

# Interview



## Beach Blanket Babylon's Mad Hatter

**Alan Greenspan and  
Jo Schuman Silver**



*The hat maker and the producer of "Beach Blanket Babylon" talk about the amazing hats, and give a behind-the-scenes glimpse into how they're made and how this San Francisco institution came to be.*

*Beach Blanket Babylon* is a San Francisco institution that's as current and irreverent today as it was when it began 40 years ago this year. Located in the intimate Club Fugazi, in the North Beach section of San Francisco, California, the show attracts locals, visitors, and celebrities alike.

The show is a musical review, built around a plot of Snow White traveling around the world in search of her Prince Charming. As she travels from country to country, she meets a wild array of stock characters, and an assortment of celebrities, pop-culture figures, and ne'er-do-wells who are in the news. The musical numbers satirize everyone and everything in sight.

Most of all, *Beach Blanket Babylon* is all about hats of every kind and size,

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*Beach Blanket Babylon* San Francisco Skyline finale hat.

especially the outlandishly large hats that famously appear throughout the production. The hats and the production are the brainchild of the late San Francisco showman Steve Silver, and are carried on by his widow and long-time collaborator Jo Schuman Silver, hat-making wizard Alan Greenspan (not the financial wizard), and a dedicated crew who rock the show for sold-out audiences night after night.

*VC* was lucky to catch up with Jo and Alan, who talked about Steve Silver, the history of the production, the role that hats play, and how Jo and Alan work

together to create the ever-evolving array of giant hats for which the show is so famous. For those who build costumes and enter costume masquerades, what they have to say proves that these two wildly creative people, and especially Steve Silver himself, are truly kindred spirits.

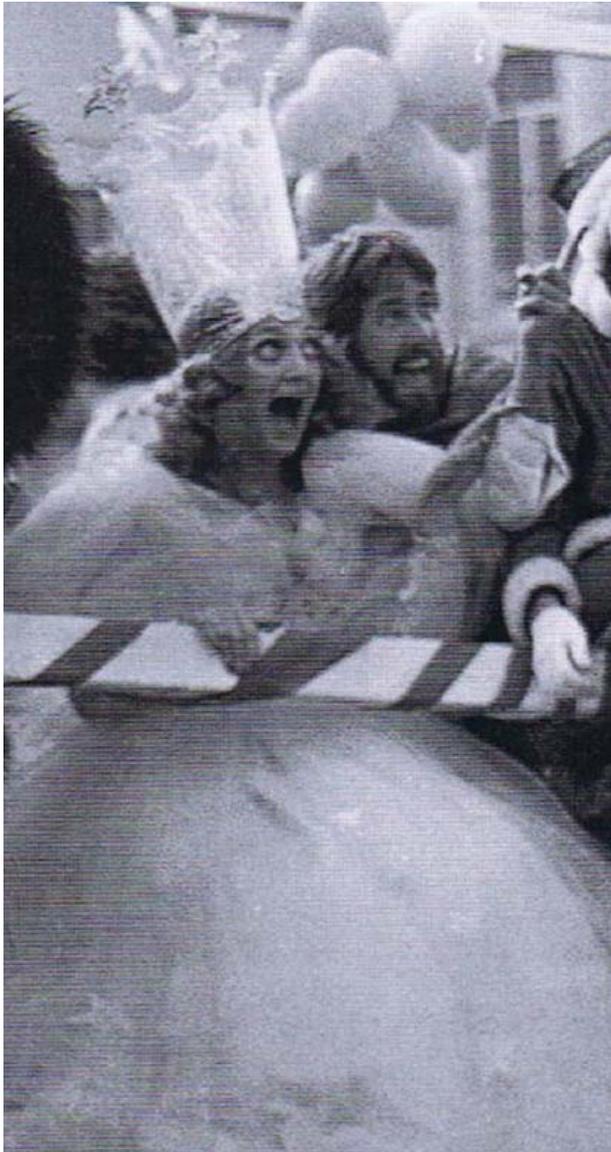
*VC*: How did it all get started?

*Jo Silver*: The show really evolved through Steve having a bunch of costumes in his parent's basement from a previous "happening" called "Rent-a-Freak." He used to rent out people for parties in the 1970s. Then he did a street corner show called "Tommy Hail." It developed a kind of cult following, started making money, and eventually outgrew the street corners.

Then Steve went to this man at the Savoy Tivoli in North Beach and said, "I'll bring my little show here, you take the bar, I'll take the door, and see if we can run for six weeks." That was June 7, 1974. He put all the money he had saved into "*Beach Blanket Babylon*," and from day one, it just took off. He had the whole city behind him. He was like the



Pied Piper: everyone just followed Steve in anything that he did. Forty years later, it's still selling out every night. He had real talent and vision.



