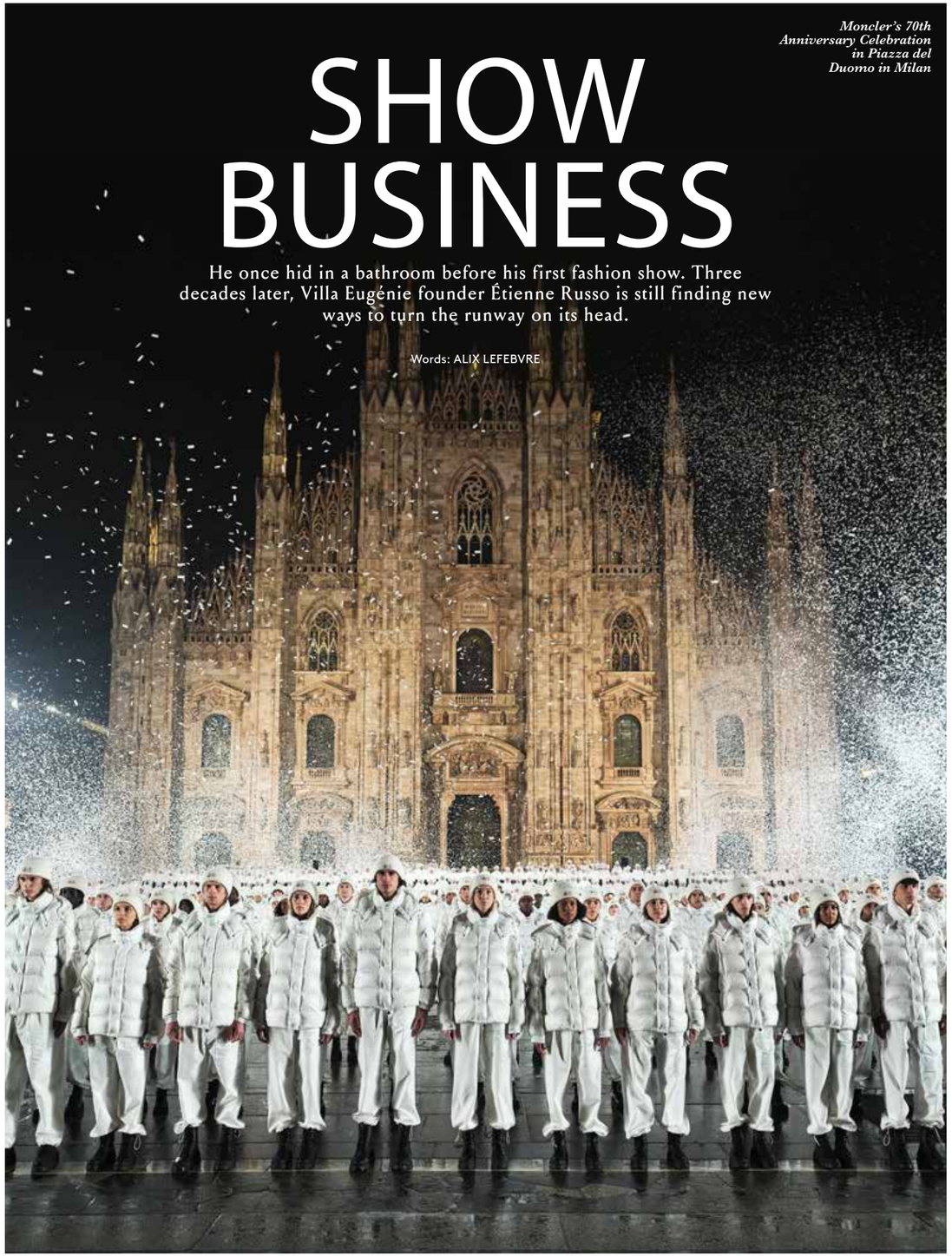


Moncler's 70th Anniversary Celebration in Piazza del Duomo in Milan

SHOW BUSINESS

He once hid in a bathroom before his first fashion show. Three decades later, Villa Eugénie founder Étienne Russo is still finding new ways to turn the runway on its head.

