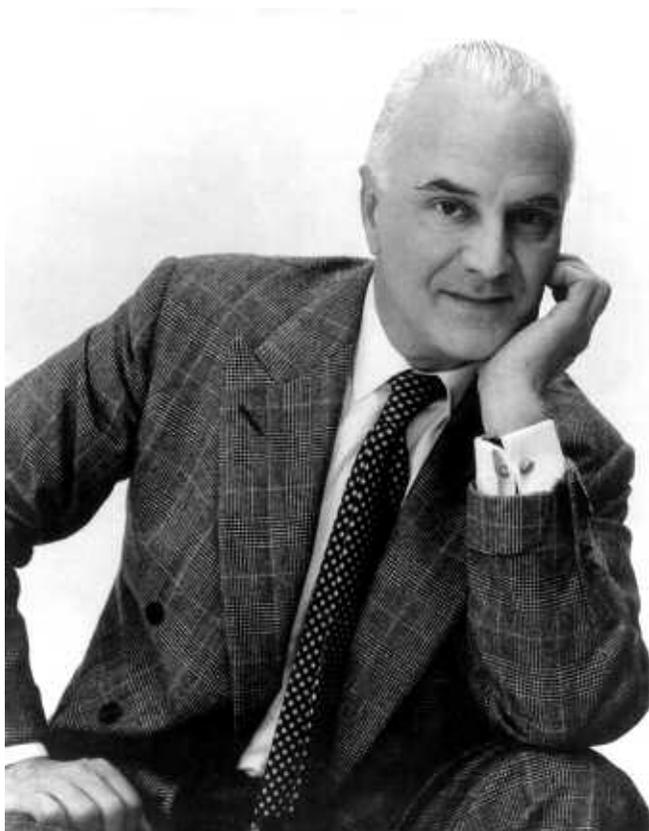


BG CONVERSATION: A REALLY BIG SHOE

MANOLO BLAHNIK, THE HALF-CZECH, HALF-SPANISH, PARIS-EDUCATED AND BRITISH-BASED SHOE DESIGNER IS FLAMBOYANT AND LOQUACIOUS. SO WHEN HE ASKED TO MEET ONE OF HIS MORE FAMOUS CUSTOMERS, THE ALL-AMERICAN COMEDIENNE, ACTRESS AND AUTHOR AMY SEDARIS, WE JUMPED AT THE CHANCE TO MAKE THE MATCH AT BG, OUR SEVENTH FLOOR RESTAURANT. SEDARIS ARRIVED FIRST. BLAHNIK FOLLOWED, JUGGLING COPIES OF HER BEST-SELLING COMIC ADVICE BOOK, *I LIKE YOU: HOSPITALITY UNDER THE INFLUENCE* AND HER BROTHER DAVID'S *WHEN YOU ARE ENGULFED IN FLAMES* IN ONE HAND AND ONE OF HIS OWN SEXY HIGH-HEELED SHOES, WHICH A CUSTOMER HAD LEFT FOR HIM TO AUTOGRAPH, IN THE OTHER. AS HE SAT DOWN AND WHIPPED OUT A SHARPIE, SEDARIS'S EYES LIT UP. HILARITY FOLLOWED. TIE YOUR SHOELACES, BECAUSE YOU'LL WANT TO FOLLOW.



Manolo Blahnik



Amy Sedaris

AS: I just tried that shoe on downstairs!

MB: I sign thousands. It's a pretty shoe but it's not the best thing I ever designed. I mean, really! [*signing*] To Oksana...Is she from Lithuania?

AS: Isn't that going to come off?

MB: No I sign in the instep. But what should I say?

AS: I feel like a heel? You're a real shoe-in? It's a 12-step program?

MB: Watch it baby! Those heels kill! I got these books yesterday. Would you sign them for me? And this is obscene. I have your brother's book, too. But oh my goodness. This [*pointing at the cover of Sedaris's book, which shows her in a homemade dress, a yellow rubber glove holding a roast turkey and a pair of silver Manolos*] is divine. It's so beautiful and young.

BG: Manolo bought your book. Have you ever bought a pair of his shoes?

AS: Are you kidding me? Actually, the shoes on the cover are the only pair

I ever bought discounted. I got them on sale—here. I never bought a pair that was on sale. Ever. And I'll tell you why. I wear a size five, and sometimes I buy a four-and-a-half, but they don't always have either. But Manolo, I have a complaint. Your fives are starting to feel like sixes.

MB: This is a technical problem! We have to do, in the factory, a different thing for America. So all the sizes are kind of weird.

BG: So this wasn't your first pair of Manolos.

AS: No! I think I have like eighteen pairs. Sarah Jessica Parker bought me my first pair, and then Pat Field bought me my second. David Letterman has given me three certificates to your store. He gives me Todd Oldham certificates, too. As gifts.