Nancy Bleiweiss as Glinda the Good with Steve Silver and *Beach Blanket Babylon* cast in North Beach parade.

*VC*: Were hats part of Steve's original concept?

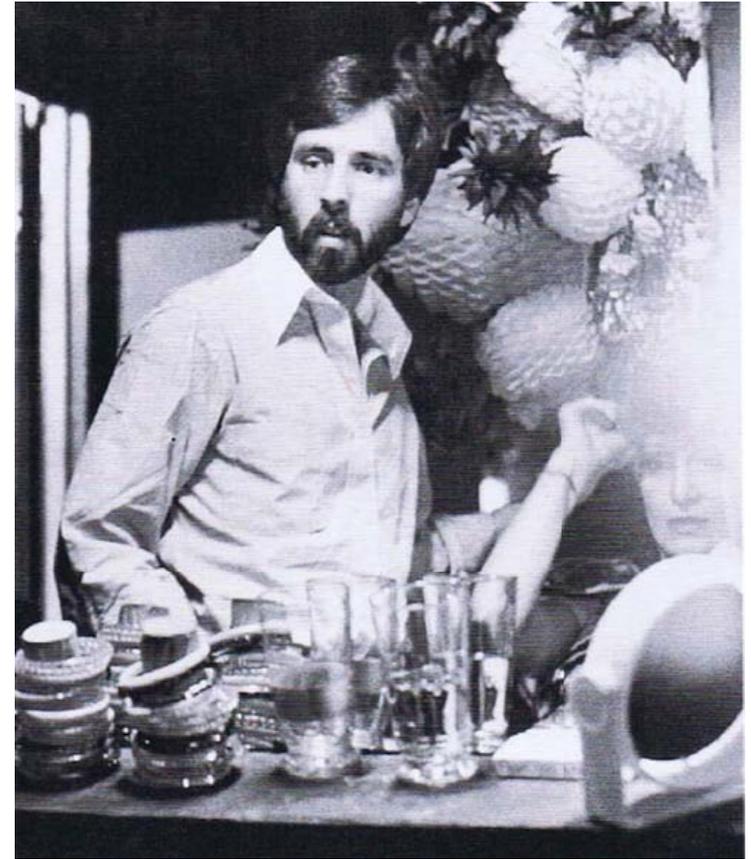
*Jo*: Yes. The Savoy Tivoli was a very, very small space, very narrow. It was a combination nightclub/bar. Steve figured that the only way he could make a statement or do something more interesting was to build hats. He didn't have space to go wide, but he had space to go up. So he drew, created, and made all of the first hats.

Before he made anything, Steve drew it. He was an amazing artist, which is why the show is so visually beautiful. Everything on the stage is taken from Steve's sketches. Even today, when we put new things in, I'll go back to all of Steve's sketches, take them out, and duplicate them, or put together maybe three or four of them to make a new hat. You always have the feeling that Steve Silver is still creating a show.

*VC*: What were some of the original hats he designed and built?

*Jo*: Some of the first characters were "Glinda the Good" (left) and "Pineapple Princess." (right) Steve made the pineapple hat out of paper pineapples. He couldn't sew, so he'd just glue things together, stick things in Styrofoam, and pray and cross his fingers that they would hold together.

*VC*: How did you meet Steve and become involved in the show?



Steve Silver checks "Pineapple Princess" hat in the mirror.