Words: ALIX LEFEBVRE



Étienne Russo

Backstage in the bathroom at Dries Van Noten's Spring/Summer 1992 show, first-time producer Étienne Russo was hiding. Twenty minutes to go; the man who had orchestrated every detail – even airbrushing the grass green in the basement – was nervous about what's to come. But the show must go on: Russo steps into the fray.

A few thousand productions later – 129 for Van Noten alone – Russo has watched the fashion show mutate from an intimate gathering to a major cultural event. With Villa Eugénie, his creative production company, he transformed runway shows into sensory experiences – space and sound dialled up to serve the collection's narrative.

Fashion has always found Russo, one way or another. He's modelled in Tokyo and New York; but as artistic director at Brussels' Le Mirano Club – a cinema-turned-nighclub that Russo calls as his creative laboratory – he learned to engineer those rare, electric moments when everything clicks at once.

"I was a mixologist of human chemistry, playing with creativity and clashing subcultures, all under one roof," he says.

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Above: Moncler Grenoble Fall/Winter 2026 in Aspen

A spirit of restless creativity ran through the Belgian scene at the dawn of the '90s. The Antwerp Six, including Van Noten and other local designers, were already shaking up fashion, presenting their work in unconventional locations and formats. Amid this wave of experimentation, Russo and the group met and, in 1986, created a spatial installation inside Le Mirano for its fifth anniversary, bringing fashion, photography, art and music into the same room. The project marked the beginning of an enduring collaboration between Van Noten and Russo, two creative forces whose careers have run in remarkable parallel ever since.

"Dries and I essentially grew up together professionally," Russo recalls. "Both of us are driven by the desire to never settle into a comfort zone. We share this intuitive language where words are barely necessary."

The industry as a whole joined the movement, questioning conventions it had taken for granted for decades. Comme des Garçons' Rei Kawakubo brought her radical vision to Paris, subverting the silhouette with her infamous "Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body" collection. Thierry Mugler reimagined the female form with machine-inspired designs that bordered on the otherworldly. As designers pushed fashion beyond garments, the runway evolved right alongside them: it was no longer just a utilitarian platform for buyers and editors, but a stage for conveying socio-political ideas and emotion.

"There was an undeniable, raw sense of freedom back then," Russo recalls. "There were no predefined industry frameworks; we didn't know the 'rules', so we simply invented our own."

In the midst of fashion's new frenzy, Russo founded Villa Eugénie in 1997, bringing his instinct for unexpected collisions into fashion production. As designers began to see the show as an extension of the collection, the format was ripe for experimentation. With his long-time friend Van Noten, the idea had room to grow. At Van Noten's 50th show more than two decades ago, 500 guests sat at a single table in a Paris warehouse, with 250 waiters serving dinner before the meal itself gave way to the Spring/Summer 2005 runway. The production was widely praised for its equilibrium – grand in concept, yet meticulously controlled in execution – a balance that has become a hallmark of Russo's work. His sets are known for their discipline and purpose, never resorting to spectacle for its own sake. "Set design is a spatial interpretation of the experience," he explains. Every element should serve the collection: "The aim is to engage every sense to amplify the clothes and create a memory that lasts well beyond the season."

The industry's appetite for ever-greater immersion quickly made Russo the man of the moment. Powerhouses like LVMH and Kering began investing in every facet of a brand's universe, while the lines between celebrity and fashion blurred across music videos, magazine covers, red carpets and the front row. As audiences shifted and expectations soared, shows adapted – productions scaled up, each detail recalibrated for maximum impact. "We naturally evolve with our own codes and challenges," Russo says. "It simply requires different forms of creative instinct along the way."

A knack for reinvention soon put Villa Eugénie behind some of fashion's most ambitious runway productions, as Russo took on increasingly complex projects and found new ways to bring designers' ideas to life. His work with Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld saw a succession of spectacular setups at the Grand Palais, from a giant supermarket, where models shopped the aisles, to a beach complete with sand, rolling waves and barefoot walks along the water's edge.

