

Isaac Mizrahi on unapologetically pursuing your interests



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2983 words.

Tags: [Fashion](#), [Design](#), [Inspiration](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Collaboration](#).

People know you from your work in fashion, but you're also about to begin a run of cabaret shows at the Carlyle in NYC. How did that happen? Have you always had this creative double life?

Well, you know, I don't remember how it came to be, because I've been doing it for so long, at different venues. I started quietly doing these cabaret shows in the middle of the '80s, or something. It dawned on me recently that I've been working with the same musical director and many of the same band members for 20 years now. It's shocking, really. But that's the truth.

I don't remember how I got started doing it. I just was always needy of a kind of attention, if you will. When I was a little kid, before I did anything else in my life, the first thing I did would be these female impersonations. I sang and I imitated Streisand and Judy Garland. I used to do it for anyone who would listen, in the driveway or on the corner or something, or at the beach club. We went to this beach club in New Jersey and I used to do these big, female impersonation shows. It drew a big crowd, and it was really crazy. It wasn't exactly something my parents were proud of, but I did it anyway.

Why didn't that didn't become your primary creative path? Or were you just the kind of person who is always interested in doing a bunch of things simultaneously?

I'm a person who's interested in doing a bunch of things. It's just what I like. I like it better than doing one thing over and over. This idea of mastery—of being the very best at just one thing—is not in my future. I don't really care *that* much. I care about doing things that are interesting to me and that I don't lose interest in. I think that's what makes me good at cabaret and I think that's what makes me good at fashion, because I get bored very easily. I think that's the idea, to do things where you can change it or reinvent it each time. Surprise, surprise.

I've certainly had had my own demons about this. My best friend, for example, is [Mark Morris](#), who is the greatest dance genius of the late 20th century and the early 21st century. He is truly a master of something and it's incredible to watch. He texted me after my show at the Carlyle last year and it was this incredible text. It felt like he really loved the show so much. I mean, usually texts from Mark are like, "Congratulations. I didn't hate your show." And that's like the best compliment you can ever get from Mark. But this last time, he was like, "Darling, that was great. Absolutely great. The music was great, you were great!"

So, it feels like I'm coming into a new phase with it that I'm proud of. I feel like it might completely overtake my life. Who knows? And if I have some kind of mastery in store, it might be a kind of stage presence thing. I like doing it. And it's never, never, never boring.

Do you get bored of fashion?

It's not that fashion is boring, but you know what? Fashion is a different thing. Fashion is a very type A kind of a job. You're always running after people to make things better and to do things better and to deliver it faster. It's like food, you know? It's like detail oriented, very complicated food.

Performance—as much as it has to do with process and writing and rehearsing and doing something—it's always taking place in the moment, whether it's on stage, or on film or on TV. I was very happy when I was making my TV show in the early 2000s, I was very happy doing that, and also doing my cabaret shows. They informed each other in funny ways. I do feel like this multi, poly mathematical thing is what it's about for me.

I love the idea that if you are a creative person, that can mean a lot of different things over the course of your lifetime.

I think so. But there are people who don't necessarily agree with that thought and I'm not sure why. Some people think, "Oh just stick with something!" And darling, I learned that lesson from every teacher that I ever had when I was a kid. Everyone said, "No, no, no, you have to really focus here." And you know, when I was a kid, I played piano, I made puppets, I made clothes, I went to drama school. I did *everything*. And I liked doing it all.

And the thing is, some of it eventually dropped off. If you're going to play the piano, you have to play for 12 hours a day. I started having problems with my wrists and it was really not good, so I gave it up and it was fine. Right now I have a beautiful piano—I have two, actually—and I never touch it. Even in my 20s and 30s I took more lessons and tried to keep up with it, but eventually I was like, "Why are you doing this? It's not relaxing. You aren't good enough." So you try everything that interests you and then be willing to let the things fall away that make sense. So the piano fell away, the puppets fell away.

You should bring back the puppets.

I know! Well, I've also been writing a lot lately and it's very, very rewarding. It's also terrible. I don't know how people do it. But I've done it a lot. I'm very good with a journal, which is not hard at all, but I've also written plays and screenplays. I just finished writing a memoir, which is going to be published next year. That felt like one of the two or three great accomplishments of my life and something that required such a great deal of discipline, such a great deal of my time and focus and energies of all kinds.

