

'I was lucky to fail my 11-plus – it set me on a completely different path'



She was a hippy who escaped to the Powys countryside, but Sasha Kagan never dreamed she would be part of a fashion revolution from her cottage. The knitwear designer spoke to Claire Rees about the woollen revival and dressing singer Cher

IF Sasha Kagan had passed her 11-plus exams, Wales would have been a lot poorer for it. In fact, Cagney and Lacey would have frozen their crime-fighting bodies off during '80s New York, for one.

But more on that later. For this is a woman who took her creative heritage and launched a cottage industry that grew from the heart of Wales, and now she's one of the most well-loved designers in British knitwear.

Sasha, 65, has seen her designs worn by some of the greatest Hollywood stars, and her work has been credited with helping to create the textiles revival we have today.

Dubbed the "doyenne of hand-knitting," books like *The Sasha Kagan Sweater Book*, and later *Sasha Kagan's Big and Little Sweaters*, contributed to a rise in women buying knitwear in the 1980s.

In total, she has written seven books, including *Knitting for Beginners* and now her latest, *The Classic Collection*, marking 40 years in the industry.

And Sasha admits it all happened almost by accident.

Born in Cambridgeshire, Sasha's mother Florence knitted and made lampshades while her Russian father, Jacob, was a translator who spoke seven languages.

It was Florence who taught her to knit and crochet when she was just four years old – the first piece she made was a crochet dress for one of her dolls – and by aged 10 she was knitting pairs of mittens.

"After supper, Mum would get out her projects, she was always dressmaking or sewing, and so I began joining her."

But while Sasha was showing a creative talent, her parents never expected her to be able to make a career from it; instead it was assumed that she would follow in her father's footsteps and go to university.

"But I failed my 11-plus," she says, something she describes as a "lucky" moment that would send her on a completely different and very successful path.

"I only found out 10 years ago that I'm dyslexic," she says.

"Back then there wasn't

much help and instead they wondered why this clever girl couldn't pass her exams."

So instead of securing a coveted place at the local grammar school, Sasha was sent to a secondary modern in the village.

There, she was mentored by an art teacher who would, to her delight, let her use the art room at lunchtimes.

She sat her A-levels and took herself to art school, studying for a BA in art and design at Exeter College of Art, followed by printmaking at the Royal College of Art, London.

"I was painting – it was only when I came to Wales that the textiles came about."

Sasha's husband, O'Hara Burne, was a member of a group called the The Black Box Theatre Company who had found rehearsal space at Oswestry, and in 1972 the young couple had the chance to rent a home in nearby Llanfechain.

And they became part of the exodus of creatives from London who moved to the Powys countryside looking for a greener life.

"It was the back to nature movement," Sasha says.

"I was a hippy, a lot of creative people were moving into Wales."

"We wanted to lay down roots, to grow vegetables and bring our children up in the fresh air."

Socialising with painters and musicians, she lived the hippy lifestyle and embraced something closer to that which she'd enjoyed as a child, growing up in a thatched cottage in the small English village of Heydon.

Her friend ran a shop on London's Carnaby Street and, spotting the sweaters Sasha had made for her family, suggested she send them to the city.

"That was my first order," she says.

"The shop wanted six slipovers, sleeveless sweaters, which I could never have made in time by myself, so I advertised for help and took on a group of women and before I knew it I had this little cottage industry."

"There was quite a movement in fashion that was very much about the hand-made look," she says.

"What was happening was very interesting."



Knitwear designer Sasha Kagan at her home near Llanidloes

Her husband, she says, became a kind of agent, taking her samples around London where they became a hit in the fashionable King's Road.

But the big break was to come two years later, when her work was discovered by an LA agent, who was dressing the who's who of Hollywood.

And huge names like Woody Allen, Lauren Bacall and Mia

Farrow started wearing Sasha Kagan.

"Cher had a cactus jacket of mine. She wore it to talk at a huge conference for American Indian rights in the mid-'80s," she said.

"And if you look at the early series of Cagney and Lacey, they're wearing my waistcoats."

As orders came in fast,

Sasha was invited to the US, and the couple took their three children to spend a winter on the West Coast, driving around in a camper van "because it was cheaper than heating the home in Wales for six months!"

"We'd bought a ruinous old farmhouse that had been empty for years – and it had no roof," she explains.

"So relocating for a while to

America where there were plenty of roofs and windows was obviously lovely."

Whilst doing up their home themselves, living the idyllic, artistic lifestyle was fun, but tough, says Sasha.

"After LA, things really exploded and the orders came flooding in," she says.

"It was a great time, but I was still self-employed and life



“The recession is biting and the beauty of making things for yourself is really coming through. Knitting clubs have sprung up, where people go to knit and natter”

The BIG Interview



Picture: Keith Morris

learned from my mother,” she says.