The producer's job has many facets, but much of it comes down to stepping inside a designer's mind and amplifying their vision, often pushing it further than they thought possible. Every idea, Russo says, evolves through an open dialogue between producer and designer. "My role is not only to execute a vision, but to challenge it, develop it, and sometimes open doors that weren't visible at



Moncler Grenoble Fall/Winter 2025 in Courchevel

Marie Adam-Leenaerdt Fall/Winter 2026





Dries Van Noten Spring|Summer 2005

the beginning."

His approach has also brought him into close creative partnerships with designers and creative directors who share his appetite for experimentation. Among them is Moncler Grenoble's Remo Ruffini, with whom Russo has developed a creative partnership built around a willingness to defy expectations. Together, they have staged some of the most talked-about runways, with their ambitious productions often going viral for their sheer scale and ingenuity. For the brand's 70th anniversary in 2022, they took over Milan's Piazza del Duomo, orchestrating a live performance featuring 1,952 participants beneath a grid of high-tech lasers for an audience of 18,000. The show producer later described the production as monumental, both for its scale and for the emotion it generated.

At high altitude and in sub-zero temperatures, Russo and his team took on the elements for a Moncler Grenoble show in Courchevel, where the blizzard became a main cast member. "We literally co-created with nature here," Russo says. "No laser on the market was powerful enough for our needs, so we had to custom-build our own. Slicing through the storm, it turned severe weather into an ethereal light installation – even as we managed the logistics for hundreds of guests."

For Russo, the challenge is not simply to make a bigger show, but to keep finding a reason to do things differently. That might mean working with new technology, taking a production into the mountains or simply questioning an idea that has worked before.

"Comfort is rarely very creative," he says. Three decades in, it remains a useful rule.

Russo may be behind some of luxury's grandest spectacles, but he has never lost sight of the new guard. He's just as likely to be found backstage at a major Paris runway as he is collaborating with rising designers like Robert Wun, whose recent couture collection, Childsplay, bore Russo's production signature. Such collaborations with rising stars in the industry promise an inspiring clash of Russo's seasonality with fresh energy. "The new generation doesn't inherit our rules," he says. "They challenge what we've stopped questioning."

Runways, too, have changed. Once a cloistered affair for fashion's inner circle, the show is now shaped by the omnipresent gaze of social media. Instagram has recast designers as content creators, their collections scrutinised for digital "wow factor". Shows that were once ephemeral are now global broadcasts, and the pressure to deliver a photogenic spectacle has never been greater.

With this shift comes a new tension: how to translate real-life emotion into something that resonates on screen. The feeling in the room must always come first. "If the emotion in the room isn't authentic, its digital echo will inevitably feel hollow," he says. Technology, from artificial intelligence to immersive digital environments, might expand the creative toolkit, but genuine atmosphere still has no substitute.

Even as runway productions have grown more elaborate, the purpose of the fashion show hasn't really changed: it remains a way to bring people together, to create connection, to experience style as something shared and immediate.

"Humans are inherently social, gregarious beings," Russo observes. "Fashion shows will undoubtedly continue to evolve and embrace new technologies, but that fundamental human desire to come together will never disappear."

Now that Villa Eugénie has expanded well beyond fashion – lending its expertise to fields as varied as art, architecture and hospitality – the motto remains the same: keep the magic alive wherever the creative winds may lead.

"Today, it's all about synergy," Russo says. The lines between disciplines are becoming increasingly fluid and Russo's creativity flourishes when boundaries dissolve and intersect.

While expanding his offices to Milan, Russo recently took on the role of Editor at Large for the magazine *Paris Noir* in collaboration with nss France, bringing together a collective of creative voices in tribute to the city.

"This chapter is heavily about transmission," he says. "Experience isn't something to keep to oneself. My work now is about passing on our tools so others can invent what comes next – and very often, their vision makes us question our own habits."

The industry will continue to shift, but for Russo one principle remains steadfast: "We can't lose the sense of mystery. Preserving room for wonder, intimacy, and the unexpected is essential. Without mystery, there is no real emotion." P



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