For the Oral History Collection

of the

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

an interview with

GEORGE STAVROPOULOS

Interviewed by:

Mildred Finger

July 9, 1990
Q: For the Oral History collection of the Fashion Institute of Technology, doing a study of the American fashion industry, this will be an interview with George Stavropoulos. The date is July 9, 1990; the interviewer is Mildred Finger.

Tell me, Mr. Stavropoulos, when I first met you, in 1961, I think you had really just come to America.

A: That's when I started, yes.

Q: You started there. Okay. So, can you tell us how all that happened. I know you're Greek. When did you come over from Greece, and what did you do there?

A: I came in 1961, that same year.

Q: Right. And--

A: At the time I spoke no English at all. I had my wife to translate for me.

Q: Had you studied in Greece?

A: I never studied.

Q: Never studied. Okay.

A: I never studied.

Q: How did you get involved with designing?

A: I knew dress makers in Athens, and I learned from them everything I know.

Q: You decided you wanted to do this. You wanted to design.

A: Yes. So, when I met my wife--
Q: You had said you were hired by dressmakers--
A: I was hired by dressmakers and I learned from them everything I was supposed to know about dressmaking, and (?) . . . special design. From them I learn to use the bias and use the quality of the fabric.
Q: Had you become interested in designing when you were a child? When you were growing up?
A: No. Later.
Q: Later. In adolescence?
A: Yes. What else?
Q: Well, so you had the dressmakers and they taught you, and then your wife wanted to come back to America, so you came here.
A: I came here and started my own business. I ask for job, nobody give me a job, except Norman Norell said call him in six months. That was too much to wait. Six months was too much time.
Q: Right. Sure. So you got some money together.
A: I bring money from Greece.
Q: You did, yes.
A: A lot of money, and I lost it, I lost every penny.
Q: Oh, dear.
A: So, I came to America poor, whereas in Greece I was rich. So, I managed. The business here, it's different from Europe.
Q: The business is different over here?
A: Completely different. Here it's wholesale stores, it's buyers. There, it's the customer and you have to treat the customer--
Q: In other words, in Greece you did a custom made business?
A: Exactly.
Q: And here you were going to try to do a ready-to-wear business?
A: Of course. That's the way, you know? But that's all right.
Q: Did you get in touch with buyers?
A: Yes. I hired Dorothy Smith. She was the woman who organized Christian Dior's business in New York.
Q: Right. Yes.
A: And she did teach me how to set up business in America.
Q: How to get a factory and how to get financing.
A: No. Financing, I was getting financing. So I had my money.
Q: It must have been difficult to get started, making all the clothes, the collections, hiring all the models. It has to have been expensive.
A: Of course, and as I said, I had lost all my money. For the other designers anxious to have backers.
Q: Sure.
A: I didn't have any. But, here I am. Thirty years later.
Q: Right. Thirty--So, you started--Did Dorothy Smith introduce you to buyers, or tell you who to call?
A: Yes.
Q: She did. And whom did you start with, your first season? Do you remember?
A: Oh, yes. The first season was Stanley Korshak from Chicago.
Q: Stanley Korshak.
Q: Miriam Neubert, from Saks?
A: Yes. No, Bendel's.
Q: Oh, she was then still at Bendel's, right.
A: Because Jerry Stutz came too.
Q: Dorothy Ross?
A: Mildred Custin, first, Bonwit Teller in Philadelphia. After that it was Dorothy Ross, in New York.
Q: How many models did you show that season? How many pieces of clothing?
A: Now I show around 60. I used to show around 25.
Q: Around 125.
A: At that time, yes.
Q: Was it just evening wear?
A: No, no. It was coats, suits, everything.
Q: So, 125 pieces meant you had only a couple of each
thing. A couple of coats, a couple of suits, a couple of dresses.

A: It was a complete look, with hats, gloves, and one morning someone came from Bonwit Teller and asked me to borrow six samples, she wanted chiffon dresses. At that time Miss Custin, president of Bonwit Teller, came ... was there so I gave them the clothes, so they were supposed to return them. That afternoon, no clothes came back--

Q: Oh, dear.

A: So I get a call in the afternoon from Saudi Arabia. It was Princess Faisal, who took about five or six pieces before she left the country.

Q: She took your original samples?

A: Yes.

Q: Oh, dear.

A: From the collection, I don't give prices. I was furious. And Miss Custin said to me, "It doesn't matter what the prices are."

Q: It wasn't like you had--If you had a bigger collection.

A: Yes.

Q: Nowadays it's like the fall collection.

A: Yes, so, she came to the show. There were fifty people there. So that was another story.

Q: Well, how did you do it?

