



The Man and the Brand: Shoe Designer Stuart Weitzman in Philadelphia



My feet were always in love with him”

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There are more than a few reasons to love Stuart Weitzman, as the packed room at the National Museum of American Jewish History demonstrated on the evening of June 12 when the renowned shoe designer – whose elegant shoes are sold from New York to Shanghai -- took the stage as part of the "Dreamers and Doers" series at the museum.

Fitting the core values of "Dreamers and Doers," Weitzman, now 72 but with the look and energy of a man still in his fifties, has shown courage,

imagination, hard work, entrepreneurial leadership, and philanthropy. When he came on stage with moderator Zack Seward of WHYY, Weitzman's audience of young, middle-aged, and older women clapped hard and long. Lots of them (Weitzman counted 47 as the women came through the doors) were wearing Stuart Weitzman shoes, hoping to get them autographed (yes, he did) after he shared the story of the man and the brand.

Picture this. Weitzman is wearing a soft pink shirt, a red tie, a navy blue sport jacket, white pants, and a pair of buff-colored suede shoes that call up the Great Gatsby era. And he's warm. And funny. Two of his fraternity brothers (Sigma Alpha Mu) from Penn are in the audience with their wives, children and grandchildren, and had just celebrated the 50th anniversary of his Penn class (which included casino mogul Steve Wynn and lawyer Gloria Allred last month.

Weitzman admits early on that he never planned to design shoes. He was a Long Island kid who "heard Wall Street calling to me." So he went to Wharton. But there were early influences in what he called "a glamorous household." His mother had been a model when she met his father, a shoe designer who was talented and degreed in fine arts as well, and "she was always walking around the house in high-heeled shoes that my father had designed." He even recalls a photo of himself as a little kid, "plotzing around in my mother's red high heels."

Fast forward. "My brother and father were designing shoes for Mr. Seymour, in the days when ladies had to wear what the shoe designers told them to wear." His father's specialty was elegant shoes. Stuart and his brother had spent lots of their childhood and adolescent summers learning the details of shoe design, production, and distribution under their father's tutelage at the Mr. Seymour plant in Massachusetts. Then, unexpectedly, his father died, leaving a portfolio of sketches, "and that," says Weitzman, "became my heritage."

While still at Wharton after his father died, he received a call from his brother. "Can you design some shoes for me?" his brother asked. He mailed off some sketches, and later, in New York City, walking into the well-known I. Miller shoe store on the corner of 57th and Fifth Avenue, he saw his designs as actual shoes.

"Hey!" Weitzman recalls, thinking like Wall Street. "I didn't even get paid for that!"

By the late 1960's, Stuart Weitzman was a shoe designer and titular head of his company, designing for brides, glamour girls, and working women. And he is obsessed with shoes – still. He recalls for his audience how much the Cinderella story drew him in. "I always wanted to make a Cinderella shoe," says Weitzman. The mostly female audience is moving closer, sitting on the edges of their seats. (The Cinderella story, by the way, is one of very few which appear in every corner of the world in tales told to the young.) "Remember that we love the shoe even more than we love Prince Charming." Weitzman recounts how he designed the shoe, and because the cost of a plastic shoe was about \$50 less than that of a leather shoe, it wasn't selling. No one wanted an "inexpensive" shoe from the Stuart Weitzman brand. "Two years later, I made the shoe again and charged \$50 more, and everyone bought it. It's the only shoe I ever made that I overpriced!"

But he has designed some very expensive shoes, encrusted with jewels. Noticing that when the press photographs the women at the Academy Awards each year, they go for the jewelry around the neck and face and for the designer clothing clinging to the body, Weitzman asked, "How can we make the photographers look at the feet?" Apparently, by putting 900 diamonds on the high-heeled silver sandal and a graceful 12K diamond in the center. ("I went on Larry King Live with that shoe," recalls Weitzman.) The next year, Weitzman decided to put 800 Burmese rubies on the sandal, but because the Bush administration announcement of the start of the Iraqi war preceded the Academy Awards by just one day, everyone was asked to dress down, and Weitzman's ruby shoes were among the abandoned excesses. On display in the NMAJH lobby are both of these breathtaking sandals and a new bejeweled plastic shoe.

Weitzman is a natural storyteller, and he tells a couple of celebrity stories. When Angelina Jolie was doing the movie *Salt*, he made a pair of high heels for her, and Jolie ran four blocks in that shoe. Women wanted to be Jolie, running in her high heels, and "we sold 263 pairs of that shoe. Two years later, I made a pair for Jennifer Aniston in a movie and we sold 1,600 pairs of that shoe immediately. I told Brad Pitt that maybe he picked the wrong lady."

Weitzman also designed shoes for the movie *Spiderman*, at a time when his daughter was a film critic, regularly attending previews. One evening, she called him, exclaiming, "You won't believe this, Daddy, but you're in *Spiderman*!" And he was. Or at least a billboard for the

company was featured on Times Square in the movie as Spiderman slithered across a high wall next to the billboard. The moviemakers had temporarily taken down a billboard for Sony and put up a billboard from another location for Stuart Weitzman shoes in which there was a dress that looked like a Stuart Weitzman sandal. Sony sued Weitzman, and lost.

"Well, ya hafta wear clothes and ya hafta wear shoes," says Weitzman. "Why not bring something wonderful to everyone's day? We try to do a good job to make you feel happy." Weitzman believes that a great shoe "works. It functions. It should cheer you up and make you smile – he goes for that extra dimension in the color, the cut, the heel, the feel." And he believes in giving back. Every year, on QVC, Weitzman raises between 3 and 7 million dollars for ovarian and breast cancer research. And his passions include commissioning inner city kids to design shoes in a contest. "The first winner of that contest is a designer today in the fashion industry."