -- and I was making like $112 every other week, working six nights a
week, and one of the guys there said, “Hey, you know, you’re a handsome guy, you know, why don’t you become a model? Down in Philadelphia, they pay $60 an hour.” I’m like, “Sixty dollars an hour, this is unbelievable.” So, I said, “This is great.” So, I went to my brother’s bar mitzvah photographer -- and I only wish to God I had these pictures -- and I made up some pictures, and I looked up the Philadelphia Models Guild, was the second biggest. [Paul Madeary?], at that time, was the biggest. And I brought my pictures down, and they called me up, and they told me, “Unfortunately, you don’t really have what it takes to be a male model.”

Well, I’d spent all this money on these pictures. I went down in my ’67 Chevelle [03:00], and I said, “I’m picking up my pictures, at least.” So I was with my friends, and they were in the car, so I said, “You know what, I’m going to drop them off at [Madeary?] Models and see if -- what will happen, just for the hell of it, who cares.” Sure enough, I take my pictures up there. Paul is sitting there and he sees me, sits me down, and signs me up as a model, and then the very next day, he says, “Look, they’re shooting a big Navy film in Philadelphia.” He says, “You’re an actor -- you’re perfect. Why don’t you go
audition for it?” I was like -- scared to death.

SICULAR: How old were you?

BALABAN: At this time, I was like 16 or 17. I was very young.

SICULAR: You were in high school.

BALABAN: Yeah. So -- and I was just starting to drive -- so I went, and I did this film and on the film, I met some guys that were New York models, and they said, “Hey, you should really come to New York and try this.” So, Paul had me for like 200 hours. [04:00] I made up this portfolio, and I went out to New York, and I first went to Wilhelmina. He had a bunch of appointments, and nobody took him, but everybody kept taking me, except for Ford wouldn’t even see me. So my parents happened to go to a party that night, or around that time -- within the week -- and they ran into Joe Patrella, who was like cousins with Joe Hunter. And they started saying, “Oh, my son is looking to be a model,” and he said, “Well, Joe Hunter is a relative of mine with Ford. Why don’t you have him go see Joey.” So the next thing you know, I walk in there, and Joey looks at me, and he says, “All right, we’ll take him.” And I was like -- I couldn’t believe it. The next thing you know, I was with Ford.

SICULAR: What year was this?

BALABAN: That’s how I ended up with Ford -- that was 1979.
SICULAR: And then, did you start -- how did you start out making -- were you on go-sees, or what?

BALABAN: Right away, they sent me out for Sue Brett. My first shooting I did with Kelly Emberg [05:00], and I was the guy -- before she became huge -- behind Kelly Emberg for Sue Brett in the New York Times magazine. And that was my very first job. And then, from that moment on -- right after I graduated high school, I went up there from Philadelphia, and from that moment on, I went to school there, and I went to acting class there, because I really wanted to be an actor, and I started working from there on. And then you became my booker, and then I started making tons of money (laughter).

SICULAR: You crack me up. OK.

BALABAN: So that’s my story.

SICULAR: Do you find yourself pigeon-holed, being a junior type model? Did you get look (inaudible) -- you were too young to (inaudible).

BALABAN: It was great because there was only a couple of guys. The industry was so new at that time, so there was Kelly Jackson --

SICULAR: Keith Gog.

BALABAN: -- and there was Keith Gog, who was a little older than me --
SICULAR: But looked young.

BALABAN: -- and they needed some new smiley kind of guys like me, so I fit right in. There was tons of work for me right away.

SICULAR: And you seem like you enjoy it. What’s the best part of modeling [06:00], when you modeled with Ford Models?

BALABAN: Working with you was really...

SICULAR: Aside from that.

BALABAN: The best part was -- is to get to be a part of that whole era. Studio 54 was going on. I was a little kid from Philadelphia coming up, and all of a sudden, I was in the big leagues of New York City and learning through the school of hard knocks and suddenly get to travel the world and go to Europe and get on planes and go do incredible jobs and meet people. I met my ex-wife, Julie, who was an incredible part of my life.

SICULAR: Do you remember the first time you met Eileen Ford?

BALABAN: Yes, I do -- yes, I do. She was downstairs, and I was introduced to her by Gerry, who was still pretty active in the agency, and I met her quickly. She didn’t really spend a lot of time with me or anything, but she met me and took me downstairs from the top floor of the men’s division.