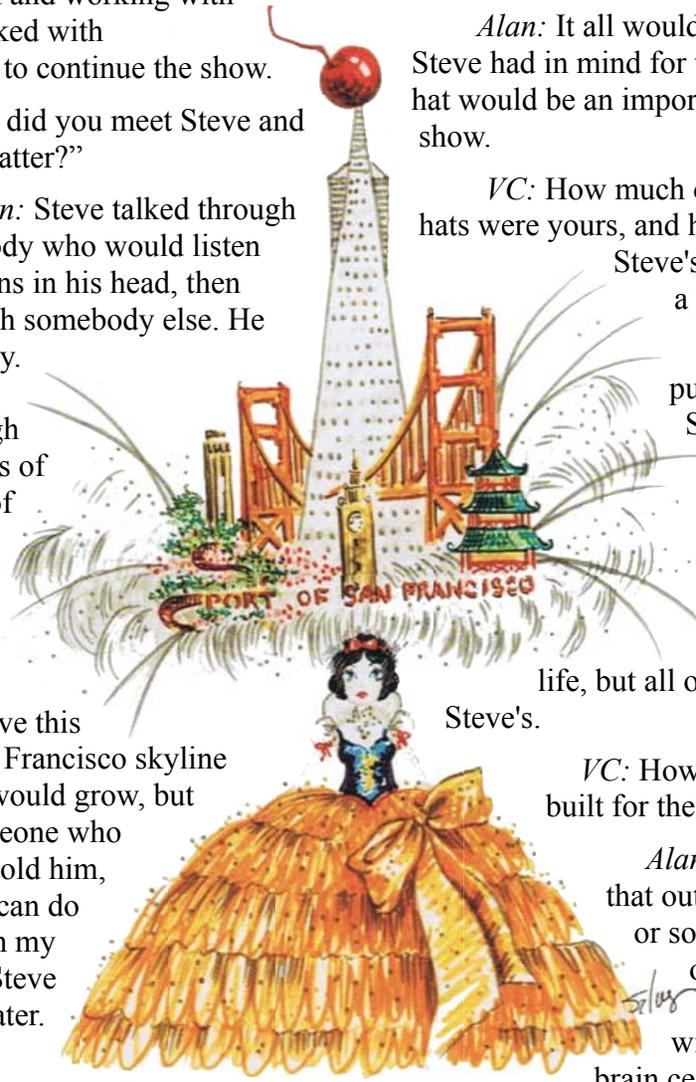
*Jo*: I saw my first show with [Cyril Magnin](#), a mutual friend, in 1982 when Steve opened a new show called "Beach Blanket Goes to the Stars on Broadway," I had no idea what it was about. Cyril said that I was just going to love it, and he was right – it was the best show I had seen in my life. I was blown away! I went home and wrote Steve a 4-page letter of gush to the point of obnoxiousness. My late husband Adolph talked me out of sending it, but Steve and I eventually met, and became close due to things we both did for Cyril.

Eventually I became like a consultant, then as the years passed I began working on the show with him. When he passed away, he left the show to me, but he never said, "Jo, this is what you do." He really ran the show out his back pocket. After being around him so much and working with the people who worked with Steve, we were able to continue the show.

*VC:* Alan, how did you meet Steve and become the "Mad Hatter?"

*Alan Greenspan:* Steve talked through his ideas with anybody who would listen and got their reactions in his head, then talked it through with somebody else. He was brilliant that way. He happened to have talked it through with two room mates of mine in 1978. One of them, John Karr, worked at Tower Records. When Steve got to the end of it, he said that he wanted to have this big hat with the San Francisco skyline and a pyramid that would grow, but he hadn't found someone who could do that. John told him, "Oh, my roommate can do that!" John gave him my phone number and Steve called me a month later.

Early San Francisco skyline hat design by Steve Silver.



*Jo:* When they got together, they had the exact same sensibility, and it became a fabulous partnership! It still is today.

*VC:* It sounds like Steve had a pretty good idea of what he wanted in terms of the skyline hat. How about the rest of the hats?

*Alan:* It all would fit in with what Steve had in mind for the show, and what hat would be an important point for the show.

*VC:* How much of the concepts for the hats were yours, and how much were Steve's, and how much was a partnership?

*Alan:* I always put my two-cents in, but Steve created the show. It's his brainchild, and it always was. I like to think that I did a good job of bringing his ideas to life, but all of the concepts were Steve's.

*VC:* How many hats have you built for the show?

*Alan:* I sat down to figure that out and came up with 50 or so. I'm sure there are others I've forgotten. I'm in my 36<sup>th</sup> year with the show. Some brain cells were probably lost along the way. Hold on to your hat!

- Washington D.C. hat
- San Francisco hat
  - 10 different versions including the big silver anniversary hat, the opera house, the ballpark hat, etc.
- Christmas hat
  - 2 different versions
- Wedding cake hat
  - 4 different versions including Las Vegas, San Francisco, London, and from Prince Charles' visit
- Trash can hat
- Jewish wine hat
- Streetlight hat
- Cash register hat
- Swan hat
- French fries hat
- Coke hat
- Burger hat
- Princess phone hat
- Birthday cake hat
- Crow hat
- Rooster hat
- Tamale and beans hat
- Roach motel hat
- Ritz box hat
- Oil of Ole hat
- Three hairdryer hats
- Typewriter hat
- Las Vegas chapel hat
- Reese's hat
- Sundae hat
- Cigarette and matchbook hat
- Banana split hat
- Assorted Ascot hats
- SOS Brill Pad hat
- World hat
- Grauman's Chinese Theater hat
- Chop suey hat
- Dancing tables with lamps hats
- Merry Men hats
- Copa hat

VC: How have they evolved over time – the San Francisco skyline hat for instance?

