

# NEW YORK THE OBSERVER

NEW YORK'S WEEKLY

## Monty Frazier, Image Catalyst: Did He Make Over Katie Couric?

BY GEORGE GURLEY

Did she or didn't she? Did Katie Couric, co-host of NBC's *The Today Show* and television's new \$60 million woman, have her image revamped last year by Montgomery Frazier, self-described "image guru" and natty fixture of Manhattan nightlife?

According to *Vogue*, the answer is yes: "Frazier persuaded her to lose the bridge lines and chunky, frumpy shoes," the magazine declared in its September 2001 issue, which raved about the anchorwoman's new look. "Into the bin went the pseudo-Chanel suits; into the wardrobe came Burberry's check pencil skirt with matching pump, leather ensembles by Tommy Hilfinger, print dresses from Nicole Miller, spectator looks from Ralph Lauren, and high-heeled mules by Celine."

But through a spokeswoman, Ms. Couric said that Mr. Frazier never got near her mules.

"Katie really has not ever worked extensively with Mr. Frazier," said Allison Gollust, Ms. Couric's publicist at *The Today Show*. "We were not exactly sure where *Vogue* came up with that."

Mr. Frazier says he doesn't mind ... well, he minds a little. He said he did three weeks of work with Ms. Couric, including a meeting in her office, phone calls, a shopping outing, and about 100 outfits that he had sent over from 10 different designers. He said he was introduced to Ms. Couric by his pal, the physical trainer High Voltage, who was credited in *Vogue* for putting the *Today Show* host through four "grueling" workouts a week.

"You know, what can I say?" Mr. Frazier said. "I think I did help Katie, and I think other people in the fashion industry have no-



MONTGOMERY FRAZIER

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# 'Oh, Montgomery!'

What, you thought society ladies and celebs get dressed all by themselves? GEORGE GURLEY meets Montgomery Frazier, image guru to Grace Hightower, Mrs. Kelsey Grammer and—shhhhhh!—Katie Couric.

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ticed it, so I don't see why she would take that as a compliment. Yes, we have had little to do with each other. However, I was with her at a crucial point, before people noticed how she started to look.

"Her shoes are fabulous now because I sent her I don't know how many pairs. And the clothes are much better," he continued. "So if anything, I gave her a big kick in the butt, image-wise. But I'm very sensitive about that. I don't want to say anything negative about Katie because I like her. She's lovely."

Eugenia Ulasewicz, the president of Burberry North America, said that Mr. Frazier "started to get Katie Couric into some of our items. She was a client through Montgomery. He came in and saw our product and said, 'You know what? I think this would really be right for Katie Couric.' She was on *People* magazine with one on. He selected some things for her which she purchased from us. And it fits her style. We love it! It was great having her wear our things. She still does; the other day she had our things on. Don't you think she looks great?"

In any case, Mr. Frazier is busy with 20 clients, whom he talks to as often as five times a day. They include a few society ladies, a journalist, the chief executive of a large corporation and some Hollywood wives who want careers.

"People like me make New York go around," he said. "We're called 'catalysts.' We help develop new people, places and things. That's exactly what I'm about. Do I think I've ever received the credit I deserve? Not really."

He said he can be tough on his clients. Or his advice can be simple: "Wear a hat; wear red, never white—photographers hate that." Or: "Just feel comfortable... live it and have fun tonight. You're going to look beyond." Often, he said, that's all a client needs to hear.

He charges \$4,000 to 6,000 a month, or \$200 an hour. A personal shopping day costs \$800. "If it's a celebrity and I want to work with them, I'm very flexible," he said. "I'm not an asshole and I don't etch things into stone."

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Frazier was eating coq au vin at La Goulue on the Upper East Side. At 42, he is lithe, with blond hair and a pink complexion. He was decked out in a brown tweed suit, an Armani sweater vest, a cashmere sweater and a silk scarf he'd bought in Bali.

"Did you meet the owner, the blond lady?" he said. "She's really lovely. This is a cool place because the food is always great, they treat you really well, and I feel like Dolly Levi when I come here. It's like, 'Hello, Dolly!' I love that because they're always like, 'Oh, Montgomery!'"

Mr. Frazier is currently staying at High Voltage's apartment—"a prince in exile," he said. He moved in last fall, when he was trying to get over his "divorce" from a wealthy boyfriend, an interior designer he'd lived with in a "very grand" palatial townhouse on East 67th Street.

