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Designing Woman

Jane Bell's journey from dancer to decorator

By JACKIE LUPO

Reinventing yourself is something many women find themselves doing at least once in their lives. Jane Bell, owner of Jane Bell Interiors in Scarsdale, where she also lives, has done it several times. And, like the ballerina she first trained to be, she has taken on every new role with style and grace.

Bell was brought up in Manhattan with a view of Washington Square Park — her mom was on the faculty at NYU — and a passion for ballet. By the time she was a teenager, she was training at the School of American Ballet at Juilliard six days a week, dancing all the children's and teenage roles.

"Then, when I was 17, I grew 4 inches and I was too tall to work with any of the men," she said. "I was crushed. So I went over to Joffrey, which was a little more of an edgy company." But at over 6 feet tall when she was en pointe, she knew she was just too tall to win the plum roles in the super-competitive world of New York ballet. The curtain came down on her ballet career.

She may have been too tall to be a top ballerina, but all that work wasn't for nothing. Bell entered a profession that not only accepted her height, but required it: international runway modeling. She also appeared in TV commercials where her dance background was an asset. But the grueling hours of practice were over.

"I went from years of rigid training to this fun world of commercials, and going to Milan, Tokyo, Paris," she said. "Then, my parents basically said, 'You have to find something real to do with your life.'"

Act III took Bell in another, completely new direction, one that allowed her to build on other important experiences she had had while growing up: "My dad was in the hotel business and I had traveled extensively and had been exposed to designers and architects. I decided I



JIM MACLEAN PHOTO

Jane Bell took an interesting path to get where she is today, now a mother and owner of Jane Bell Interiors.

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wanted to pursue a career in interior design.”

She liked to sketch and knew how to draw a floor plan, so she created a portfolio of drawings and floor plans based on some of the favorite places she had visited. She was admitted to Fashion Institute of Technology, where she spent some of the toughest four years she had experienced yet.

“I thought my dancing was hard, but during those four years, I never went out,” Bell said. “Two hundred of us started and only 20 of us graduated.”

In 1988, during her last year at FIT, the 28-year-old fledgling designer won a national competition that launched her career. She and another student won a slot designing a series of former servants’ rooms in a show house in Greenwich, at the old Gimbel estate. The two young designers were the only student decorators creating rooms for the show house, which included rooms by New York design stars such as Mario Buatta.

“We borrowed antiques, asked decorative painters to work for us, and we created this beautiful series of rooms,” she said.

Many job offers followed, but Bell decided she would start her own business. “I jumped into it myself and had a couple of tough years,” she said. At first, she didn’t know much about contracts, bills and all the other financial details involved in running an interior design business. But she learned, and soon had many clients.

Little did Bell know it, but she’d soon be appearing in one of the most important roles of her life: “I had my business going for three years when I became engaged. And then, a year later, my husband [James Cammarata, a software developer at IBM] had the opportunity to move to Paris for his job. So I closed up my business in the city and left, and we had our son, Alexander, while in Paris.”

Bell had spent a summer in Paris through Parsons School of Design and jumped at the idea of returning there.

“I had the most amazing experience,” she said. “I loved Paris, and I went and saw decorative art museums, homes and chateaux. I had the best two years not working, just soaking up French design.”

Returning from Paris, the family decided to move to Scarsdale instead of re-establishing themselves in the city.

“We thought we’d try the suburbs for a year and we rented a house,” Bell said. “We came in the winter of 1996, and there was a huge blizzard with 3 feet of snow. I wasn’t much of a driver because I had only lived in New York and Paris, and I felt so isolated.”

When her daughter, Sarah, was born that spring, Bell began to join local parents’ groups and started to feel comfortable with the idea of staying in suburbia. The family bought a house and put down roots in Scarsdale. “Now we love it,” she said.

Bell started working part time when her children were very young (a third child, Sophie, followed Sarah four years later), gradually building a base of clients that now includes everything from Manhattan pied-a-terre to large Westchester houses. Her design studio is on the third floor of her house, but she spends much of her work time meeting with clients and shopping the market.

She decided early on that she would limit the hours she worked while her kids were young.

“I had a person who helped me with the children one day a week. I knew if I had someone full time I would work full time, so I had someone helping me one day a week when I would work till 7 p.m., and the other days I would work until 3.”

Today, Bell said, “I’m in a really good place now. I love the people I work with. You get to the point where you get business through word of mouth and you don’t have to advertise. I have a good network of people.”

Bell explained that she charges by the hour, giving clients the flexibility to hire her to do as little or as much as they feel comfortable with: “With some very young couples, I give them a list of what to do. Sometimes I come for a few hours to people who want to freshen their home, while others want someone to completely take over.”

For two couples that moved to apartments on Christie Place in Scarsdale, Bell helped with the difficult task of downsizing. “It’s nice to have somebody come in and be a little more objective,” she said. “I definitely encourage them to figure out what to keep. A lot of times they want to make a completely fresh start of it, but I encourage them to take a couple of pieces that have meaning. I worry they’re going to be sad if they don’t take some things.”

Bell said she’s not wedded to any particular style, so it’s important to her to get to know what excites her clients.

“I dislike the most when somebody says, ‘I have no idea — you go ahead,’” she said. “I always encourage them first to go through magazines and tear out pictures. I say they’re never going to find something that’s just right, but maybe there something about the room they like, or just the color. I had a person who was going through magazines and found a bouquet of flowers, and that was a starting point for the whole room.”

Sometimes a client’s own possessions can spark a design theme: “Somebody had an

Egyptian box from a trip, and we ended up doing a Moroccan motif for their dining room.”

To get an idea of what direction her clients’ tastes may lean, she’ll come to an appointment armed with many pictures of sofas or tables. It soon becomes obvious whether their tastes tend toward the traditional, the contemporary, or that in-between world of “transitional” style. But when it comes to designing the actual room, Bell always starts at the bottom.

“In terms of color, you always start with the carpet,” she said. “Your carpets are your biggest investment. They set the tone and color. I’ll have 10 carpets delivered to the home, because there’s nothing like seeing it in your home and flipping back and forth and seeing what you like. It’s really a process, and when you have a designer it’s less daunting because we know the order in which to do things.”

Bell also loves winning over the clients who lack confidence in their design sense: “A lot of people think of designers as overbearing, always saying, ‘This is what you should do,’ but most of us want to bring out what the clients want.

“I have one lady who never had an accessory in her life (she never even wore any jewelry or accessories in her clothing). She had two sofas. I don’t think she had a plant, a basket or a pull-up chair. In the bedroom there was just a bed and two night tables. We’ve been together now three years, and we’re really excited about the process. She sends me pictures. She just got her first live tree, and she’s never had a plant before. It turns out she does have a style, but was too scared to even start.”

As for Bell, she loves accessories of all kinds. “I love things that look like life, that they’ve collected,” she said. “There was a lady who said they had gone to the ocean and had collected these beautiful rocks. She showed them to me, and I said, ‘Let’s display them.’”

Designing for suburban families has made Bell aware of the practical considerations. A designer might mandate white silk upholstery for a Manhattan client without children, but that’s out of the question for active families with kids.

“I think back to my city days prechildren and how unaware I was, but I never realized how bad it was until I had my three,” Bell said. “I’m very aware that the family room has to be comfortable for the people living there. Even the living room does, to some extent. It should look dressier than the rest of the house, but I think you want the kids in there, too. There are so many gorgeous fabrics that you never know are synthetic. I still love silk and lacquer, but you have to be aware of the people living in it.”