Alan: The skyline hat has gotten bigger over time. It started out about 4ft wide, and grew side-to-side because we couldn't make it any higher. Eventually I had to build a new one because it was structurally better for the width of the hat.



Ellen Toscano and Doug Magpiong as Catherine the Duchess of Cambridge and Prince William

We've added more buildings to it, and they have changed over time. The center of the hat is the newest building on the San Francisco skyline. For example, when the new de Young museum opened, that went on the hat. When San Francisco's Davies Symphony Hall opened, it went on the hat.

VC: How do you come up with new characters and hats to put in the show?

Jo: If there's something in the news, like the other night with the MTV Video Music Awards with Miley Cyrus, I was able to get that in the show the next day. We're that current, and we have such great people who are so on the ball.

When Prince William married Kate Middleton, my costume designer and I were up at 3am, and as soon as we got the pictures of the dress, we went down to the club and started to put together the dress and the crown that she wore. We had Kate Middleton and Prince William in the show that night in an exact replica of what they wore at their wedding. (left) This is how Steve created the show, and this is how we continue it.

VC: Take us through the process of creating a new hat from concept sketch through construction and when it first goes on stage.

Jo: I'll meet with Alan, show him some ideas I have from pictures and all, and how I think the hat should go, and then ask him to draw up some concepts. He draws them up, and then we both go over it together. I'll make some changes, saying no, I don't think

the audience will get that, or we should go a little further here, and he'll get the ideas. It's really a collaborative effort.

Alan: We'll go back and forth that way, until I know there's something that I can build, can be worn, and Jo likes the way it looks. Then I can go ahead and build it.

Jo: We also make sure it looks good on stage. It's a big, long, really fun process. Alan is so much fun to work with, he's so easy, and we're very, very lucky to have him. He's just a joy to work with.

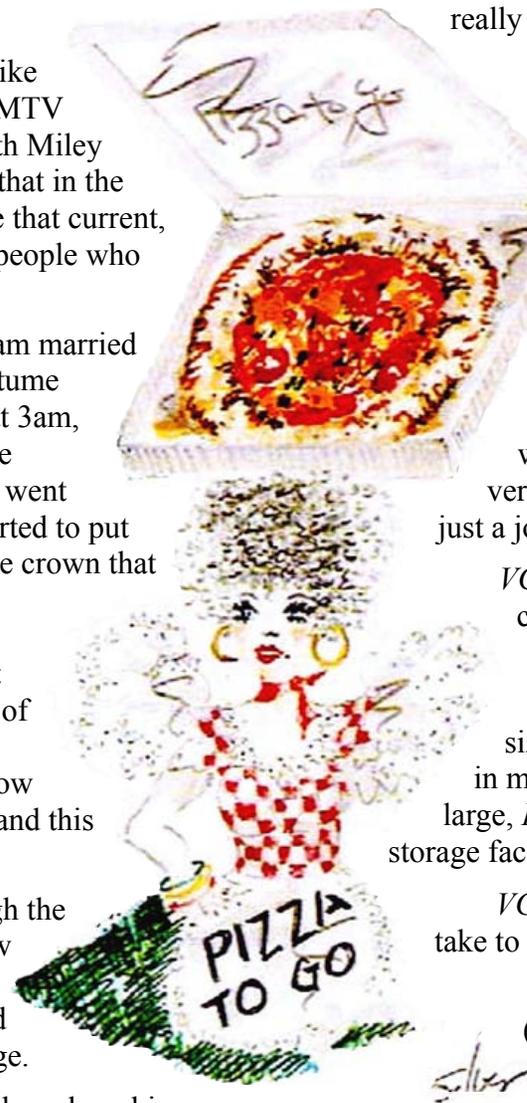
VC: What about the actual construction, Alan? Do you do that in your own shop?

Alan: It depends on the size of the hat. Most things I do in my own workshop. If it's too large, *Beach Blanket Babylon* has a storage facility.

VC: How long does a typical hat take to build?

Alan: There is no typical hat (laughs). It depends on the hat, itself, and whether it's mechanical or electrical.

Because our show is topical and pop-culture, I usually have to put a new hat in fairly quickly, otherwise it's stale.



Pizza box hat design from Italy segment by Steve Silver.

VC: How do you know if something new really works? What do you do if it doesn't?

Jo: It always has to be that the audience gets it as soon as they see it. If it's something too obscure, then there's no reason for it to go in the show. And that's how we always put numbers in. The flats open, you see it, everybody has to get it.