“So what I do now I call wearable art.”

Sasha specialises in the Intarsia method, where blocks of colour are worked with separate balls or bobbins of yarn, producing a sweater only one layer thick.

“Intarsia means you can place motifs anywhere you want on the sweater,” Sasha says.

“You keep a separate ball or bobbin of yarn behind each motif and you weave a yarn behind each motif as you go.”

Intarsia knitting is described in her new book, *The Classic Collection*, compiled after she received a grant from the European-funded Chance to Create scheme to hold a retrospective exhibition of her work.

The exhibition has been running since November, appeared at the National Wool Museum in Newcastle Emlyn, and ends in Harrogate this November.

As it covers 40 years of work, it's presented in themes – geometric, folkloric, florals, leaves, witty and whimsical and abstract.

The book, which was released last month, looks at five iconic designs from her career. “It's a piece of fashion history.”

Sasha, who has four children – Tanya, 37; Jacob, 35; Ambrose, 33 and Rowan, 25, and five grandchildren, says she is proud to be a part of the continuing textile movement in Wales and especially proud about the current knitwear revival.

“This is a great time,” she says.

“It phases in and out – it tends to happen on a seven to 10-year cycle and in the '80s it may not have seemed so but it was really hard work – everybody wanted plain clothes and everything was black.

“At one point, the knitting shops were closing down and we worried the industry was dying out.

“But now the younger generation are getting into it. They're not only wearing knitwear but they're knitting too.”

She now lives in Caersws. She parted from her husband 30 years ago, and has spent the last 26 years surrounded by 13

acres of land.

“I have a conservation project going,” she says.

“I'm a keen gardener and I've planted indigenous trees, and willow, and created some lakes.

“When I look out of my window I see a carpet of bluebells,” she adds. “And there are butterflies everywhere.

“So my surroundings always inspire me. No two days are the same. I'm inspired by the colours, the leaves, the trees.”

And Sasha thinks one of the appeals of knitwear, as well as its connection to nature, is the long-lasting nature of wool and its potential as an antidote to the fast, disposable fashion filling landfills.

“People want to get back to the roots of clothing,” she says. “They want to make things themselves, instead of going into Marks and Spencer every time.

“The recession is biting and the beauty of making things for yourself is really coming through.

“Knitting clubs have sprung up, where people go to knit and natter and the industry's had a makeover.

“It's lovely. It's fashionable again now, the process of making it yourself. Knitting is no longer something only your grandmother does.”

She still knits herself, and still gains relaxation from it, explaining, “I give myself a new jumper every two years. They take around five weeks to make so I don't often get time.”

And the Sasha Kagan name continues to sell.

“Around Llanidloes I see lots of people wearing my jumpers,” she says.

“There's a little pocket of it around here.

“I feel proud to be waving the flag and helping to keep the craft going.

“I love Wales and feel so lucky to be living here. I think of what I do as some way of giving something back to Wales.”

She adds: “Knitwear is a very important part of a woman's wardrobe.

“You can show your personality through knitwear. “And the process of it is good for your wellbeing – doing something with your hands is therapeutic.”

And her tips for anyone



■ Sasha says she has no plans to retire

considering picking up the needles?

“Start with a small, easy project, and build up your skills.

“Start with a scarf, everyone starts with a scarf, it's easy as there's no shaping, and you'll soon be seduced by the technique, and that feeling of the yarn beneath your fingers and the smooth bamboo.

“Knitting something for your baby, you put your love into it.

“Mine had clothes made by my grandmother and now my grandchildren wear mine.”

Her wool is on sale at Wool and Willow Festival at Minerva Arts Centre in Llanidloes until June 25, and as we speak she tells me she's off to France to teach knitting in a monastery.

“What will I do next? I'll probably put together a book for children,” she says.

“I'm always busy. I should be retiring soon but I can't see it happening – I haven't got time.”



■ Sasha Kagan's exhibition, *My Life in Textiles – Four Decades of Classic Knitwear Design*, runs at Ruthin Craft Centre until June 12. Her book, *The Classic Collection*, pictured above, is out now published by The Guild of Master Craftsmen Publications at £19.99. It is available from Waterstone's, Amazon and at sashakagan.co.uk. For more information, go to twistedthread.com woolandwillowfestival.org

was difficult – I had three young children, and we were working on the house and working all the time.”

And she's hardly quietened down since.

Today the brand is still going strong.

Sasha designs everything from her studio and it's sent all over the UK to be produced, with a workforce of 13

compared with the 150 she employed “in the heyday”.

Yet she is as busy as ever – as well as the workshops she runs, and the books, fans continue to love the multi-motif designs using blocks of colour, inspired by nature.

“I went to art school and learned to be a painter. But I had in my fingers what I