Did you find that examining your life in that way was illuminating?

It was a very emotional thing. At the end, when I turned in essentially the final draft of the memoir, I felt as though my past was gone. Like I had described the past, and now there is no more past. I mean, this is really what I felt—and it was this incredible feeling. I thought, okay, this is my story. I feel like I've told it really well with as little rancor or cynicism as possible. It took me six years to get it to this place where it's right. It's my honest account of things. And I feel like now, if you don't like it, that's your problem because it's my life and I've told the story as I lived it.

So, now that the book is done, I feel like the future is even more dazzling because it isn't so much encumbered, it isn't so much weighed down by my past. I know that you never lose the past and I could certainly be in therapy for the rest of my life, but you see what I mean. It did really feel like this crazy weight was lifted. I don't really believe in epiphanies, I don't, because I think people don't change that way, but this did feel like as close to an epiphany as I'm likely to ever have. It really did. And I didn't just scribble it down, I literally thought of *everything*. I worked closely with my editors on this book. It wasn't a flimsy little experience, it was a real heartfelt deep thing.

Much of your success in the fashion world—as well as your work on television, doing cabaret shows, etc—has had to do with being a good collaborator. I'm curious what you think makes for a good collaboration and why that has been so important in your work?

First of all, if you have an idea for something—whether it's a movie or a collection or something for television, a book, or whatever it is—that's 80% of it. Just having a good idea, something that you are completely and utterly and truthfully committed to, is key. That's the first step. And once you have that, you need to right people to help you realize it. To be honest, I've had some of my biggest successes with some of the biggest asshole collaborators, where people are just completely functionless, they do nothing. And you take the lead and you get it done, because you have this idea and you believe in it. Sometimes it's on you to make it happen.

And then other times, most times when I collaborate with people, I'm very fortunate. After having had a lot of bad collaborations, you pick the right ones. It becomes another skill that you hone over time. You learn how to listen. If you make the collaborative choices properly, you then need to listen to people. Speaking of Mark Morris, who is much more autonomous than I am, when I collaborate with him on costumes, he is the full-on leader of the squadron. If he doesn't like something I'm doing, he will tell me. And I will listen.

When I was running my own company, for those 15 years of whatever it was, I was very autonomous and always like, "This is the way it's going to go. You're going to do it this way." I had to learn to collaborate on a huge, corporate scale when I worked with Target. It was a big, big deal. Suddenly you're dealing with a corporation, not just a small group of people. They have an agenda, they have a way of doing things, and it's this way or no way. I was very fortunate that I worked with great people there who could talk me off the ledge when I needed it. So that was really lucky and I learned in that whole exchange how to collaborate in that intensely corporate world. And I think it's really put me in good stead since then. Also, I'm a Libra and I'm very good at listening and being very fair. The Target thing really taught me a lot about corporate collaboration, listening and demanding things in a certain kind of righteous way.

Being a creative person who makes things for a living, even under the best circumstances, can be hard. But there is this idea in our culture, that things are not legitimate unless they're difficult.

Oh, that's bullshit. I hate that. I hate it so much. I also hate the fact that creative people are expected to be to be drug addicts or impossible or divas. It's just a dumb kind of pretext about creativity. That it has to be difficult. I'll tell you something, some things are really difficult and they're great. You know, they're just great because they're so difficult. Usually firsts are more difficult—your first collection, your first cabaret show, your first movie, your first whatever, is very difficult. Because you're getting your foot in, you don't really know what you're doing yet, right? And then it starts to get easier. You wonder, "Uh-oh, is this not as good, because it's not as difficult?" And the answer is, no. In fact, it's probably better because it's not as difficult. It's just happening. I mean, you're learning how to let it happen.

For someone who's doing a lot of different projects, how do you organize your life? Not just your creative life, but your life in general, in a way that makes it manageable?

I don't take on too much. I really don't. I never felt like I took on too much. But that's my opinion. There are people around me who think I do too much. There are certain critics who don't think it's right that I do all of this stuff. They think it's not right that I can do *that* and *this*, and that I need to do both equally as intensely. They just don't believe it.