MB: Oh, I love Todd! I adore...

AS: He loves your shoes. He says they're an extension of a woman's leg.

In fact, I did not decide anything at all. Everything in my life has been accidental. I should have a movie called *The Accidental Shoemaker*. **MANOLO BLAHNIK**

MB: That was the best of New York—at that time. That period of Todd Oldham and all those kids, it was so exciting and new. I mean, I adore New York. But everything is corporate, everything is huge now.

AS: It's true.

MB: I really miss that kind of grittiness that used to be. When Marc Jacobs started. It was very exciting, that period, for me. It was just like the time of Blass, Beene and Galanos. We had these youngsters coming through New York, and they were fantastic, incredibly creative. Then some of them, because they didn't have the help or the know-how of how to survive in the business world, they just...they moved somewhere else or transitioned to something else—or they're still doing fashion, I don't know. But I miss that. And now what do we get? An incredible battalion of people, I don't even know their names, I don't even know where they come from, and maybe I don't have the culture or the time to follow it. But I don't find it as exciting. It's too organized now.

AS: You're right. It is too organized.

MB: I really liked that madness. I really liked *Paper* magazine. Now, even *Paper* magazine is kind of serious. Everything is. Of course, you have to move.

AS: I guess that's true. I like homemade clothes. I like to see the stitches on things. Anything homemade, I love...

MB: I wish I could do that!

BG: You can't! You're too huge.

MB: Huge?! Are you kidding?! I'm the mingiest of the manufacturers. I'm very small compared with anybody. But I don't belong to anyone. I'm free. I do what I want to do. Sometimes I think, "Ooh, maybe I should...No, I don't think so."

BG: You mean sell out to a conglomerate?

MB: I've been tempted so many times, especially by some people, very important people, and I say, "Ooohh..." But money is not everything, Amy.

AS: No, it isn't. Your shoes are so...they're just so...I mean, you can run, hop, skip and jump in them, and that's what I like about your shoes. They're so comfortable and they're so beautiful. Well, for me, because I love high heels. Since I was little, I was obsessed with high heels.

MB: So was I. We have something in common. But I was not wearing them. I've never been into cross-dressing. I never liked it.

AS: I've seen drawings of your shoes, too. The drawings are as beautiful as the shoes. And I like going to your store and seeing all the women when they take their shoes off. My brother and I call them castaways, when they just throw the shoes around. It just makes me laugh. When I moved to Chicago, David took me to every shoe department on Michigan Avenue, and we would laugh so hard.

BG: When did you get your first pair of high heels? How young were you?

AS: Well, I played in my mother's shoes. Then I was obsessed with Barbie Doll shoes, which I still have. I have them all. Every single one of my shoes. I've just always been crazy about...well, most girls are, really...

MB: You must have an archive type of collection.

AS: Yes, I do. I do. I have them all in the boxes; I love the way shoeboxes look when they're stacked up. It's pretty when people have those fancy closets. But I like them in the box.

MB: You'll be glad to know you're not the only one. It's very kind of normal now.

AS: To have that kind of closet, you mean?

MB: I'll tell you, I get around. Tomorrow I'm going somewhere. I don't know where, I think it's Atlanta. I'm not sure. I don't guarantee it. But anyway, every time I go there I have these incredible cases of people telling me, "Oh, I love shoes." I go, "Yes, of course. Yes." But I had an extreme case of a very pretty Southern woman, she said, "Would you sign your name on my leg? Would you do it small and in a line?" I said, "Well, I can't, I'm kind of overwhelmed." But I did. I signed. And this girl came back about three hours later with a bandage, gauze or something. She'd had it tattooed, my signature, on her leg.

AS: Oh my God!

MB: This is not a fantasy. I adore shoes, too, but that was kind of weird!

AS: Wow.

MB: Can you imagine when she gets old?

BG: What's the expression, "Thank goodness, the legs go last?"

MB: I know. But the skin gets funny.

AS: What made you start designing shoes? Was there one moment when you decided?

MB: I didn't actually. In fact, I did not decide anything at all. Everything in my life has been accidental. I should have a movie called *The Accidental Shoemaker*. But it is true, I'm not kidding. It's so strange. I came to New York with two friends of mine and I went around. I went to see a woman called China Machado. She was an editor of the *Bazaar*—this wonderful Eurasian woman. Very, very beautiful. She said to me, "Oh, your things are very interesting, get into fashion design..."

BG: What were you showing her?

MB: I was doing theatrical sets. I wanted to be in theater.

AS: I love set designers!