You can't even think that one person won't get it. If someone has to turn to their neighborhood and say, "What was that?" there goes the show! So it can't be beyond current, that only a few people know. It has to be current ... already in the mainstream for the number to work with our audiences.

If we put in some number that the audience didn't care about, it's out of the show the next night. That's how Steve did it. The audience has to judge. We could fall in love with something and think it's the most brilliant thing, but if the audience really doesn't care, then it's out.

VC: It's a pretty intimate house, too, so you can tell.

Jo: I can tell immediately. I sit there and watch their faces, and you can tell. We may try to tweak it through the weekend, but if tweaking doesn't do anything, then it's out, it just wasn't meant to be.

VC: *Beach Blanket Babylon* has gone out on several tours. For example, you took the show to London in 1997.

Jo: Steve and I first went to London in 1986 because he always wanted to bring the show there. We looked at maybe 20 theaters, but he never felt that any of them were right.

After he passed away, we got a call inviting us to perform at the Covent Garden Music Festival. I didn't know if it was a

great idea. I went over and saw the club. It had a raked stage, and it didn't look like us. Then I was going through Steve's stuff when I got home, and there on a napkin is exactly what Steve sketched, and this was the theater, so it was meant to be.

Alan created a London hat for when we went over there. We also had to create a lot of British hats, because we had to change a lot of characters. They didn't know our American characters, so we had to change them to be British. Like when we had Martha Stewart. The producers from there really didn't know who she was, but they had TV cook, Delia Smith, so we were able to create a Delia Smith character. I was just able to incorporate things that were British into our show.

VC: Where else have you taken it, and what happens with the San Francisco production while its on tour?

Jo: We also took the show in 1988 to Las Vegas. When we take the show someplace, we keep the show in San Francisco, we never close down the show. It ran very successfully for two years, and then the hotel was sold. So then the Mirage asked Steve to do a show, but the way he thought was, "OK, I've done Las Vegas, I don't have to do it any more." The priority is always San Francisco.

VC: You never thought about opening a permanent show in London or Las Vegas, or other places?



Finale Skyline hat from the Las Vegas tour.

Jo: It would have to be myself overseeing it. I take my responsibility very seriously, because Steve left me the show. Just a few of these small bits are fine, but the show belongs in San Francisco. We have a traveling show that goes all over, but a permanent show? No, we're never going to do that.

VC: Tell us about the London hat.

Alan: It's a wedding cake hat. The original one was done for Las Vegas, and when it opened up, it has the Las Vegas strip inside – all the lighted signs of the Las Vegas strip. (previous page) Then the wedding cake hat we did for the show in San Francisco has the Seven Dwarfs inside, and they're mechanical.

The wedding cake hat for the London show had Buckingham Palace with the changing of the guards. It had a mechanical Queen Elizabeth waving, and London show signs like “The Mouse Trap,” the Tower of London; it had London landmarks inside, it was London, a London cityscape. When it was redone for Prince Charles' visit in 2005, it had Charles and Camilla.

VC: *Beach Blanket Babylon* has had several other Royal encounters as well.

Jo: Steve and his friend [Charlotte Mailliard](#) wrote a

show for Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip when they visited here in 1983. The show we put on at Davies Symphony Hall kept the feel of *Beach Blanket Babylon*, sprinkled with British ideas, and characters, and costumes. There was 20 minutes of the Royal Family which was funny, and brilliant. They loved it, and it just worked out fabulously.

VC: Rumor has it that Queen Elizabeth has really quirky sense of humor.

Jo: Oh my God! When the big hat came out -- this was just when Charles and Diana had Prince William – the Queen was smiling and laughing, and so was Prince Philip. It was a very big deal, it was wonderful. [See a video of the Queen's reaction [here](#) – Ed.]

Prince Charles came to the show with Camilla when he visited in 2005 because his mother recommended he see it. He was fabulous. Queen Elizabeth had

struck up a wonderful friendship with Steve when he did the show in 1983.