SICULAR: The townhouse. [07:00] And did you get closer to her over the years?
BALABAN: Yeah, well, you know, my ex-wife -- obviously, Julie was a very big model with them, and we used to do all the events together, and it was like a real clique in those days. If you were a Ford person, you were really like a part of a team, a really special team, and we all -- we had dinners together. We played softball in Central Park together. We’d go to movies together. We had parties together. We used to have big parties at Studio 54 -- Ford parties -- I mean, it was really something.

SICULAR: Did Eileen ever give you any advice?

BALABAN: Eileen, yeah, she probably told me don’t drink too much, don’t -- oh, she always told me, “Eat salmon the night before you do a job, and it makes your skin glow.” I think she might have even said have a lot of sex, because it makes you glow. [08:00]

SICULAR: Not with a model. (laugher)

BALABAN: No, but remember, I was with one of her top models. Julie was like...

SICULAR: That doesn’t sound like something Eileen would say, especially with one of her models.

BALABAN: (laughter) No, I think she said it to me as a joke, and then Gerry laughed it off.

SICULAR: And how about Gerry, do you remember meeting him the first time? He’s such a gentleman.
BALABAN: Yeah. I remember that very, very special, because the first time I walked into Ford and I went upstairs, like getting in there was like going into Fort Knox, and I remember walking upstairs, and there was Gerry, just the most handsome man, and he had a carnation -- always wore the red carnation -- and then the --

SICULAR: The boutonniere -- and the pocket.

BALABAN: -- right, and then the sash, the pocket -- elegantly dressed and tall and handsome and just, you know, he was like meeting Clark Gable or something like that, you know. He was really a memorable, amazing guy.

SICULAR: Always a gentleman.

BALABAN: Always a gentleman, always nice. They used to take us to Broadway shows, as I said earlier.

SICULAR: Were they at your wedding? [09:00]

BALABAN: Yes, they were at my wedding. Eileen was at my wedding and Gerry, and Joey, and you know -- they came.

SICULAR: It really was like a family then.

BALABAN: It really was.

SICULAR: So who were some of your clients that you worked for?

BALABAN: You know. I used to work for -- what was it -- Pringle & Booth, Media Graphics -- I was the Kool cigarette guy for five years. I was the Skin Bracer, "Thanks, I needed that," for five years on television.
SICULAR: Wow.

BALABAN: I did 120 national commercials over those years.

SICULAR: That’s amazing.

BALABAN: Yeah. I was the Noxzema men’s skincare guy, men’s shaving cream. I was the [Ross?] guy -- I started that chain. I used to do 16 spots for them a year. I did John Henry -- I was his main guy for years. It was many, many years of work. Every day, we did it.

SICULAR: Wonderful years. So Howard, who are some of your favorite photographers? [10:00]

BALABAN: Wow, well, Bruce Weber, obviously.

SICULAR: And what did you work with Bruce Weber for?

BALABAN: GQ. He took me out to -- the first time I ever worked with him, he took me out to Fire Island, to the Pines, which was a huge wake-up call for a guy from Philly like me -- you know, tough kid from Philly.

SICULAR: They might not know what the Pines is.

BALABAN: The Pines was an all-gay community in the early 80s, and Calvin Klein had his mansion there on the beach, and we went to shoot the September fall collection there. We went by sea plane -- I’ll never forget it -- and got to the Pines, and I was like -- it was like I was on another planet.

SICULAR: Were all these guys after you, trying to...
BALABAN: It was definitely -- I wouldn’t say they’re after you, because we’re in a little team of models and photographers and all that stuff, and Bruce, with his umbrella and this whole thing. It was interesting, very interesting. [11:00] It didn’t bother me to get out of there when I left. Going back on the ferry -- went over to his house in Shelter Island, I think it was the first time I saw two guys making out with each other. It was like, “Oh my God.” I was such an innocent kid from Philly -- it was a total shock.

SICULAR: But seeing yourself in GQ must have been quite a thrill.

BALABAN: Yeah, it was really cool.

SICULAR: And did your parents get to see it?

BALABAN: Of course. You kidding me? My parents, my grandparents, my cousins -- they kept a collection of everything. I just got -- my grandmother passed away many years ago. They just gave me all the archives of all the -- all the tear sheets she had over the years. She would, like, collect everything, every little Bradley’s ad, anything. It didn’t matter what it was.

SICULAR: That’s very sweet. And what do you think -- so that had to be one of the high points of your career, being in GQ.

BALABAN: Yeah, that was good. But you know, for me, I was
more, as you know, because you’re my booker, I was of more
that smiley --

SICULAR: And do you want to say the rest of it? [12:00]

BALABAN: -- guy than I was burn-the-camera -- like Bob was like
a real serious, you know, manly, GQ kind of guy. Looking
into the lens, for me, it was always “Hey, how you doing,
what’s going on?” You know, with big smiles.

