

Jill Salen, Costume Maker, Lecturer & Researcher
Madison Brito for Middlebury College Costume Shop, February 2021

Jill Salen, British costume maker and lecturer, has snatched almost every single job she's had with a simple phone call. Her mellifluous pitch exudes wisdom and confidence, a vocal embodiment of the advice she offered to me in our interview: "Always just ask. Always approach them." In many ways, Salen's career is a chronicle of this attitude. At 17 years old, she knew precisely what she wanted to study, applying to fashion schools and boldly proclaiming her interest in costume, even in the face of admissions offices that drew a clear line between the two. In 1972, she attended school in Bristol to study fashion and worked for Theatre Bristol, quickly advancing to the Welsh National Opera via the commonly-dreaded 'cold call.' Salen makes it sound perhaps too easy, explaining her own surprise at receiving the job with little proof of her abilities. In fact, she herself later instituted sewing tests for future applicants. "You cannot employ somebody simply on character," she asserts. Sewing is a measurable, technical skill, one that cannot be faked, and it is even one Salen believes to have a "genetic fingerprint," as there exists a line of master tailors in her family. And why sewing and not design? "Anybody can draw the picture, not everybody can bring it to life."

A fresh-faced 21-year-old graduate working as the ladies cutter for designers such as Maria Bjornson (think, Phantom of the Opera), Salen is ample proof that the perseverance and forwardness she speaks of is not only open to those with the years to back it. In fact, one of the only jobs for which she formerly interviewed, at BBC in Wales, rejected her. Later, forgoing the formal interview process, she went on to work for them. The Shakespeare Globe Theater, she called for a job and got it. When she decided to start teaching, she rang up the college at which she went on to teach for 14 years, the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama. While teaching and raising two daughters, Salen continued her freelance costume work, carving out the space for her work amidst a changing personal landscape. "Stay interested in your discipline," she tells me, "I'm 66 and just started exploring lace-making." The energy captured in her stories of the 1970s are as palpable as the energy she radiates now, her anecdotes and advice a breathing reminder that curiosity is a key to success. She loves going to auctions and finding things and staying in a lively dialogue with those in the field through societies. "Share information, join societies, stay alert," are her words that punctuate the reality of collaboration and community in success. At once a ferocious competitor, forging her own path forward in her industry, and an advocate for sharing the wealth, Salen deftly balances the line between the two, expanding her own opportunity and knowledge and growing that of others.

In sharing her knowledge, Salen published a book on her speciality, corsets, explaining how these sorts of endeavors should be "useful" to the public, not merely to show-off. Her interest in corsetry arose at the opera house, when she began to notice gaps in corset information and grew curious about its history. She began researching corsets held in museums and developing corset

patterns from that research, which serendipitously led to her now working at a reserve collection in a museum. Her story is a testament to the wisdom that you discover your vocation as you go; carving your career is not a one-track road, much less a direct route. With that comes her utmost advice: be nice to everybody. “The girl who cannot thread the machine could one day be in charge,” Salen reminds us. You never know who you will work for or what opportunities could become available to you with the simple power of good character. And when you do make that cold call, you cannot simply ask for what you want as if it’s owed to you. Always ask, but be ready to show you deserve it.