



Stars are recycling more than paper and plastic, thanks to Jane Kaczmarek and Bradley Whitford. Their celebrity auction is giving new life to red-carpet garb — and raising funds for kids.

CAUSE CELEB

BY ROBERTA G. WAX



Look fabulous *and* help needy children. It's an irresistible combination for the likes of Jennifer Aniston, Allison Janney, Jennifer Garner, Brad Pitt, Jay Leno, Sean Hayes and all of the *Desperate Housewives*. They are among more than 150 celebrities who have donated their gowns, tuxedos and glam accessories to Clothes Off Our Back, a foundation started by Jane Kaczmarek (*Malcolm in the Middle*) and her husband Bradley Whitford (*West Wing*). The group auctions the garb on the Internet (www.clothesoffourback.org) to raise money for children's charities.

The idea to sell haute couture at cool prices took shape at the 2001 Emmys, which were postponed twice because of the 9/11 attacks and subsequent bombing of Afghanistan. When the show finally went on, stars were asked to tone down the glitz in keeping with the more subdued event.

"I thought, 'This is nuts,'" Kaczmarek recalls. "I had this gorgeous dress made [by *Malcolm* costume designer Heidi Kaczinski]. It was a navy blue taffeta, modeled on a 1950s Balenciaga gown. It fit me perfectly. I thought, 'Why don't we just wear the dresses that are ready, and when we walk on the red carpet, say, 'Here we are, this is what we do — we are entertainers, and we are wearing clothes you can buy and raise money to help others.'"

With a proliferation of sponsors, award shows have morphed into a kind of marketplace, anyway, adds Whitford, who most recently donated a black, single-breasted Giorgio Armani tux worn to the 56th Annual Primetime Emmys. "So we thought that if you knew you were modeling for a good cause, you wouldn't feel so silly. It seemed like a productive way to use fame — more productive than wearing a ribbon."

It's also an easy way for stars to give. Celebrities are constantly asked to donate time or money to causes, Kaczmarek says. "We say, 'We don't want your time or your money. We just ask you to give us the clothes off your back.'"

Aniston was among the first to jump aboard, and the shimmering vintage Dior gown and scarf she wore to the 2002 Emmys (the year she won as outstanding lead actress in a comedy) fetched \$50,000 for U.S. Funds for UNICEF.

"That gown bought 50,000 inoculations for children," Kaczmarek says. "For \$250, you can fix a child's cleft palate. Some people pay that to have highlights put in their hair."

A Donna Karan gown that Teri Hatcher wore to the Golden Globes fetched \$31,000, while *Without a Trace* star Anthony LaPaglia's custom-made watch sold for \$435. Martin Sheen, who has participated in the auction each year, raised \$1,000 the first year for his Brioni tuxedo, while last year's Dolce & Gabbana number brought in \$675.

Still in the closet for upcoming auctions are Virginia Madsen's champagne brocaded jacket and matching skirt from Bebe, which she took off immediately after an event hosted by *InStyle* magazine. Also: a slinky peach satin Versace gown modeled by Hatcher for an *InStyle* cover; a short, black sequined Armani worn by *American Idol* star Fantasia Barrino; a sleek, black sleeveless Maggie

Norris with plunging neckline worn by Sharon Stone at the 2004 Creative Arts Emmys — and more.

Designers and design houses such as Vera Wang, Randolph Duke, Versace, Armani, Dolce & Gabbana and Taryn Rose have also sparked the idea. "Designers are thrilled to have their names associated with good work, and it's great exposure for them," Whitford says. "It's a win-win situation."

Not just any formalwear is accepted, however. The star must have been photographed in the outfit, usually at an awards show or movie premiere. The awards-show aura lends cachet to a garment, Kaczmarek and Whitford note. Still, many outfits are quite reasonably priced, considering their designer pedigrees and their brush with fame.

"The tuxedos are a phenomenal buy," Kaczmarek says. "They are so beautifully made." Tony Danza's Dolce & Gabbana tux went for \$400, and Eric McCormack's John Varvatos for \$500. A turquoise Sue Wong gown with beaded bodice, worn by *Guiding Lights* Mandy Bruno to the 32nd Annual Daytime Emmys, garnered \$300.

Winning bidders receive the item, a thank-you letter from Kaczmarek and Whitford and a photo, donated by Wire Image, of the star in the outfit. They have the option of paying to have their clothing dry cleaned before shipping, but, to the couple's surprise, many don't. Though Kaczmarek had her own sensory experience with a Haj Designs Chicago tuxedo worn by Bernie Mac. "It still had his cologne on it, and I really liked the scent," she says. "I wanted to get it for Brad."

Perhaps the biggest hindrance to selling the clothes is the small size of many of the women's dresses, which can run from an anorexic size two to an almost realistic size eight.

Kaczmarek, who recently donated a colorful hand-painted and beaded Randi Rahm gown and Baccarat ruby crystal ring she wore to last year's Primetime Emmys, laughingly notes that her dresses sell well because "I'm a good size."

"I don't have the body of a starlet," she adds. "I believe in foundation garments. I like to wear a bra. I have a girdle I've worn that I bought at Sears the day before my first Emmy show."

She's also a good customer. She's bought Meryl Streep's Taryn Rose shoes and Jennifer Garner's long, lacy white Oscar de la Renta, worn at last year's Emmys, which is so beautiful, Kaczmarek says. "I imagine my daughter getting married in it."

So far, Clothes Off Our Back has raised about \$500,000. Grateful to have three healthy youngsters

of their own, Kaczmarek and Whitford have directed much of that sum to organizations that help children, such as Smile Train (which fixes cleft palates), U.S. Fund for UNICEF, UNICEF Tsunami Relief Fund, Children's Defense Fund, Cure Autism Now, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Heifer International and Union of Concerned Scientists.

"Anything to do with children hits a chord," Whitford says.

"Nothing feels better than raising money for children," adds Kaczmarek. "The evening gown, the expensive jewelry, the trappings of success just pale in comparison to the way you feel when you get a thank-you note from a kid who's been sick or a parent."

For her own red-carpet forays, Kaczmarek says, "I like to wear things that are a little different from what everyone else is wearing. Maybe because I come from the theater, I love clothes that have some

drama. I love vintage. I'm not always the favorite on the red carpet. I like clothes that have a bit of drama, a bit of color and a bit of support."

She and her husband agree that getting dressed up is hard work.

"I spend more time getting ready for an awards show than I did for my wedding," she says, laughing.

Whitford, who prefers a laid-back style in his personal life, says he's "still getting used to the dress-up routine." If forced to go formal, he favors a form-fitting, classically elegant look, à la Sean Connery. Although he knows better than to get involved in his wife's wardrobe decisions, she is slowly getting him to coordinate his outfits with hers, even if it's only in the color of his bow tie.

"Jane seems to feel we need to be coordinated or something," he says. "I just don't want to look like the Von Trapps." ☑

