



STYLE

SUIT UP

→ Sartorialist Gigi Basanta discusses the power — and perils — of a well-made man's suit

Story **Gordon Bowness** | Photography **Nicola Betts**

Life off the rack is not an option for Gigi Basanta.

The Toronto-based lawyer knows how to work a power suit, and not a woman's jacket with a femme pencil skirt, but a well-cut, properly tailored man's suit.

"The suit is still a powerful signifier of style, substance, credibility," says Basanta. "I want to access those messages by figuring out how to wear men's suits so I can make it true for me. I don't want to play dress-up, I want it to be real."

Basanta can list off her favourite designers rapid fire. From the US: Mark McNairy, Band of Outsiders, Tom Ford (Luxe). From Italy: Ferragamo, Gucci, Prada, shoes from Brunello Cucinelli ("My new hero"). The Brits: Paul Smith and Burberry. "I try — try being the operative word — to channel an Italian sensibility into an American style, a look that I can get here and make my own."

Basanta's facility around men's fashion is hard won. She's made big investments — some money, yes, but mainly thought and feeling about what it means to be a strong, capable woman making her own way in this world.

"In my experience, as a male-identified woman or butch or whatever term you want to use, I am going to have a dysfunctional relationship with suits," she says. "It

takes a ton of confidence to walk into a store and try one on. That's why the first step, at least it was for me, is usually Value Village or a vintage store in Kensington Market. But that means it probably will not fit and the cut will be dated. Of course, the perfect suit would be more accessible if I was a tall skinny man who can buy a gorgeous charcoal wool suit off the rack.

"I can't get the access that a guy can when I buy men's clothes," says Basanta, a self-professed "chubster."

"Men's fashion, at a high level I mean, is a construct that doesn't make room for me. There aren't a lot of women who demand that kind of space, who you can look to as role models."

The ever-loquacious Basanta demands space. Whether discussing politics or fashion, she's not one for equivocation. "A jacket without a vent is a sin." So it's surprising to learn that the garrulous profession of law wasn't her first choice. Born in Trinidad, she arrived in Toronto when she was 14. After attending Queen's University in Kingston, she worked in mediation, labour relations, social services and human resources. She only started law school at the age of 37. That's when Basanta came into her own; law was a good fit.

"After law school, I sat myself down and looked at what it meant that I never wore women's clothes," says Basanta. "I thought if I'm only going to wear men's clothes, then I'm going to have to figure out how to do it properly."

As an immigrant, Basanta felt

she had a lot of catching up to do. "My dad never wore suits; it was the tropics." She started reading up on fashion and style; she checked out blogs and sought the advice of other sartorialists. "I read everything. I still do.

"I'm generally a confident person but feeling confident about my aesthetic is a different thing. I want my aesthetic to be authentic not campy."

It's an issue of credibility. "Maybe it is just me, but I would not feel good in a middling suit next to a colleague who looks like a million bucks."

Basanta is currently legal counsel for the Pan American Games, on secondment from the Toronto District School Board. She wears a suit everyday. "A grey suit for a lawyer is like underwear; it's a basic necessity." She prefers narrow single-notch lapels and two-button jackets. She has a penchant for pat-

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tern: Prince of Wales plaid, houndstooth, gingham, birdseye. She often accents her look with a perky bowtie and pocket square of linen or cotton, not silk. "A cotton pocket square sits up."

"I think of my job as part of my identity, I am not one who leaves it at work, probably to my detriment," she says. "I admire those lawyers who cultivate a personal style, a style that they're known for so they

stand out, like the signature bowtie or the suspenders. So right from the start I was interested in acquiring some accoutrements that I thought of as powerful style statements. I probably will never have to worry about coming across as stodgy or conservative."

Despite all the talk about professional identities, one of Basanta's earliest forays into making a powerful style statement came about because, she says, "I was hot to trot for a girl." It's that age-old story: She wanted to impress a date. "I went on what I thought was a romantic weekend with a girl I was interested in but what really happened was that she helped me buy my first Brooks Brothers suit — navy, two-button." Brooks Brothers was a great start but Basanta still had to hem and trim any of their off-the-rack suits or shirts.