He mentioned a client: Grace Hightower, Robert De Niro's soon-to-be ex-wife, who was looking to be reinvented. Rather than write a tell-all book—a "cheesy" idea—he suggested she write a children's book. So she's working on that.

"With my clients, I'm a bit Svengali-like," he said. "I'm always on the phone with so-and-so or so-and-so: 'Monty, I just got this and I don't know what to do.' And I'll be like, 'Well, why are you making such a big issue out of it?'"

Another client is Camille Grammer, wife of *Frasier* star Kelsey Grammer. They met back when Mr. Frazier was giving fashion advice to MTV and Ms. Grammer was a dancer on a show called *Club MTV*. When Camille and Kelsey married, Mr. Frazier dyed his own hair purple, blue, pink and magenta for the wedding.

"Kelsey just adores Monty," Ms. Grammer said. Last autumn, while spending the weekend with the Grammers at their home outside Woodstock, N.Y., Mr. Frazier gave Ms. Grammer some career advice. She had said she wanted to start producing movies.

"I said, 'Well, why don't we think about doing a movie on the *Club MTV* days and make it a real feel-good dance movie? And have Kelsey produce it!'" said Mr. Frazier. "And Kelsey thought the idea was great, so I don't know where that's going to go."

A waiter appeared and handed him a phone.

"How'd they know I was here?" he said.

MONTGOMERY FRAZIER GREW UP ALL OVER THE U.S. HIS FATHER



Before: still-perky Katie Couric in 2000.



"People like me make New York go around. We're called 'catalysts.'": Montgomery Frazier.

was an Air Force man; his mother was beautiful and, he said, "incredibly stern, a strict disciplinarian." Once when he was 7, he was fighting with his older brother and broke an expensive ceramic lamp that his father had just brought home from Japan. So his mother broke the other one over Monty's head. "I learned never to do that again!" he said.

When he was 9, they lived in Ontario, Canada. Monty was late to school one day, so he took a shortcut through a frozen marsh and fell through some ice. He nearly died of hypothermia.

In high school in Colorado, he was on the student council and dubbed "Mr. Popular." "All the jocks wanted to know why, for some strange, inexplicable reason, all the prettiest girls in school happened to hang around me," he said. "Hmmm... makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

He said he graduated early and faked a nervous breakdown to get away from home, spending six weeks in the hospital.

He finally came home, but not for long: One day when his parents were out shopping, he convinced his next-door neighbors to whisk him off to a hotel, where he got drunk on cheap wine. Then he left town and never saw his parents again. "A shame, but sometimes things don't work out," he said.

He lived with his grandfather on a ranch in Phoenix and hooked up with a local modeling agency. "That's where I started discovering exactly who I was," he said. He got a job with Hyatt hotels, first in Phoenix and then in Los Angeles, where he spent a year hanging around the sons and daughters of famous people. In 1982, he convinced Hyatt to transfer him to New York, where he shackled up with two drag queens who took him to Studio 54. He was 19.

"I was the new kid in town," he said. One of the first people he met in Manhattan was the infamous art dealer Andrew Crispo, who convinced him to scrap his first name (Ronald) and go with his

middle one. "So he actually was kind of a mentor for me—scary, when you think about it," said Mr. Frazier.

Mr. Crispo went on trial a few years later for the S&M-related death of one his Hamptons house guests, Eigel Vest. Mr. Frazier had been spending weekends at the Hamptons house, and he had to testify.

At the time, Mr. Frazier was working his way up to public-relations director for the trendy SoHo boutique Parachute. "That's where I learned that a look is very important," he said. Madonna would come in all the time to read the magazines.

In 1988, he became wardrobe stylist for *Club MTV*, which was hosted by "Downtown" Julie Brown.

"He was a force," said Ms. Brown, now a full-time mother in Los Angeles. "He definitely brought fashion to MTV. He opened a lot of doors, especially for new designers."

"MTV was still in its cool stage," Mr. Frazier said. "I was there during the golden age of MTV. The 80's were a high point for me—I was Mr. MTV."

He dressed Ms. Brown, he said, in "the most ridiculous outfits," which "months later you'd see in videos. So we did influence the way divas look today. I'm sorry. And I will take credit for that."

He left MTV in 1992 and spent some time at a downtown magazine called *Project X*, which was backed by nightclub owner Peter Gatien.

"So that was my renegade, nocturnal, star-of-the-downtown-world days," said Mr. Frazier. He avoided drugs. "I only drank champagne. I'm a bit of a glamour boy, right? I've always been an uptown boy downtown."