A: I tried to make as many as possible.
Q: In your own factory.
A: In my own workroom.
Q: In your workroom, as though they were samples.
A: That's right. That's my story. That's how I started out, how I became well known.
Q: So, how did Bonwit's promote it? Did they have windows?
A: They had windows six times a year, four or five times on 57th street and Fifth Avenue.
Q: Did they have a fashion show of your things as well?
A: Oh, yes.
Q: With customers coming to the shows, placing special orders.
A: Yes. I always gave them stuff. Always.
Q: Well, if you could make it. Did you finally get contractors?
A: No, no, no.
Q: You did everything with your own workers?
A: Yes, because using a contractor, the clothes were terrible. There was a manufacturer that I liked downtown.
Q: Yes, right. So how many workers did you have to make all those clothes?
A: There were 35.
Q: I see.
A: Now I have--
Q: You have how many? Ten.
A: Nine.
Q: So that was the season when you still did an entire collection, ranging from coats and suits and so on. Yes. And you showed at a hotel, didn't you?
A: At that time it was customary to show every afternoon for a week in the showroom. So I would have a big showing, at a hotel, and after, everybody did it.
Q: Yes, everybody would do the same thing.
A: But when I first did it--
Q: Yes, because I remember seeing one of your collections at a hotel.
A: money. Pay all the models, you know, for a week, for two hours. Too much money. If it's somebody else's money, it doesn't matter. But if it's your money--
Q: Yes, then it matters. So, how many collections did you do a year, at the beginning?
A: Two.
Q: Two collections a year. One for spring, one for fall.
A: Yes.
Q: Right. And at the beginning, how many clients did you have? How many stores did you have?
A: In the beginning I have, oh, I didn't have anybody else.
Q: Really?
A: Yes.
Q: How could you afford to lend your collection to one store?
A: I didn't know any better.
Q: Oh. But after a while you began to sell to other stores, right?
A: Yes. But it was too late. The other stores
Q: But you did sell to other stores later on.
A: Yes. It was a big fight, getting stores to buy.
Q: Do you still have Dorothy Smith with you to--?
A: Dorothy Smith had passed away.
Q: At that time?
A: At that time.
Q: So whom do you have?
A: No one.
Q: You sound as though you do more than Jimmy Galanos, and he cuts, etc.
A: I can't do everything myself. I need somebody.
Q: Right. So when would you say that your business began to expand and to grow into--
A: Nineteen-sixty-six.
Q: Five years later.
A: Yes. Because I went to the White House. I dressed Ladybird Johnson.
Q: Oh, did you?
A: For the opening of the new opera in New York City.
Q: So people began to know your name.
A: My name became well known.
Q: Yes, right. When you did somebody like Ladybird Johnson, did you do it to her measurements, or--You did.
A: Yes. A special design. Nobody else has it.
Q: I see. So she had a couture kind of dress.
A: Oh, yes. But this was through Bonwit Teller. Miss Custin.
Q: How much business were you doing with Bonwit's at that point do you think?
A: I don't remember. It was enough to survive.
Q: Yes, quite. To keep going. Right. So, actually, it was in 1966 that you began to sell to more stores.
A: Yes.
Q: Did that change your methods any? Did you have to add more workers or take more space, or--?
A: In 1965 I took more space.
Q: In this building, right. Yes.
A: Because it was too small.
Q: Well, now, tell me how you design your clothes. Do you start with the fabric? Do you start with a silhouette? How do you plan?
A: It's like an architect. I have a plan, and every year I have to change the look. The woman's body is only one. The same curves, the same proportions, so you have to make
something new and exciting. So that's how I start.

Q: But you work in fabric first.
A: I pick the fabric and I drape it.

Q: You pick your fabric first.
A: I take the fabric and I drape it.

Q: But you pick the fabric first.
A: Yes.

Q: Are your fabrics mostly European?
A: Yes.

Q: Did you go to Europe before, or did you buy from the American--
A: The American representative. I had no time to go to Europe. Never went to Europe to buy fabric. I developed my own style, my own look, and I believe the moment a woman goes to bed to sleep she try to be beautiful, in her nightgown. So I try to make things that way, make every man excited.

Q: How long did you go on doing day clothes?
A: I still make some.

Q: You still--
A: They're not successful.
Q: They're not successful?
A: No. You can't compete with Seventh Avenue.

Q: Well, I wondered, because it doesn't seem likely. Even with expensive Seventh Avenue, it's still Seventh Avenue,
and I can understand where it would be difficult for you to compete.

A: I can't compete.

Q: So, most of your sales nowadays is on your chiffons, short and long.

A: Yes. Chiffons or satins or laces or--

Q: How do you decide on your colors?

A: You see one day you like one color to complement the skin of a woman. For that reason I keep it black and white a lot, because those are the two colors that always please a woman.

Q: Yes, I see you do a lot of black and white. Sure. So, you start with the fabric. But you said you have a certain design that you like to make. There are certain shapes or silhouettes.

A: Yes.

Q: What are they? Could you describe them?

A: You clothe the body. The moment you move, show every curve in the body. All my studies were the physical. The statues.

