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S.J. DESIGNER ONE DEGREE FROM 'RUNWAY'

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Donna Kato, column
Memo: Ask Donna.

Illustration: Photo

Caption: PHOTO: AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE
Tommy **Marquez** sketched this costume design for the American Musical Theatre.

Who knew San Jose had a connection to "Project Runway"? His name is Thomas G. **Marquez** -- Tommy -- and he's the costume designer for the American Musical Theatre of San Jose.

It's a bit like the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game, so you'll have to follow closely to chart his link to the hit show:

Marquez, a Watsonville native who splits his time between the Bay Area and Los Angeles, had been working as a costumer on the WB show "What I Like About You" when the producers hired a new head designer: Kara Saun. Saun had just finished her run on the first season of "Project Runway," losing to winner Jay McCarroll.

McCarroll and Saun are buddies, despite the creative tension we saw on television. He was in the midst of filming "Project Jay," a one-hour spinoff special tracking his life after winning, when he went to visit Saun in L.A.

"That's where we got introduced," **Marquez** says.

McCarroll needed a design assistant to work with him on "Project Jay." Specifically, to help him create an Emmy dress for Heidi Klum. **Marquez** says he jumped at the chance.

But much to their disappointment, the former supermodel, who had just given birth to her son, ended up wearing a fluttery Dior dress instead.

So are Jay and Tommy, as he prefers to be called, friends, or was it a one-time professional pairing?

"We're definitely friends now even though it started off as a work-related thing,"

Marquez says. "You know he's crazy -- but in a good way. I'm like the older brother, always telling him to focus!"

Marquez, 45, grew up watching his mom sew and learning the craft with her. His first projects were marble bags.

"When you're from Watsonville and you have the chance, you get out," he says of opting out of life in agriculture. He focused first on dancing, ending up on the stage of regional theaters here and in L.A. Interested in designing, he starting taking costume classes at Cabrillo College and apprenticed with designers at the San Jose Civic Light Opera, now the American Musical Theatre of San Jose.

He has been the company's costume designer for 15 to 20 productions, he says, the latest being "Gypsy," opening Tuesday.

Although Broadway is his real dream, **Marquez** says he has applied for a spot on the next "Project Runway."

And for those fans of the show wondering who was his fave from the last round, it was Daniel Vosovic.

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