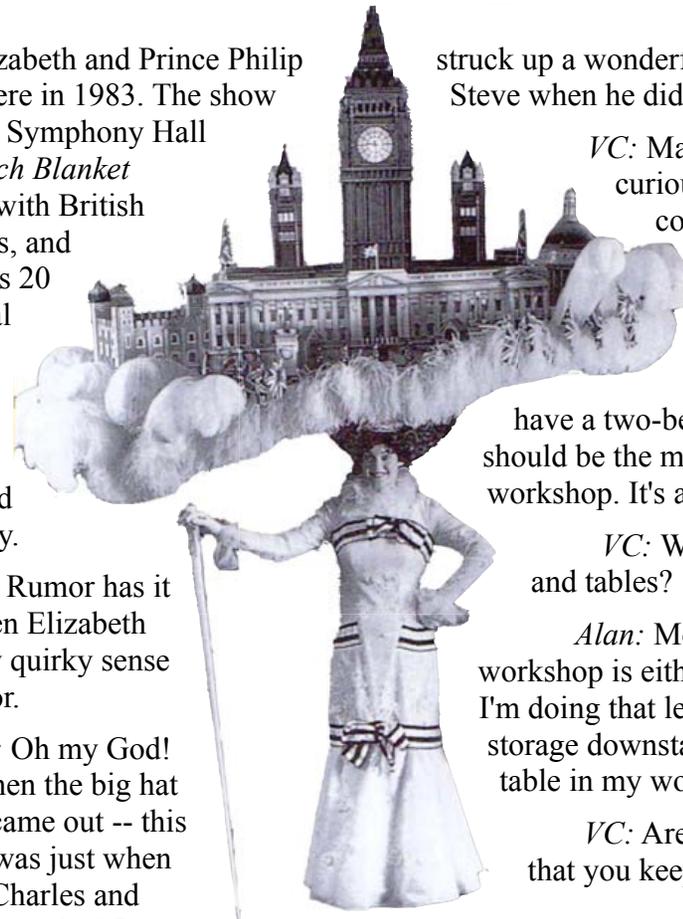
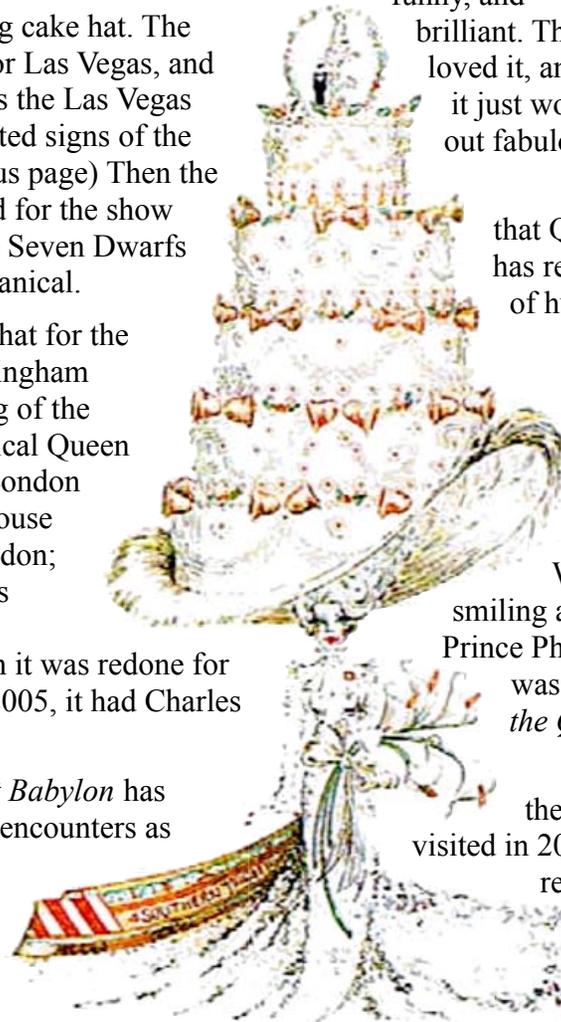
VC: Many costumers are curious about what other costumer's workspaces look like. Alan, describe yours.

Alan: It's a dungeon (laughs). I have a two-bedroom flat, and what should be the master bedroom is my workshop. It's about 12ft x 15ft.

VC: What about storage space and tables?

Alan: Most of what is in my workshop is either part of the project I'm doing that leaves, or I have some storage downstairs. I also have a large table in my workshop.

VC: Are there standard tools that you keep around or materials



Queen Elizabeth talks with Mary Martin, Tony Bennett, and Steve Silver at the 1983 command performance. (above) London Skyline hat from the production. (top) Wedding cake hat design by Steve Silver (left)

that you keep in your workshop all the time to build hats?

*Alan:* Working on 3-dimensional objects, is always a struggle for deciding what kind of things should be saved as stock to use on future projects and what kind of things to throw out as garbage. It's a fine line that divides them. I get swamped with stuff where I think, "oh, I'm going to use this," and I really should get rid of it.

*VC:* So typical tools like steel straight-edges, and hobby knives, and drills, and all that?

*Alan:* And a band saw, and all kinds of power tools. Also an assortment of pliers, screw drivers, and all that good stuff.

*VC:* What's the strangest tool you use?

