

## Pageant

CHRISTOPHER HUNTE stood in a corner of his sweltering studio surrounded by bolts of fabric, pounds of bugle beads, stacks of *Vogue Italia*, four sewing machines, one perspiring assistant (female), one implacable chaperon (female), one very proud mom (not his), and the reigning Misses Staten Island and Capitol District (New York State). All eyes were on Christopher Hunte, but Christopher Hunte was serene. "This is the magic fabric," he announced, unpinning a gorgeous length of antique silk lace—midnight blue picked out with iridescent black sequins. "Under the pageant's lights, this fabric just comes to life." Five damp female heads nodded delightedly.

If the pageant were the Miss America Pageant and the sash read "Miss New York State," then the gown beneath the sash would likely have been created by Christopher Hunte; he was anointed Miss New York State's exclusive evening-gown outfitter by Miss New York State Scholarship Pageant, Inc., in 1986. We had been told this by a friend who'd had Christopher Hunte design her wedding dress.

We wanted to meet Christopher Hunte, and we tracked him down to a sixteenth-floor studio high above West Thirty-eighth Street on a blistering-

hot morning a couple of months ago, while he was entertaining, with his assistant, the aforementioned four pageant-conscious ladies. The studio was cramped and airless, with jade-green carpeting and walls of a hopeful hot pink. The coolest-looking object in the place was a finished gown of gray silk hanging on a rolling rack near the entrance. Christopher Hunte himself turned out to be a tall, slender black man, thirty-odd, with sparkling eyes, long, elegant fingers, and a lilting island accent.

"I was born in Barbados," Mr. Hunte conceded when we asked, "but I was raised in Brooklyn. I came here when I was fifteen. I attended Grover Cleveland High School, and LaGuardia Community College, and I received my B.F.A. from Pratt. I started my own business in 1982, after eight years in retailing at Saks Fifth Avenue." As he recited all this, he was ironing a length of black silk charmeuse—a piece of material that would soon become the shell beneath the "magic fabric" of a gown for Miss Capitol District. "My first beauty contestant was Miss Jamaica/U.S.A.—she was a former model of mine—and in 1984 I began designing for Miss New York State contestants."

Christopher (by now we were calling him Christopher) introduced us to Miss Staten Island—Anna Marie Truncali, a surprisingly petite young woman, hardly sixty inches tall in

heels, but those modest inches culminating in a big, dazzling smile.

"This will be the most elaborate gown I've ever worn," Anna Marie told us as she stood motionless before the studio's one mirror while Christopher sculpted fabric at her waist. "I'm absolutely thrilled. No, I have no preconceptions about how the gown should look. I trust Christopher completely."

"What I try to do is get inside the judges' heads," Christopher explained as Anna Marie pirouetted slowly for him. "Give them something that will make a strong impact—something sexy but not too revealing, sophisticated but not overdone, something very, very feminine, with lots of shimmer."

"Christopher, I don't know about this," Anna Marie said apologetically. "The neckline is so low!"

"That's just the shell, dear," Christopher laid a reassuring hand on Miss Staten Island's bare shoulder. "We stitch the dress on you in reverse, you see. Scallops of fabric will cover everything. Don't worry."

Miss Capitol District, from Schenectady, was Melissa Morrison, a lovely honey blonde. (Capitol District, Christopher explained, is the pageant territory encompassing metropolitan Albany.) Melissa, at the moment we met her, was jabbing at her stiff foundation garment with a fist. "I'm not used to wearing these contraptions," she whispered to her mother, who was sitting very close by. "You really used to wear one of these?"

"I don't design for all the contestants who reach the Miss New York State pageant," Christopher informed us at one point. He was pinning together an open seam along Miss Capitol District's thigh. "In fact, a lot of the Miss New York State contestants use store-bought gowns. But each year a few hire me to design something special for them. More of them each year."

"I'm paying for Melissa's gown," Melissa Morrison's mom admitted shyly. "Melissa deserves it. She's my best friend—never gave me a moment's trouble, this one. How do we afford it? I'm a beauty technician, I rent a booth at the mall a few hours each week, and her father's a fireman."

We asked a few of the obvious questions.

"Twenty-five," said Anna Marie.

"Nineteen," said Melissa.

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"Music—singing and accordion playing," said Anna Marie.

"Interpretive dance," said Melissa.

"Dentistry," said Anna Marie. "I'm in the N.Y.U. College of Dentistry. When this is all over, I'll become a dentist."

"I don't really have any specific goals right now," said Melissa. "Right now, my only goal is to be Miss America."

"You should come to the pageant," Christopher told us later, as we prepared to leave his packed little hutch of a studio. "You should see how this all turns out."

We agreed with him, and that is how we came to be in the Dulles State Office Building in Watertown, New York, seventy-four miles north of Syracuse, on a recent hot Saturday, watching eighteen misses vie to become Miss New York State 1988. There was Anna Marie, her smile still dazzling. There was Melissa, looking very nervous. The transformation wrought in this appealing nineteen-year-old by formal wear, high heels, cosmetics, and hairspray was astonishing. Melissa looked a very beautiful thirty-five. The gowns that Anna Marie and Melissa were wearing for the evening's curtain-raiser were not Christopher's creations. Christopher's gowns would not appear until much later.

"And now our semifinalists." Randy Wenner, the master of ceremonies, was all aglow. "Miss Greater Saratoga County, Miss Niagara County, Miss Dutchess County, Miss Long Island, Miss Westchester, Miss Southern Erie County, Miss Greater Syracuse, Miss Buffalo, Miss Fulton County, Miss Manhattan."

No Anna Marie! No Melissa! The smiles on their spotlit faces, however, were unimpeachable. Everything, expressively speaking, was still in place.

The balance of the pageant passed in a blur of swimsuits and stiletto heels endlessly promenading. The only constant was Randy Wenner. Randy Wenner on talent: "Miss Long Island will be singing for us tonight 'Musetta's Waltz,' by Giacomo Puccini, one of the most popular of all operatic arias, and one that has also been arranged in the past for artists like Jerry Vale and Vic Damone." Randy Wenner on programming aesthetics: "If you glance at your program, ladies and gentlemen, you'll notice that we have



1066  
1766  
620  
410  
1861  
1215  
1812  
1941  
1492  
1917  
1914  
789

CR Barcott

"You're history, Leonard."

no intermission for you this evening, but we do have the next-best thing—a commercial break. Our sponsors this evening, and it's a beautiful, long list, are . . ."

Christopher's evening gowns made their appearance during the pageant program's final production number—a procession of all the Miss New York State contestants. The gowns were indeed smashing: smart, sexy, eye-catching, and very, very flattering. The winner of the Miss New York State 1988 title, in the meanwhile, had turned out to be Miss Manhattan—Mia Seminoff, a student at the Juilliard School of Music and a native of Oklahoma.

Afterward, at the Queen's Reception, we found Christopher already huddled with pageant officials, plotting this new Miss New York's projected wardrobe. What we wanted, though, was a final word with Anna Marie and Melissa. The crowd was thick and clamorous, but we located Miss Staten Island at last, in the celebratory embrace of her highly demonstrative family. She smiled and waved. And then, suddenly, Melissa Morrison was at our side. "I'm so happy," she said, her eyes a little glassy, her face quite flushed. "I'm so very happy."

We shook her hand. "Christopher's gown looked beautiful on you," we said. "Really wonderful."

"I'm so very happy," Miss Capitol