I will never take a job unless I know what I'm going to work toward. And once I know that, and I have the job and the legal terms are worked out and all the collaborators are put in place, and blah, blah, blah, there's nothing that's going to stop me from finishing it.

So I never feel put upon and I never feel too busy and I'm not one of those people who are like, up until 3 o'clock in the morning finishing things. If I'm up until 3 o'clock in the morning it's because I want to be up until 3 o'clock in the morning, not because I'm a procrastinator and I put things off and I better get it done.

One of the things you are called upon to do a lot is give advice. On a show like *Project Runway*, your advice never feels mean spirited or disingenuous.

When people ask for my advice, it's really not about me, it's about them. I used to be a critic at Parsons years ago, and I stopped doing it because I started to sense that I was becoming the wrong person for the job. I remember an interaction I had with this one student where I said, "Oh, what about these buttons? Is this the best you can do?" And she said, "Well, I didn't want to waste any more time looking at buttons." And I was like, "Wait a minute. You know what you have to do? You have to waste a lot of time looking at buttons." In that moment I felt like I wanted to kill her. It's like, you have to sacrifice a lot to be good at this, so if you can't spare the extra time to look at lots of buttons, maybe you're not going to be a good designer.

Once I said, "Oh, everybody, if you can, go to Europe on your summer break. Just get the money somehow and go." And somebody raised his hand and said, "Are you kidding us? I can't afford that!" And I was like, "Well, then you can't be a designer if you can't go to Europe." You know, I got there. How did I get there? I had no money. I worked and I saved and I got my ass to Europe and I saw all that shit that was going down there and got informed and inspired. You figure out a way to make it work. And I got so mad that I was like, "OK, stop doing these critiques, because you're just getting mad at people."

That was a long time ago, and since then I guess I've learned that it's more about them. So when they say stuff like that, it's best not to react. Best to just let them play out their own fate. I also learned humor is often the best way to approach giving feedback. It's less painful if the feedback is bad and I think I myself learn the most when things are done in a funny way.

You've done a lot of work, whether it be with partnerships with Target or your line with QVC, to democratize fashion.

That's my life's work. I think that people who turn their noses up at stuff are vicious. They're just vicious and shallow. And they usually don't know what they're talking about. I'm telling you this because I've been inside all of these different industries. Usually, expensive clothes are made poorly and the fabrics are poor. There are some incredible exceptions to that rule, of course, but for the most part expensive clothes that you'll encounter are terrible.

I feel it's my job to reverse our ideas about that. For example, a poorly set-in sleeve, I don't care how expensive the fabric is, it's going to chafe, it's going to be ugly, it's going to wrinkle. And the best thing in the world is a perfectly cut t-shirt—a garment fully resolved from soup to nuts, which you can launder and take care of and keep for a long time. And that's not a just personal opinion. That is the law. There are certain things that are just better than other things. I can't bear this two-dimensional perspective of expensive things always being better than cheap things. That's ridiculous. A terrible, terrible person came up with that idea. And it's part of my legacy, I hope, to dispel that, because it's bullshit.

Before I made my line for Target, there weren't a whole lot of people doing things like that. I think it's one of the good things I've done in my life, like a kind of public service. Before I did the line for Target, I had a few lunches with clients and one or two of them were like, "Oh I can't buy your clothes anymore if you do that." And I was like, "Oh?" It was shocking the way some people responded to it. I just had to be like, "It's your loss, darling."

Essential Isaac Mizrahi:

[Unzipped](#) — is a 1995 American documentary film directed by Douglas Keeve.

[Isaac Mizrahi: Fashion, passion, and about a million other things](#)

["Sweet Marijuana" Isaac Mizrahi @ Cabinet Of Wonders City Winery, NYC 4-15-2016](#)

[Fashion Designer Isaac Mizrahi's Updated 1930s New York City Apartment](#)

[The Nine Lives of Isaac Mizrahi](#)

[Peter & the Wolf with Isaac Mizrahi](#)

Name

Isaac Mizrahi

Vocation

Designer, Entertainer, Entrepreneur