*Alan:* Well, I have a hot wire cutter, which I'm very fond of for styrofoam. I also have something most people haven't heard of called a "[cutawl](#)." It's a machine that was

invented in the 1920s. It's a mechanical thing that will cut lines through almost anything.

*VC:* When you're doing theatrical construction for any stage, you have constraints. Talk a little bit about how you think about the constraints you need to worry about.

*Alan:* How to get the hats into the building is a big one. You have to plan that out in advance, and it becomes part of the process.

*VC:* The San Francisco skyline hat, for instance, the current one is just huge!

*Alan:* Why, thank you! (laughs) It was built in pieces, and has to be assembled in the theater. It won't fit through the doors.

*VC:* What about weight, and structural integrity, while making them sturdy enough to stand up to the wear-and-tear?

*Alan:* It's a balancing act! You have to make them strong enough, but not make them too heavy. You have to find that line.

*VC:* Obviously the actors don't balance these things on their heads. Is there a standard armature that you use to support the hats, or do you have to come up with a new one for each hat?

*Alan:* It's theater magic, its the stuff that dreams are made of. I'm not going to tell you how they're worn.

*VC:* Does every hat have the same theater magic, or do you have to invent new theater magic for each one?

*Alan:* No, there's different theater magic.

*VC:* So most of them use one kind of technique but some require other techniques where you have to cook up something new?

*Alan:* Yes.

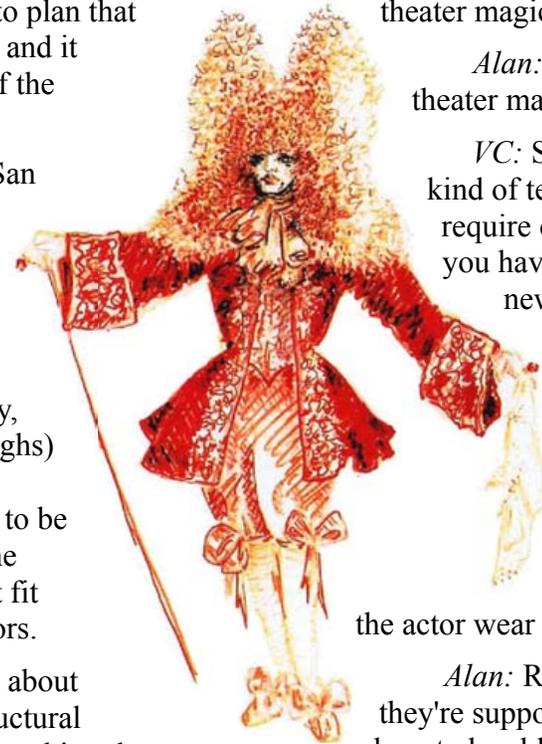
*VC:* With so many hats, it's likely that one size doesn't fit all, if you will, in terms of how you support them and let the actor wear them comfortably.

*Alan:* Right. And the way that they're supported and worn, I would love to be able to see the show and not know. I wouldn't want to spoil that for anybody.

*VC:* Do the actors who wear things like the San Francisco skyline hat have to be pretty sturdy?



Snow White and King Louie in the France segment. (above) King Louie design by Steve Silver. (right)



*Alan:* Not really. I mean, you have to be pretty sturdy to even work in the show. They do seven shows a week; even more during the holidays. I have to be mindful in construction that humans will be wearing these hats. Our performers are truly trained to wear the hats.

*Jo:* The number one priority is what's comfortable for the performer. They're really in great shape, they're like athletes. They have to be able to balance the hat. That's the longest process, for the performer to be comfortable in it. We have to tweak it over and over again until they feel great, because they have to dance and move around a lot. We have to make sure everything is perfect and safe for them. The creative part is the most fun part.

*VC:* Alan, you've said that you enjoy the challenge of doing effects on hats, mechanical, lighting, motion, things like that. Is that a common

thing? Do you only do that on a few of them, or more than we realize?

*Alan:* We generally save that for the end, and I've done all the mechanical hats that have been in the show. There are about a half a dozen hats that do mechanical tricks.

*VC:* Like the wedding cake hat with the dwarfs, and the San Francisco skyline hat with the building going up...

*Alan:* And the Washington DC hat, the Grauman's Chinese Theater hat for the Academy Awards (left), and the World hat. Those are all mechanical hats.

*VC:* Do you use pretty standard off-the-shelf kinds of parts for these effects, or do you always have to do custom builds?

*Alan:* You have to figure out a mechanism for them, and then figure out how to build it. You don't go to "Hats R' Us" and buy the parts. (laughs) The mechanisms are hand-made.