Q: Oh, yes?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Do you have a collection of books of statues? Because you said you don't go to Greece, and you don't go to Europe.

A: I used to go to Greece every summer.
Q: Oh, you did. For how many years?
A: Lately I don't go anymore, but I used to go every year. And I have all the collections of books anyway. I try to undress the statues, sculptors
Q: Were you influenced by somebody like Jean Bisses? Did you do work much as he did?
A: Yes. Jean Bisses was famous for his sculptured stuff.
Q: Yes. Right. So you've done various kinds of shapes that were taken from the Greek statues.
A: Exactly.
Q: And the colors in the prints you chose yourself, based on how you happened to feel at a particular time.
A: That's right.
Q: Right. To what extent do the women customers themselves influence what you make?
A: Oh, the moment you go to a ball, see a beautiful woman dressed by badly, you have the inspiration to make a gown to make her look fantastic.
Q: Tell me what is the age of women you dress. I'm sure you dress all ages, but--
A: Eighteen to 80.
Q: Eighteen to 80, well that's pretty good. And in the ready-to-wear, you make sizes.
A: Yes.
Q: From what to what?
A: From a Size Two to a Size 20.
Q: Oh, really. Are there actually women who are a Size Two?
A: Yes. Yes. You can go into a Size Two.
Q: Do you know many of the people who buy your clothes? Or, do you know who they are?
A: You never get to know all the customers. That's impossible.
Q: It's the stores who sell to them--
A: Sure, you know--
Q: But does the store buyer call you and say, "I have the wife of a governor who is going to go to a big party next month and needs a dress"?
A: Yes.
Q: So you will design for a particular customer going to a particular--
A: No, no, I'm not going to make a special design for her.
Q: And do you do trunk shows ever?
A: Yes.
Q: How many stores are apt to be covered in one season?
A: Now it's--Forget it. Now we use only Martha's.
Q: You use what?
A: I'm going only to Martha's.
Q: To Martha. Right, yes. I've seen the ads for Martha.
A: So--My health doesn't allow me to go any place.
Q: And you do not have anybody on staff who can do shows for you.
A: No.

Q: Trunk shows.
A: No.

Q: Because I know Trigere does most of her own shows in New York, but she has somebody who goes out of town.
A: I know.

Q: Yes. But you do mostly for Martha.
A: Yes.

Q: And she does very well with your things, I gather.
A: Extremely well.

Q: That's great. Do you like going to the store yourself?
A: Yes and no.

Q: You used to like it more, probably.
A: Now it's--Well, you know. I don't like it.

Q: Why did you like it in the years when you did like it? What was good about it?
A: Because you have to mold the customer, against the will of the buyer. The customer is supposed to be helpful.

Q: And did you like to tell the customer that this will be good for you but this will be less good?
A: That's right.

Q: Because I'm sure the customers were thrilled to have you look at them and tell them what you thought.
A: Yes. That store.
Q: It was who?
A: Erlebacher's.
Q: Where are they?
A: They used to be in Washington.
Q: How do you spell it?
A: I don't know. Erlebacher's.
Q: Okay.
A: They asked me to go talk to a customer, Size Zero. So I said, "Why don't you wear shoes?" She said, "I wear my shoes."
Q: Oh, dear. Well, I guess if she has such physical problems she hasn't got much choice about getting her own size.
A: She was beautiful, but it was well-made dress.
Q: What about your own, private life? Do you have children here?
A: I have a son. I have a son, he's 25 years old.
Q: What does he do?
A: He is going to go for law, he's at Fordham University. He has his Master's in business.
Q: Many of the young people today get both degrees.
A: They have to.
Q: Business and law, yes.
A: So that's that.
Q: So he's not going to come into your business.
A: No, I don't think so.
Q: So what happens to your business?
A: I close it. I will close it.
Q: That's sad, to see--
A: Everything has an end.
Q: Right, that's true. That's true.
A: Nothing's forever.
Q: But I'm sure the workers who work for you will be very sad to see you go out of business.
A: Yes.
Q: Tell me, do you keep a sample of everything that you've made, over the years?
A: I have, yes.
Q: You have. Right. Because I'm sure it would be a fantastic museum collection.
A: I have to sell them.
Q: You're going to sell the samples. Do you have them all? Well, I'd like to put in a good word for F.I.T. They have a wonderful costume museum, and maybe sometime, when you are ready to put those away, into a collection, you can think about them having at least part of that collection. Because I'm sure they'd be very good. And, it must be very difficult to train young people to do the work that you need to have done on your clothes.
Q: Well, because, one of the things they use clothes for at F.I.T. is to teach people how to do certain kinds of draping and stitching and so on, so it isn't just used as a museum but it's also used for working.
A: For work.
Q: Yes. Which, I think, could be awfully--You might like to think that people are learning from your work. Anyway, I'll have them get in touch with you, because I think it would be good for them.

Anyway. I thank you very much. It's been very interesting. I really appreciate it.
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