

Toni Whitaker, 56
Houston, TX
Syracuse University, North Carolina State University
Fashion Designer

Anyone that has met Toni Whitaker sees the reasons for her incredible success very clearly: her drive, her passion, her talent, and her intelligence. Ms. Whitaker pursues whatever project she undertakes with intensity and authenticity. Having designed costumes for Main Street Theater's 2006 production of *Intimate Apparel* in Houston, Whitaker designed and painstakingly saw executed every last detail of the elegant corsets created for the play. "We have sewn by hand; we have paid attention to every stitch. Any cut corners would not only be noticed by the audience but would simply not be true to the period." *Intimate Apparel* tells the tale of Esther, the anonymous African-American dressmaker from the early 1900's – and Ms. Whitaker's work on the piece was one of those rare moments when life and art coincide.

Nevertheless, Whitaker is far from an unknown. Her designs have been lauded by *Essence Magazine* and *Black Enterprise* in addition to touring with the Ebony Fashion Fair. In 2004, she was named the *Houston Chronicle's* "Ultimate Fashion Designer." Whitaker often dresses many of Houston's leading socialites, including several repeat honorees on Houston's Best Dressed List, and her work is often recognized and heralded in the society pages in Houston. In 2009, The Houston Museum of African American Culture recognized her 25th year in business with a fashion show and exhibition entitled "Only Toni". In 2010 she was a featured designer in Houston's first Audi Fashion Week. Recently named by the Houston Art's Alliance and the Houston Greater Partnership as a Houston Creative, Whitaker continues to work with the city in developing Houston as a fashion center as a member of the Houston Fashion Task Force

Her costuming work for Houston Ebony Opera Guild, Main Street Theater, and other groups in Houston provides good synergy for her commercial work as well. With Houston Ebony Opera Guild, Whitaker has broken new ground, taking opera costume design to a whole new plane. Working with General and Artistic Director of Connecticut Opera (Hartford), Willie Anthony Waters, who also serves as Artistic Advisor and Conductor of the Houston Ebony Opera Guild, Whitaker created a radical new costume design for HEOG's 2000 production of *The Barber of Seville*. She and the show's director, the late Talmage Fauntleroy (former Director of Opera at the University of South Carolina), did away with the traditional aristocratic garb. They instead used Spanish and Moorish influences to give everything an ethnocentric approach that infused the production with a different sense of history and passion. This is just one example of that edge Whitaker speaks of when she identifies the importance of costume design in her life and work. Whitaker again partnered with HEOG and Willie Anthony Waters for a recent production of *Carmen*. Once again, Whitaker pushed the envelope, working this time with stage director Buck Ross of the University of Houston's Moores Opera Center. They set *Carmen* in Cuba 1958 when Castro was coming into power, a radical approach to one of the greatest operas of all time. But there is much more to her career – and her life – than just design. Education is an integral part of Toni Whitaker and always has been.

A native of Camden, South Carolina, she went to Syracuse University in New York State. She is proud of and grateful for the role Syracuse University played in her personal journey from a childhood in a segregated community in the South to the artistic and entrepreneurial success she now enjoys in Houston. "Syracuse gave me a whole new look at the world, at life, and at people," she says. "It was what I wanted, and I loved it. I visited SU for orientation weekend and got to know people and saw the campus. For me, it was the best of all worlds." Whitaker received a B.S. degree in clothing studies from Syracuse at their College for Human Development (now known as "fashion design," the program has since become part of the College of Visual and Performing Arts). She then earned a second B.S. degree, in textile technology, at North Carolina State University. Before moving to Houston in 1982, she taught at Arizona State University in Tempe. In Texas, Whitaker has taught courses ranging from the history of costume and clothing design to visual merchandising, and at universities ranging from Texas Southern to the University of Houston to Prairie View A&M.

Toni Whitaker is also invested in her community. Whitaker says she believes it's important to share her love of fashion design with the youth so they know about opportunities. So she partnered with Harris County's Department of Education's Cooperative for After-School Enrichment, or CASE, and Texas Children's Cancer Center's Arts in Medicine program to create "Kids' Day at Toni Whitaker Boutique," a four month-long after-school program for twenty teenage apprentices. "I didn't have a means to express my interest in fashion when I was growing up," Whitaker said. "However, there are limitless possibilities for these teens." So the students met with Whitaker after school to learn design and actually create comfortable clothing for the children suffering from cancer. As a culminating event, Whitaker hosted "Kids' Day at Toni Whitaker" at her former retail store in Rice Village. The fashion show included student marketing campaigns with design solutions for young patients at Texas Children's Cancer Center. Students also delivered their finished products to patients themselves. In 2011 the designer teamed up with the University Museum at Texas Southern University to create FOR THE SAKE OF ART: A Wearable Arts Competition. The historic murals and artworks of Texas Southern University came to life in a competition open to all artists and students across the country.

Whitaker founded the Houston Incubator Project (HIP) in 2012. Scheduled to debut in the Spring of 2013, the HIP is an innovative, not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting and mentoring emerging fashion designers.

As a professional designer, Whitaker has worked for over 30 years in Houston. Considered to be one of the first fashion design pioneers, her boutique had long been a major fashion institution in the trend-setting Rice Village area near Rice University. Whitaker is known for her stylish and elegant designs often accented by a daring touch of the imagination. Whitaker establishes a rapport with her clients that keeps them coming back. Her flair for the dramatic is always imaginative, passionate, and masterful. Her commitment to her work is unparalleled. She truly brings honor to the role of the American designer and couturier.