

➔ THE LAST RAIN MAN UMBRELLA VET KEEPS THINGS COVERED

If you want an umbrella repaired, need your bridesmaids carrying parasols in the same fabric as their dresses, or are staging a Broadway show and want umbrellas made to spec, Gilbert Center is, quite literally, the only man to see.

While city umbrella makers and repairmen were once as common as pushcarts, the lanky 84-year-old is pretty much the last man standing.

Center was born into the business. His father, Henry Centrovitz, owned an umbrella manufacturing shop on the Lower East Side. The family lived nearby, and every day, Center's mother stopped by the store with her infant son.

"I was weaned on an umbrella," he says.

He may have been weaned on them, but he wasn't supposed to work on them. Umbrellas were made by piece workers, and Centrovitz wanted something better for his son; while Center followed his father into the business, he was steered into management.

Despite his father's determination to see him in a white-collar job, though, Center was drawn to hands-on work, and he'd sneak onto the floor and watch fabric being cut and umbrellas put together. There were no machines then; every cut, every stitch was done manually. If someone took a break, Center grabbed silk and opportunity and had a go at imitating the piece workers' actions.

"I love to work with my hands," he says.

His father taught him about buying, selling, overseeing the workers, and the detail work that went into making a fine umbrella.

"My father made the best umbrellas," Center says, his strong, graceful hands sketching a memory of his father taking tiny stitches around the top point of an umbrella.

In his father's day, a new umbrella cost 75 cents, and 25 cents would see one repaired. Consider that a suit cost \$20 — often with a second pair of trousers tossed in — and you can see that saving 50 cents meant something.

Center understands saving money, but planned obsolescence bewilders him. Modern umbrellas don't flex in the wind. They break. In his father's shop, they made things to last.

But the trade itself was not destined to last. In the 1960s, inexpensive imports started to kill American umbrella makers.

"Japan was the first one, then it went to Taiwan, and from Taiwan it went to mainland China," says Center. "And that's where it is now."

Center's father's store closed in 1984. After a brief, uneasy retirement, he went to work for Uncle Sam's Umbrellas and Canes, an institution on West 57th Street, where he managed the repair shop. His lifetime of experience made him a repository of knowledge, and many came to him with questions about which umbrellas were best made, what made a proper British broly and whether something was worth repairing.

When Uncle Sam's closed in 2000, after 134 years, "People came from all over the world, crying, 'Where am I going to fix my umbrella?' I said, 'Don't worry, I'll fix it.' I had a pile like this," he says, holding his hand well above the floor.



Rich Press

POUR HOUSE: Gilbert Center learned his trade growing up on the Lower East Side.

“The umbrella business thrived before the days of cheap imports, but today, ‘Who wants to fix a lowly umbrella?’”

Today, Center works out of his home in Kensington, Brooklyn, doing everything by hand. He makes umbrellas for shows (including “Spamalot” and “Mary Poppins”), does all of Burberry's umbrella repairs and fixes umbrellas sent by all sorts of people.

Why would anyone get an umbrella repaired when they can grab a new one for a few dollars? It's attachment, says Center. When people are partial to an umbrella, “They'll do anything to have it fixed, because they can't replace that particular one. Maybe it's the pattern, or it was given

to them by somebody they loved.”

At this point Center reckons he's the last one in the country repairing umbrellas. He doesn't have an apprentice.

“Who wants to fix a lowly umbrella?” Center asks, shrugging regretfully. His children don't — they work in software and cosmetics for major companies. “It just doesn't pay.”

So why is he still at it?

“I like to do it — and I'm involved,” he says. “What else am I going to do? Some people play cards, some people go golfing. I fix umbrellas.” — *Seánan Forbes*