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How to become show designer

In conversation with Etienne Russo, Harriet Cuddeford and Fabio Cherstich



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In *Yves Saint Laurent*, the 2014 film directed by Jalil Lespert, it is portrayed with great accuracy how **fashion shows worked before they became spectacles**. Inside the **ateliers** of Dior, in Paris, the new creative director (even though this term was not yet in use) Saint Laurent finalises the looks of the new collection before presenting them to the press and potential buyers. No set design, no lighting effects: just a **few people** gathered around a runway only a few meters long, watching the models walk while holding the **number corresponding to the look** they were wearing. Since then, things have changed considerably.

The **concept of the fashion show** arrived in the fashion capitals only later, with the **birth of the Fashion Weeks** (New York, London, Milan, and Paris) and the development of an ecosystem of brands and Maisons that, in order to stand out amid the growing number of new labels, had to **refine the experience** by adding distinctive stylistic touches. As often happens, the pioneers of this new way of staging runway shows were **independent designers**, those farthest from traditional luxury, such as **Martin Margiela**, **Alexander McQueen**, **Franco Moschino**, **Fiorucci**, as well as Thierry Mugler, Vivienne Westwood, **Jean Paul Gaultier**, and **John Galiano**. Thanks to the success of these designers, even the more conservative side of fashion realised that runway shows could be an **integral part of a collection**, contribute to the **brand's imagery**, and expand its **media value**. But a show, to be successful, requires **strategy and direction**, qualities that today can be found in the role of the **show designer**.

But what exactly does a show designer do? How is a large-scale artistic event created, **co-ordinating all the people** who contribute to its realisation? In past editions of *How You Become*, we learned that no one in the fashion industry is an island, and often a single title hides a myriad of other roles that go unnoticed. For this reason, we spoke with **creative directors, show producers, art directors, and directors** (we'll stop here, as all the definitions would not fit into one paragraph) who have created some of the most remarkable shows and events of recent years: **Etienne Russo**, founder of Villa Eugénie, **Harriet Cuddeford**, the creative director behind Bad Bunny's iconic Super Bowl halftime show, and **Fabio Cherstich**, theatre director and art director.

Together with Russo, Cuddeford, and Cherstich, we attempted to create an **identikit of the show designer and producer**, ultimately discovering that the profession has a thousand faces - and needs a thousand more.

Etienne Russo, Founder of Villa Eugénie



Summarising Etienne Russo's work in a few lines is no easy task. Over more than thirty years, his agency, **Villa Eugénie**, has produced iconic shows, from **Dries Van Noten's Paris Fashion Week debut** to **Karl Lagerfeld's** Chanel Haute Couture presentations. From **Dior's** mechanical gardens to **Moncler's** snowy high-altitude landscapes, **Miu Miu's** beaches, and **Maison Margiela's** tents labyrinths, Villa Eugénie has done it all - driven, Russo says, by a single quality: **obsession**.

He explains that he constantly asks his collaborators to pursue **research**: not the social media kind that traps users in repetitive loops, but **tangible, paper-based** exploration. In the early years, Russo fondly recalls spending entire days after Fashion Month with his sole creative assistant, gathering books and spending entire days highlighting colors, lights, and details for future use. «*Maybe it sounds old fashioned*,» he admits, «*but that to me was fantastic*.»

Obsession and research continue to guide Villa Eugénie's success. While the shows and events last only twenty minutes or a single evening, each project aims to create **moments that can last a lifetime**. Russo emphasises that show production is a chain in which every link is essential, especially the **invisible** ones.

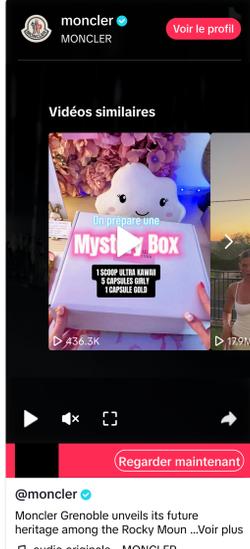


What has been the key quality of Villa Eugénie that has made it one of the most successful companies in the industry?

Obsession, research and emotion. I approach production almost like a movie, where everything unfolds at the right moment. We have to think about space, sound, light, audience, attention: I don't call it decoration, it's more of an immersion and it has to be as rigorous as possible, almost surgical. And instinct for me is extremely important. I think all of that has built our credibility. Our clients - or as I call them, our partners - know that we never no drama, just intensity. That's it.

What qualities do you look for in a potential collaborator at Villa Eugénie?

He or she must think out of the box and have no fear for the unknown. I'm looking for people that resemble us, that have the same flame inside of them that pushes them to do something they never did. It is kind of difficult now, because everybody today has Instagram, Pinterest and all of that, where they receive the same information. So I'm pushing people to go back to books, to go see movies, art exhibitions, to open their eyes and their minds. Integrity is also extremely important.



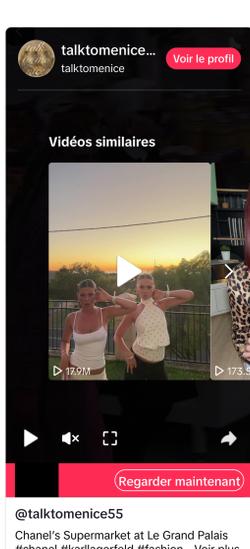
How do you translate an artist's or creative director's vision into a physical event?

First of all, I listen more than I speak. It's a bit weird what I'm going to say, but when we have a new client what we try to do is have the same definition of the word "normal", just to make sure we are speaking the same language. And from show to show, from event to event, we develop a common sense, a communication that's been based on the thing that you've been creating from moment one. Sometimes an artist can have a mood, a memory, a word, which we have to decode without betraying their sense of direction. Then we break it into physics: materials, acoustics, timing, weight. The translation from idea to structure is delicate, we have to protect the poetry while respecting the gravity of it.

How many people does it take to produce a show at Villa Eugénie? Are there any roles that you believe are undervalued or underrepresented, yet essential to every project?

It can range from 40 to 400 people, depending on the size and where you produce. I think the most undervalued roles are the technical crews: the technical director, the stage manager, the sound engineer, the people who remain invisible when everything works and only become visible when something doesn't. A door opening at the right second, the silence before music starts, these are very fragile moments. Fashion celebrates the visible production, yet it depends on the invisible.

I would like to bow to my teams everywhere. Without them there would be no Villa Eugénie, there would be no Etienne Russo. I may be the person who has the idea, but then it takes tons of people to bring it to reality. Show production is a chain, and everybody has the same value. Of course, some have more responsibilities, but there's no one better than the other.



What skills should an aspiring show producer or set designer develop in order to grow in today's industry?

You need resilience, curiosity, and technical knowledge, of course. More importantly, you need to understand culture, music, architecture, lighting, youth, movement, and digital behavior. Shows are no longer isolated moments, they live online, fragmented, replayed. You must accept pressure. This job is not glamorous backstage, believe me. You really have to accept that you will have to work extremely hard, you will have to deal with stress. There are a lot of responsibilities that fall on you, from decision making to time and budget constraints. If you can remain calm when 10,000 people are waiting for something and something goes wrong, then you belong to this industry.

