

Interview: Tim Gunn on 'Project Runway,' New Book, Current Fashion

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CHICAGO – October 28th is the season finale of Lifetime Network's popular "Project Runway," As contestants Andy, Mondo and Gretchen take their final designs to New York's Fashion Week, backstage will be the show's mentor, the inimitable Tim Gunn. His new book is "Gunn's Golden Rules: Life's Little Lessons for Making It Work."

Gunn was in Chicago on September 13th, greeting admirers and signing books at Borders Books Michigan Avenue. The always stylish and avuncular Mr. Gunn has an aura of goodness about him, treating everyone in the green room with the utmost grace and respect.



The Mentor: Tim Gunn at Borders Books Michigan Avenue, Chicago, September 13th, 2010

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com.

Gunn was born in Washington, D.C., and got his BFA in sculpture from the Corcoran College of Art and Design. He started working at the Parson’s The New School for design in New York City in 1982, making it to Chairman by 2000. He began as designer mentor on Project Runway at the show’s inception in 2004, and has several catchphrases, including the ubiquitous “Make it Work!”

Recently, besides his new book, Gunn participated in the “It’s Gets Better” video project – a YouTube channel with cogent advice for the GLBT community due to the recent rash of gay bullying and suicides – relating how he tried to commit suicide at age 17.

HollywoodChicago.com got the rare privilege to sit down and interview Tim Gunn, as hundreds of admirers gathered at Borders for his book signing.

HollywoodChicago.com: What perspective of your life came out of the writing of this book? What revelation surprised you in the sense that you hadn’t thought about it for a long time?

Tim Gunn: Generally speaking, a large portion of the book contained material that I hadn’t really thought about or mulled over in recent years. I called up a lot of this for several reasons. One being, many people tell me that they don’t know a lot about me, they know what I do, but they don’t know who I am. And another thing is that I wanted to give back to the young people, who share with me a lot of private, intimate information. They may be suffering a great deal, they may be going through emotional trauma. I wanted to say to them that I wasn’t a very happy kid and I’ve risen above it all. But it wasn’t about pure self-will, in fact if self will had anything to do with it I wouldn’t be here today. It had to do with a lot of people who very supportive and very nurturing, and really helped me. Life is a collaboration, it’s not a solo act.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you think the world of fashion needs more etiquette in general? Or do you think that this behavior is simply the result of the ego you need to be a trend setter?

Gunn: I believe that one has to have self confidence and self esteem, but I don’t believe for a moment that one needs to behave badly. The reason that the events that I talk about in my book are memorable to me is because they are aberrant, they aren’t the norm. I would never paint the fashion industry as being a horrible place filled with people who are unbridled divas. Those unbridled divas stand out because there are there are a lot of fine, wonderful and responsible people.

HollywoodChicago.com: Everyone knows you in your role as mentor on Project Runway. What job in the past was most like your role on the show and what similarities do you have in your current position as Chief Creative Officer at Liz Claiborne?

Gunn: I spent 29 years as a teacher, and that’s how Project Runway found me, I was Chairman of the Department of Fashion Design at The Parsons School. That’s where I was ensconced, and they weren’t looking for mentor at the time, they were looking for a consultant. Mentor wasn’t even in anybody’s show vocabulary, it just evolved, largely because the producers feared that Heidi would send everybody to the workroom and no one would talk. So by sending me in, there was a guarantee there would be some dialogue.

But I have to say that I never once dreamed I would be on the show. I thought as long as they have the designers responding to me, that no one needs to see me, no one needs to hear my voice. No one is more shocked or surprised than I about this whole thing.

In my role at Liz Claiborne, I’d say it’s largely as an educator. Whether I’m working with the designers across the brands, or doing a multi-brand fashion show, it’s really about giving people information, hopefully giving them information that’s useful to them, and having them come away from the experience feeling that they know more about how to help themselves.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your role has expanded on Project Runway as the show has evolved. In your recent admonition to the designers regarding Gretchen at the team challenge, how did you present that to the producers as something you felt strongly you had to do and how do you see it as part of your general role and evolution on the show?