MB: I wanted to do movies, I wanted to do anything in theater. And finally, a friend of mine, said a friend of hers was working with Mrs. Vreeland at *Vogue*. My mother had all the magazines, so we knew about her work, and

I did a one-woman show in high school in drama class, and I wore a black unitard, and changed my shoes for each character. I love seeing women in shoes they can't walk in. **AMY SEDARIS**

we knew about the way she looked. And she knew this girl. So it was easy for me to be introduced. I was terrified! She said, "Very interesting, very funny. I love what you put on the extremities." At the time, I was really mad. I was doing things with cherries hanging down the leg, or ivy. I had one shoe with the plastic dolls that they use at first communion...

AS: Oh no! Wow.

MB: Yes. Hideous! But I liked it. I once did a shoe for Veruschka that was hideous! I went into a shop in London called Puntings or Pointings (I don't remember), and I bought all these plastic grapes, and then I had a trellis with leather! It was horrible! And it was heaven because those legs of Veruschka! Do you remember, when I'm talking about Veruschka?

AS: Yes.

MB: She had enormous feet...I've never seen...tall, very tall, enormous, you know, huge. Somebody said that in Germany, she'd had one of her toes cut off to get into shoes. You are too young. You don't remember, but I do. So anyway, Vreeland, after seeing these incredible creations with cherries, said, "Concentrate on extremities!" This is the way I started. Then she said to me, "I know some people who could help you." [*He stops abruptly, and stares hard at Sedaris.*] I like what you do with your hair, with the bun.

AS: Oh, thank you.

MB: Very Monica Vitti-ish. You know Monica Vitti? Anyway, that's the way I started. It sounds like a fantasy.

AS: I love that you came from set design.

MB: And I was derailed by Mrs. Vreeland and all those old fashion ladies!

AS: I love that you just went with the flow. That you fell into your own journey.

MB: At the time, I didn't know what to do. "Shoes, why not?" I was very elastic.

BG: It was about creativity, not money then.

MB: Yes. All my friends, still, at the moment, we think about, oh my God, what we did, we could have made millions. But we didn't. We never thought about it one minute.

AS: You can't really...

MB: I just did it because I loved it.

AS: I did a one-woman show in high school in drama class, and I wore a black unitard, and changed my shoes for each character. I love seeing women in shoes they can't walk in. I love it when I see somebody in a bad pair of shoes, or they're aching or they're hurting or they're just brand new. I love it. I can't get enough of it.

MB: I adore it, too. I had a friend, she was an extraordinary woman. In England. She's dead now. But she was not old or anything. And she had

the most incredible collection of shoes. When I say "incredible," like thousands, possibly. Isabella Blow.

AS: Wow. What a great name.

MB: It's true. She was an exquisite, extraordinary woman. If she came to a party, immediately, I looked. She had all her heels completely in rags, beautiful, silken, all in threads, like Miss Havesham. And I thought it was chic. And I always loved the way she walked, like this [*he stands briefly and minces*]. I really loved her. I still love the excitement of this kind of nomadic shoe life that I have. I don't know anybody normal!

AS: Misfits and outcasts.

MB: *The Misfits!* I saw it two nights ago! Clark Gable was incredible. And Marilyn?

AS: There's a documentary on the making of that movie.

MB: There is?

AS: Mmm-hmm. You can buy it. *The Making of The Misfits*, I believe it's called.

MB: Where? Where? I'm going to buy it immediately! I'm going to get it this afternoon.

BG: Do you use the Internet? You can order it.

MB: I don't use it very much, but I do it.

AS: I've never had a cell phone!

MB: Technology is not for me. I really do not get into technology. The most I do is just taking pictures with my digital camera, and my iPod. But I don't really like to go [on the] Internet. I get bored to tears! I don't like it.

AS: Are you a fire sign? I'm not that into astrology. Just a little bit.

MB: Neither am I. I'm a Sagittarian.

AS: Oh, yeah! It's fire. I'm Aries. We are the same thing.

MB: My Mummy was Aries. I love Aries. They're totally twisted. But the most difficult people to deal with is myself.

AS: You said it! Check, check, check!

MB: Oh God, you're so tough.

AS: Who do you live with?

MB: Nobody! My dog! No-no, no-no-no...

AS: Oh, you have a dog? What's your dog's name?

MB: Seraphine!

AS: That's adorable. What kind of dog is it?

MB: It's a Belgian Milinois. You know what? Somebody gave it to my mother, the vet. Someone burned it with acid! He was in a state, about seven weeks old.

BG: So it's a rescue.

MB: Yes, of course. He saw me and I saw him, and I thought, "This is it." And it is incredible. I still just adore him. I have a picture here. No, I don't have things with me...

AS: Again, it just happened.

MB: Yes. Nothing was planned!

AS: It's so great, isn't it, when nothing is planned.

BG: Like this conversation. Do you have a pet, Amy?

