

Dress to Impress

It's not every day one receives an invitation from Buckingham Palace, so when Katie Jarvis gets the call, a little help with her wardrobe is in order

I'm not giving personal shopper Kate Parker an easy time. "I normally like to see people first," she explains, gently, during my emergency phone call demanding we go shopping as soon as possible. If not slightly sooner.

"I haven't got time!" I wail. "I'm going to see the Queen in just over a week and I haven't got a thing to wear."

The invitation to a media reception at Buckingham Palace is thrilling beyond words... but this is the scary thing: there is a dress code. I scan it quickly – there's always the possibility of mine stipulating 'overalls and Marigold gloves' – but, no. 'Day dress' it states. On the face of it, Her Majesty is undemanding; on the other face of it, my wardrobe has all the style of someone who's climbed into a Solihull clothes recycling bin and dragged out whatever they could reach. In short, I genuinely have nothing suitable, and I hate clothes shopping with a passion. I've never used a personal shopper before (as will be abundantly clear to anyone who knows me) but this is a panic that reaches all the way to the top.

"OK," says Kate, calmly over the phone line. "Describe your body shape to me."

This one's easy. "Teletubby," I say, with confidence. "Possibly Lala, though I don't look as good in yellow."

In a move of such generosity, it

surely merits an OBE, Kate agrees to take me on, and quickly. Which is why, a few swift days later, we meet in Starbucks, Cheltenham, to sort me out – and to chat about the work of a personal shopper. It's easy to assume it's all about shallow profligacy. (If it were, it's definitely a job I'd consider.) In fact, a personal-shopper role is about

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both psychology and economy.

"It can be seen as shallow," Kate agrees, "but, on the other hand, appearance is how we communicate with each other. People make so many assumptions that stem from the way you look. I read an article about Kate Middleton recently, where she had gone to a school wearing jeans. One little girl said, 'She doesn't look like a Princess. Where's her dress?'"

"Susan Boyle is another example. The judges had initially written her off before she sang a note. Yet this wasn't a beauty contest; it was a singing competition."

She's absolutely spot on, of course. If I feel I'm dressed appropriately and looking my best, I'm more confident and I probably do a better job... OK. So that's psychology covered. Where does economising come in?

"I've read a statistic saying that the average woman will waste more than £13,000 on clothes she'll never wear," Kate explains. "My own litmus test is: which three other things that I own is it going to go with? If you buy a bargain for a bargain's sake, you'll end with disparate things; so, when I go shopping with someone, I try to make sure they end up with something that will work hard for them."

In fact, the main service Kate offers has little to do with buying new. Although she'll happily go special-occasion shopping, she also goes through clients' wardrobes, not with the aim of throwing it all away but of making it work properly. Even simple advice can dramatically alter the way something looks: would a belt make a difference? What about altering the length or the sleeves? She'll look at the clothes you have, pointing out gaps, putting outfits together and photographing them as an aide memoire. Such a rapport does she build up with her regular clients, she'll often get photos by text saying, "What do you think of this?"

Kate's background is in PR – the personal shopping role came about almost by accident, beginning with



friends raiding her own successful wardrobe. And there's no denying she looks great – her style is characterised by retro influences (which obliquely reminds me of the time my brother went to a '60s-themed party dressed entirely in our dad's current wardrobe); but that doesn't mean she spends a fortune. She wears boots she's had for 10 years, "And a recent buy was a dress from M&S for £49." Her secret lies in the accessories she'll use to customise it.

So, delaying tactics over: it's time to hit the shops.

"Now," says Kate, as we head to Cavendish House, "I went round yesterday and had a few things put aside that I thought you might like to try on."

She hasn't specifically asked me my budget but the dresses she's found discreetly represent an excellent range, from around £80 to £borderline heart failure. What's more, the very first one I try on – the VERY FIRST – I absolutely love. It's in taupe which, in a certain light, hints at purple, and its Grecian folds hide a multitude of sins. Made by Kaliko, it also comes in at under £100, leaving money for other bits and pieces.

"And I've found a necklace to go with it," Kate says, bringing out a silver chain with green and purple droplets. It costs less than a tenner and looks a million dollars. I'm not going to buy anything without fully exploring other possibilities, of course, so Kate – who is clearly on very good terms with all the assistants – has it put aside.

After five minutes, I'm actually beginning to relax and enjoy myself. I absolutely fall for one dress with a pretty plunging neckline that I think suits me down to the ground. "You've got that back to front," whispers Kate, kindly. A floaty James Lakeland number in muted red goes down a



Katie's taupe dress made by Kaliko came in at under £100.

Katie wearing her Laura Ashley coat, Buckingham Palace invitation in hand.

storm with Kate, while it reminds me of elderly spinsters at a church fete. She doesn't argue or try to persuade. It's banished in disgrace at my say-so. "I thought it looked terrific, but sometimes people can associate clothes with a person or an experience, which puts them off a certain style or colour," Katie points out.

We go into LK Bennett, somewhere I've never dared venture on my own for fear of accidentally buying something, where there's a delightful purple clinging dress, which I love. "But on a limited budget, I don't think you're going to get the use out of it," says Kate, ever practical. I try on a pair of the most delicious purple shoes which I would happily either wear or eat. But, were I to buy splash out on them, I'd be forced to go otherwise naked.

We decide 'naked' doesn't fall within the range of 'day dress' and head back for Cavendish House. Nothing, for me, has surpassed the all-round score of the Kaliko dress. With that in mind,

Kate pulls me into Laura Ashley on the way back, and shows me a purple coat – £25 off – which would complement it perfectly. At £125, it means I have a minus amount left for shoes and a bag. Nothing daunted, Kate finds me £15 patents from M&S and a slightly more expensive black bag. Sorted.

It should have been the most stressful shop of my life; as it turns out, it's been one of the most enjoyable. Odd. Kate smiles. "I love my job," she says.

And so it is that I head for the Palace feeling appropriate, smart, confident and very, very grateful. 'How was it?' you ask. Well, how do you describe an experience like that? I'll just have to borrow from TS Eliot: it was (you may say) satisfactory. ■

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