ON ANOTHER RECENT AFTERNOON, MR. FRAZIER WAS IN THE TEA room at the Carlyle Hotel. He was wearing a gray suit with yellow

window pane, a lavender sweater vest with matching lavender tie, and a pink-and-white-striped \$400 shirt.

Next to him was a client, Barbara Conroy, who was wearing a leopard-skin jacket over a black outfit that would fit right in on a ski slope. Ms. Conroy, an Emmy Award-winning TV journalist, had recently been divorced and wanted back into journalism.

Mr. Frazier tells her what to wear (Donna Karan, Carolina Herrera, and no more Mary McFadden), and she introduces him to people.

He wants her to write a book called *Fifty Countries, Seven Wars* and get a serious TV chat show. Recently, he sent her to a makeup artist.

"I want Barbara to get a new kind of palette," he said. "Get her into the colors that are more appropriate for her hair color now and where she is in her career now. It's about launching Barbara Conroy as a brand name. First of all,

there's no redhead on a network. I mean, Barbara Walters is more blond, Katie is blond, Diane Sawyer is blond, Deborah Norville is blond, Paula Zahn is blond. They're all blond! There's no redhead. I said, 'Capitalize on that.' I said, 'Always be yourself; don't try to fit into the other person. There's already somebody else. Be Barbara. Be a unique creature.'"

"I hate the word fabulous," he continued. "I'll say, 'It's beyond.... That is so beyond.' I love to express myself; I'm very animated when I love something and ruthless when I hate something. I can be very, very evil."

Later that night, it was off to the 50th birthday party of another client—Sydney Biddle Barrows, the Mayflower Madam—being

held at the Bubble Lounge in Tribeca.

He knew the bar's manager, Billy Lope. "We were the young, beautiful boys who used to go to Studio 54," said Mr. Lope. "We were the fresh young meat, and we just had to be beautiful. It was a nice era—we didn't have to actually know how to do anything. But we turned out great. I did, he did. We're not drug addicts; we're not dead."

"I always have the feeling that he's a descendant of the English royal family," said Fares Rizk, a belly-dancing drag queen who once painted Mr. Frazier's portrait. "The way he puts himself together with the cap, the cane, that's what he looks like—like a young English gentleman. He also advises me on how I should appear at the next party."

"When Sydney invited me, she was rattling off the guest list," said Edward T. Callaghan, a seventh-generation New Yorker, publicist and dandy. "I told a friend, 'The only one I'll have to compete with in the sartorial-splendor area is going to be Monty.' I just hugged him and I brushed his cheek and I said to him, 'How dare your skin be so soft? I know how old you are, and why are you looking like you're 25? He's my style guide. He's a Seeing Eye dog for everyone out there.'"

"I think he's the most stylish... he has the best taste in New York," said the birthday girl, Ms. Biddle.

Then it was time to head to a *Harper's Bazaar* party in the West 20's. Mr. Frazier wasn't on the guest list, but publicist Susan Magrino appeared and whisked him in.

Inside, he danced with two women.

"He is like an enigma," said Vivian Bernal, an actress and model. "He knows everyone, and yet it's like no one knows who he is. But everyone knows who he is.... If Montgomery Frazier was a straight man, he would be the ideal husband for any woman in New York."

"Now that I see him doing this, I think he definitely is straight," said *Harper's Bazaar* fashion director Mary Alice Stephenson. "He's not dancing like a gay guy. O.K.?"

Then he headed to the after-party next-door at Lot 61.

Actor Alan Cumming was introduced to Mr. Frazier. "He's svelte," Mr. Cumming said. "Trim. He's like a hedge that's trimmed. He needs to get fucked up the arse."

Christian Leone, the 30-year-old head of public relations for Halston, said he met Mr. Frazier four years ago at a party.

"He was the quintessential dandy," Mr. Leone said. "I'd never seen anyone dressed like that in my life. He had a cane. He had a, like, three-quarter velvet jacket. Very Oscar Wilde. So a friend of mine and I went up to him; we were intrigued. We heard he was a stylist, and he said, 'No, I'm a fashion guru.' And we were like, 'What is a fashion guru?' He's like, 'It's very different... it's very involved.'"

It was 1:30 a.m. Mr. Frazier got his first drink of the night—a white wine. "I always wanted to be a big star," he said. "But I was so busy helping big stars that I never had the time to work on myself."



After: va-va-va-voom Katie Couric at a Golden Globe party in January 2002.