*VC:* What kinds of places do you go to find the parts for your effects?

*Alan:* Various places. You figure out what you need and then go to hardware

stores, and variety stores, art supply stores, and places like that, and get parts you need.

*VC:* Costumers who build effects are always on the prowl for stuff. When they find things lying on the ground, they pick them up and put them away for future projects without knowing what they'll use them for. Do you ever do things like that?

*Alan:* (Laughs) Welcome to my workshop! I'm glad I'm not the only one. I'll pick up things that I have no real use for and think, "Oh, that's a clever thing!" Sure enough, ten years later, I'll find it and use it.

*VC:* *Beach Blanket Babylon* has a lot of hats. Where do you actually keep them?

*Alan:* We have a storage facility. It's a huge warehouse, and everything is very carefully stored away there, the things that aren't in the show. There's an assortment of special ways of storing things depending on the objects. There are a gazillion wigs, there are hats, and props – a lot of stuff.

*VC:* There must be plenty of backstage space for hats plus the costumes and actors.

*Alan:* No! (laughs) The backstage area is a scary place! It's smaller than the stage, and if you don't belong, you really shouldn't be there. I don't even go back there during a show. When I first started with the show I did. I was the one who put the hats on the girls, but that's a *long* time ago!

*Jo:* It's choreographed just like onstage. You have to do so many props and so many costumes, there's a lot of people back stage



Grauman's Chinese Theater hat design by Steve Silver.

dressing them and putting props away, getting in and out of the big hats, lines, and all that. Some hats go into the fly, some go on shelves, some go upstairs, some go downstairs. It's 90 minutes of a lot of intensity, since each performer has at least ten changes. It's a madhouse, but really fun.

*VC:* Do you have duplicates of the hats in case something goes wrong?

*Alan:* Not in case something goes wrong, but we have a second company for a traveling show. So if we have a booking in a hotel downtown for a Northwest Waste Water Management Convention closing night gala, then we can have that show going on at the same time as *Beach Blanket Babylon* is playing in the theater.

*VC:* What is your background, Alan?

*Alan:* My background before joining *Beach Blanket Babylon* was special effects for TV commercials and window displays, and carpentry. It's all used in the hats.

*VC:* Rumor has it that you have a “Mad Hatter” collection.

*Alan:* Yes, over the years people started giving me Mad Hatters. The nickname “The Mad Hatter” went with the job. People gave me Mad Hatter Christmas ornaments, and Mad Hatter candlesticks. It just got ridiculous to the point where I started collecting, and now it's totally out of hand.

*VC:* Do you buy interesting hats when you travel? Do people give them to you?



Alan Greenspan in his workshop. SF Chronicle photo by Michael Macor.

*Alan:* People sometimes give them to me, or I'll just see something and buy it. I have a hat tree in my front hall that is completely obliterated with an assortment. I like to get the classic ones like a sailor hat, a Santa hat, a crown, a gaucho hat.

*VC:* Is there a hat that they haven't asked you to build that you'd really like to?

*Alan:* Not that I can think of. Without the context of the show, the hats don't make any sense. Making a monster-sized hat that lights up and does exotic things is wonderful. But if it's not in the show, who cares? Without somebody wearing it and dancing and singing, it's like, “What?!”

*VC:* If Steve hadn't come along, or you weren't doing *Beach Blanket Babylon*, what would you like to do?

*Alan:* I've always been a person who builds things. Outside of *Beach Blanket*

*Babylon*, I do sets and costumes for children's theater, I've done interior design work, and I've done a lot of display work.

*VC:* Thanks to both of you for taking the time to talk about *Beach Blanket Babylon* and its amazing hats.

*Jo:* You're welcome. This was great!

*Alan:* Talking about me is my pleasure!

*Jo Schuman Silver* has kept *Beach Blanket Babylon's* vision alive since her husband Steve's death in 1995. Jo also continues Steve's dedication to charitable involvement through many philanthropic endeavors. Jo created the annual Steve Silver Foundation and *Beach Blanket Babylon* "Scholarship for the Arts" to give Bay Area high school seniors a chance to pursue a higher education and their dreams.

*Alan Greenspan*, a hippie high school drop-out, has had a long and colorful career. This includes sculpting the U.S. olympic trophy, puppets for Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, mechanical window displays, furniture design, and Victorian restorations. The feather in his cap, so to speak, is the huge mechanical hats he has been creating for Steve Silver's *Beach Blanket Babylon* for the past 36 years.

Learn more about Steve Silver, *Beach Blanket Babylon*, and the hats, at their [website](#). Special thanks to [Charles Zukow](#) for his kind assistance.