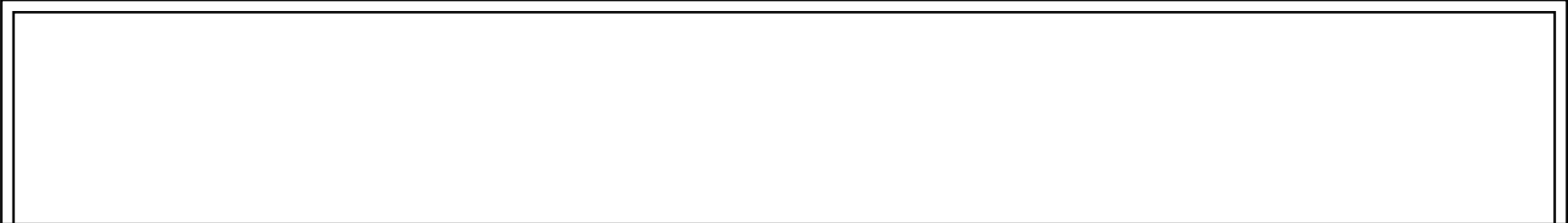
Gunn: I will have to say that my admonition was to all of Team Luxe. It wasn’t just to Gretchen. I couldn’t understand why they allowed her to act that way, there was no leader.

For the first time ever, I gave the Project Runway producers a heads up about the fact that I was going to give them a talking to, because normally that beat in the show is I go in and I tell the designer who is out to go clean out their space. I could have done it by simply telling A.J. [the ousted designer] to go clean up his space. He leaves the room, and then I deliver this line that was preoccupying me. I felt that I had to do it, just to purge me.

But I wanted A.J. to stay, I wanted him to hear it, to hear my anger and frustration. I wanted him to hear me say that I believed he was the sacrificial lamb.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you watched the fashion media on television, was there ever a time you said to yourself, I want to do that?

Gunn: Yes, no time. [laughs] At no time at all. When I was first asked to do red carpet reportage...that’s too grand a term...coverage, I thought I could only do it in my own way. To be respectful of people, to engage them in a dialogue and not to stand and offer snarky comments. It’s like fashion stand-up, that’s not what I do. I’m very pleased and very proud to be a positive voice for this industry and to take it seriously. Not too seriously, I’m very fond of saying, ‘we need clothes, we don’t need fashion.’ They are two entirely different things.





Tim Gunn (center) Makes an Appearance as Himself with Chris Noth (Mr. Big) and Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie) in Last Summer's 'Sex in the City 2'

Photo credit: Craig Blankenhorn for © New Line Cinema

HollywoodChicago.com: Where do you think your gentle empathy comes from? Even as you are critiquing someone, how did you develop the skills that allows that advice to be positive rather than devastating?

Gunn: I learned from teaching. If you are perceived by the student to be belittling them or purely criticizing them without offering up words of encouragement and support, they shut down and discredit you. It was really from a lot of trial and error, and doing things the wrong way and not doing that again. It's acquired.

HollywoodChicago.com: As a person who was just a teenager when the Stonewall Inn riots occurred, how did you transition into that part of the gay liberation movement, and did the events of that particular freedom make it easier for you personally as you navigated those years?

Gunn: No, not even remotely. I was a teen then, but I didn't come to term with my own ability to even acknowledge my sexuality until almost my early to mid-twenties. I knew what I wasn't, but I hadn't owned up to what I was, I definitely knew what I wasn't. And what I wasn't was a heterosexual male. I knew that. I would call myself asexual all the time.

Even when I first became involved in an intensive long term relationship, I wasn't certain how authentic I was in that relationship. I knew I loved this man, I knew the activities we engaged in besides loving his brain as well. But if someone had asked me, 'well, are you gay?' I might have said in the early stages of the relationship that he was more like a brother. That actually made it worse. [laughs]

It was something that I struggled with, not having to do with social conforming, but having to do with my sense of really who I am. And in the time I was growing up, there were gay stereotypes that were jokes, like Paul Lynde or the decorators in Doris Day movies. I thought I wasn't that person either. So who am I?

HollywoodChicago.com: What discipline did you learn in your early life as a swimmer that you took to your other life as a fashion expert?

Gunn: Well, that practice does make better. Also I studied the piano for 12 years, so I'm used to the fact that you have to put the time in to get the product out. I love swimming because it's clean and you don't sweat.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally. there are many avenues that a person can navigate after hearing your famous advice to 'make it work.' What impresses you most after you see something you really like as a result of giving that advice, either on the show or in life?

Gunn: Well, what satisfies me about it is feeling the papable-ness of an individual having an epiphany of self discovery. And it's really a wonderful thing, and you know that they have an enhanced sense of who they are, and they're better armed to navigate the world from that point forward. It's a wonderful thing.

"Project Runway" Season Eight finale is Thursday, October 28th, at 9pm EST/8pm Central Time, on the Lifetime Network. Check local listings for channel location. "Gunn's Golden Rules: Life's Little Lessons for Making It Work" by Tim Gunn is available at Borders Books or wherever books are sold.

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