AS: I have a rabbit. Her name is Dusty. My first was Paddletail.

MB: But what a fantastic family.

AS: Yeah, we all get along.

MB: Your parents must be...you're genetically gifted!

BG: You and David obviously inherited something.

AS: Well, we had an Aunt Monie, who my brother wrote about, and my mom inherited all her shoes, so that's what I got to play with. They had jewels on them, and big pearls, and they were like a six. I still have a pair in my apartment. I just had to save them because they're just so beautiful, even though I can't wear them.

MB: No, of course it doesn't matter. It's getting to the point that my home is not a home any longer. It's just a shoe depot.

AS: The Shoe Depot! Hold, please!

MB: It's on one of the crescents in Bath, which is a Georgian city in England. It's the most boring city in the world, but it's...

BG: Beautiful.

MB: Very beautiful. I don't go there very often, but it's my chosen place. I wasn't born there. I'm not at all English. But you pick out places that you like. My sister and my nieces are my family. I don't have many ties, so I just go wherever.

AS: That's a good feeling, too. So you have a sister?

MB: Yes. My sister is the one who does the serious job, like keeping up the business.

BG: Evangeline. She is very beautiful.

MB: Well, she was ravishing, yes, but we're getting old now. I really like to grow, but I don't like to grow old! But it's difficult to avoid, actually.

AS: I want to just go straight to seventy-four. I love little old ladies.

BG: But it fascinates me, Manolo, that you've managed to be ageless in terms of audience.

AS: Yes, it's true.

BG: I mean, *Sex and the City*. Sorry, I had to bring it up. You are an icon for people who are half your age. Age doesn't mean anything!

MB: In certain cases, yes. But in certain cases, no. Writers can go on forever. Filmmakers and writers, but it depends.

BG: What do you think, Amy? You wear his shoes on your book jacket. What makes him ageless?

AS: His work is just perfect. The shoes don't look dated. I can wear a pair that I bought seven years ago, and not feel, "Oh, that was last year."

MB: This is a very nice compliment, because I try to always be detached from trends. You cannot avoid this in fashion, because it is out there and you pick it up. But I always try to avoid to be too much into trends. For the last two years I've almost been losing money. If I was into trends, I would have done platforms again, like I did in the mid-nineties with John Galliano. But I can't bear them! I find them so Catherine Deneuve in *The Last Metro*. Or those

black-and-white war documentaries, like Max Ophüls's films! Those clumps.

AS: Bring back the clumps!

MB: That Frankenstein type of...you know?

AS: I know! They're ridiculous. But your shoes are a real classic design, and again, they're always comfortable. You can always walk in them. You can always count on them. And the colors. The colors are—

MB: A little bit off?

AS: The colors *are* a little bit off!

MB: And the materials, too.

AS: Like nobody else's. You've got a green shoe downstairs now that's got a big flower on it.

MB: Oh, yes, I know which one. But you know what? Sometimes I do horrible things, too, like everybody else. But I try to not be vile. Everything which is too to-the-point of fashion, it's vile. Maybe for you, no, because it's the nature of fashion to change. But at the moment, everything is *extreme*. I don't do these things any more. I've got a huge factory to keep up, and if I get too crazy or the thing is too upsetting for my customers...I have young kids that buy the extreme things that I do. But it's not like I used to do before, doing experimental stuff. Excuse me, but I find it vile, vulgar and common.

BG: What people are wearing now?

AS: They make me laugh so hard. It's humorous. Hideous. I've sent pictures to my brother David, when the new shoes come out, just to laugh. We laugh so hard.

MB: It's a very thin line between hysteria and horrified.

BG: Remember in the mid seventies when everyone wore Frankenstein platforms?

MB: They were dangerous!

BG: Short people liked them. They made you taller.

MB: I don't think so. When you're short, you should wear flats.

AS: I'm five feet, so I should wear short? But I'm proud that I can wear high heels.

MB: But you know what? I think the idea of faking it with high things is awful.

AS: How did your cobalt blue shoe get into *Sex and the City*? Did they approach you?

MB: Yes, they did. We did things for them. But I didn't know what they were going to use. That was chosen by Miss Field or by Miss Parker.

AS: Because it is a really beautiful shoe.

MB: But I've been doing that shoe for a hundred million years. But it worked in that little framework.

AS: Right. But I was afraid to buy it because I felt like, I'm going to be a *Sex and the City* nerd.

MB: Mmm. I really hate when people recognize something! But it was a phenomenon, *Sex and the City*, at the time. When was it, at the beginning of the century?

AS: '96? '97? I don't know.

MB: And you know, I never saw it. I finally saw the movie two nights ago in the hotel.

BG: Did it change your life?

MB: Change in what way? Buying blue shoes? BG

The BG Conversation was conducted and edited by Michael Gross.