SICULAR: But it’s like being an actor. There are different
types. In your book, specifically, did you ever want to be
the other type?

BALABAN: Of course, you know, but I was young. I was really
young.

SICULAR: You were very young, when I worked with you.

BALABAN: I was very young. So, I was a little bit, you know, I
had to mature a little bit when I first started to really
be the man, because I was still -- you know, when I
started, I was 18, 19 years old.

SICULAR: But you trained me.

BALABAN: But I did train you. When you came in, I was tough on
you -- I know I was -- but I whipped you into shape. You
got me some serious bookings, and I kept you going on your
toes. You needed a guy like me to really break you in
(laughter). And you admit it, right?

SICULAR: I do.
BALABAN: I was tough.

SICULAR: I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for you. I would not be where I am if it wasn’t for you. You taught me everything I know.

BALABAN: I really feel good about it. Let me tell you, I feel really good.

SICULAR: It was tough. At times, I went home and cried a few times, but I lasted.

BALABAN: It was great.

SICULAR: What has modeling given you that you’ve taken away that you use in your life every day, whether it’s dealing with people or travel?

BALABAN: Powder, I still powder myself all the time. No, I’m kidding. Let’s see, what have I taken away from it? I guess a lot of confidence. You know, it gave me a lot of confidence, and being able to take rejection in life, because that’s a huge thing that you learn, because most of the time, you’re canceled, right? Most of the time, you don’t get the booking. So, being able, at a very young age, to always hear -- and you would be so sweet --“Oh, no, they canceled that yesterday.” I’d be on hold for some gigantic campaign, and you know that we’re dying, waiting to hear, and then you get canceled, and you learn to take
it. So now, I can so easily be rejected. [14:00] It’s like it rolls right off my back. Anybody can reject me, and I feel fine. (laughter)

SICULAR: And what are you doing now?

BALABAN: What am I doing now?

SICULAR: You’re living in California.

BALABAN: As you know, I moved to California about -- almost 20 years ago, now.

SICULAR: And what kind of work do you do now?

BALABAN: Now, I started the brand “Baby Genius,” and it’s a whole line of child development products -- CD and DVDs and toys and books and...

SICULAR: And is there a website if someone wants to look?


SICULAR: OK.

BALABAN: We also started a program called the Circle of Education that is with San Diego State University that’s a preschool program where -- with the deans in the university, we identify the 25 most important academic and behavioral things a child needs to know to walk through the kindergarten door, and it’s a kindergarten readiness program. [15:00] And then each one, we made a little jingle out of, so you learn by the jingle. So, like some kids hold their pencil like this, and you’re supposed to
pinch it, so we make a little song “Pinch, pinch, pinch your pencil now. Pinch, pinch, pinch your pencil now.”
Or, wash your hands, “Wash your hands. Wash your hands. Keep them clean. Keep them clean,” you know, so we have like 20 little jingles and a whole curriculum that supports it that you can learn at home or, you know, a preschool program right at the school, so that’s something we’re really proud of that we’re doing right now.

SICULAR: That’s great. Any last thoughts before we close?

BALABAN: Any last thoughts? Well, I’m so happy to see you. I love you so much.

SICULAR: Thank you.

BALABAN: And, you know, I really appreciate Gerry and Eileen Ford for the opportunity they gave me and the years that I got to be a part of this industry, because they do go away, just like an athlete growing out of his position...

SICULAR: Did you realize it at the time? [16:00]

BALABAN: Yeah, you always kind of know that. People remind you of that all the time. Save your money. Everybody knows that the career -- because it’s just obvious, because everybody else’s career kind of fades out. The new guys come in. The new looks come in. But I was fortunate. I lasted a pretty long time, and yeah, it brought me -- to this day, I use contacts that I had back then, including
seeing you, and who knows what we can do together today and hooking up with different things, and you being at this gallery, and there’s still that network of people that you --

SICULAR: People that care.

BALABAN: -- that care. And it was such an incredible time to meet like all these amazing people in New York City. So it was a valuable experience that I would love everybody to have, but it’s not so easy. It’s a different time, those days, than it is today.

SICULAR: We were lucky.

BALABAN: We were lucky. And we are lucky.

SICULAR: That’s right. [17:00] Thank you, Howard Balaban.

BALABAN: Thank you.

SICULAR: Sweet.

_: That was wonderful.

SICULAR: I adore you.

END OF AUDIO FILE