Then Basanta discovered Brown's, A Short Man's World, the one on Avenue Road. "They have what's called a Banker's Cut, which are suits designed for portly men. Perfect for me," she says. "I bought a blue pinstripe and a blue birdseye from them. And upstairs they have a great selection of shirts, so I don't have to trim them down. Where else are you going to find a 17" neck/31" sleeve?"

Her sartorial successes and new earning power propelled Basanta to tackle the summit of men's fashion: the bespoke suit. The choice of who to make it was obvious: her friend Victoria McPhedran, co-owner of

Continued on page 12

→ **LAWYER'S UNIFORM** Gigi Basanta is wearing a blue birdseye wool suit from Brown's, a Harry Rosen made-to-measure shirt, a Haspel bowtie, a Harry Rosen Outlet pocket square, a Hugo Boss belt, Etro socks and Uncle Otis shoes (The Generic Man). Her glasses are from Rapp Optical.

Continued from page 11

Green Shag clothiers on Queen Street West. Intriguingly, Basanta found the experience unsettling; she reverted back to a more insecure version of herself. The myriad choices set her off-balance. A man used to having his own way might see teal lining and pink stitching as fun, dashing options. But to Basanta, they became political minefields: Were they too femme? Was she being pushed around? It was all too much.

"I felt intimidated, through no fault of Victoria's," says Basanta. "I didn't understand the process. I started to panic. I didn't have enough patience to take my time and articulate what I wanted. I had a lot of self-doubt."

In some ways the experience revolved around a basic question of worthiness faced by so many women and queers. Are you worthy of all the attention being lavished upon you? Are you worthy to demand space, to be heard? Are you worthy of power? Basanta cringes recalling the experience. And yet the suit is now her favourite.

It's an object lesson she keeps in mind when she's called upon by friends to take them shopping for suits. While the first hurdle is sticker shock ("Yes, a good pair of men's shoes will cost you, but they're going to last you 15 years"), it's that issue of authenticity, of power, that can be the real hurdle. There have been a number of occasions when, after a day of shopping, a friend just can't see themselves in the suit they've picked out. Basanta literally has to barge into the dressing room and get her friend into the outfit. The transformation can be overwhelming. "You see them stride out of the dressing room, full of swagger," says Basanta. Then come the stories from whatever event they attended. "After going to a wedding in a good suit, one friend said that she had never gotten that type of reaction before, 'Now I know what you were talking about,' she said. 'It was out of control.'"

With the lesson of the bespoke suit well learned, Basanta now marches into high-end shops like Holt Renfrew and Harry Rosen to make the most of their made-to-measure services. Every spring she gets two shirts made to measure. As for suits, there are at least two sales every year when they sell off the remaining fabric used that season.

Communication is key. She recalls picking up one suit ordered from Holt Renfrew when they had cut the buttonholes on the wrong side, the female side. "Of course they totally understood my distress and were extremely apologetic. And of course they fixed it. But it's those assumptions that you have to keep fighting through."

Basanta gives as good as she gets. "When they see me coming, they tend to send the women over," she says. "I don't want the women, which I say with all due respect, as there are some really great female salespeople and they have all sorts of expertise working in the men's department. But part of me is saying, I want the Italian guys!"

"Then the reality is that these very professional men can get flustered when they have to measure my chest for a shirt or my inseam for pants. I feel for them because they are as much purists as I am and we both want an excellent outcome."

"I mean, 'Get in there,'" she says, laughing. "'Fit me like I'm just another chubby guy.'"

One last piece of advice for anyone setting out on a fashion journey of self-discovery? "That a pair of khaki chinos, a Lacoste polo shirt and a pair of Bass Weejuns loafers is always a great look. It can get you into anywhere." •

→ **THE PINNACLE** Her Green Shag bespoke suit is made with Scottish superfine wool, brown piping, ticket pocket, surgical cuffs, hunting buttons, teal lining and hot pink stitching. The shirt is from Stollerys and the cufflinks are a gift from Basanta's mother-in-law. Completing the look are an H&M tie with vintage tie clip from Cabaret, a Calvin Klein belt and Allen Edmonds brogues.

