

PORTRAIT OF Etienne Russo

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PHOTO BY Brock Elbank

# THE GREATEST SHOWMAN

It's one of the most elusive things in the world of fashion. Impossible to predict, difficult to categorise, lasting just minutes but having an influence that resonates for seasons. I speak of course of the 'fashion moment' - a fleeting instant when a designer catches the prevailing zeitgeist in one startling flash. Bigger than just a collection, a model or a location, fashion moments are spoken of in hushed tones for years, often short-handed by those in the know. Mention 'The rocket at Chanel' or 'Dries on the stage of the Opera Garnier' and every fashionista will give a gasp of recognition and admiration. Of course, the clothes play a huge part in what constitutes such an event but more often than not, it is the presentation that really makes the heart beat faster so it is with more than a little excitement that I find myself Skyping with Etienne Russo, the man behind every Dries show so far and the guy who participated in the production of the aforementioned Chanel rocket show (and the Chanel supermarket, and the Chanel rainforest - the list is long). As head of Brussels based agency villa eugénie, he and his team have been entrusted by some of the world's biggest names to create and produce their seasonal fashion shows. Juggling mind-boggling budgets and heart-attack-inducing logistics, Etienne and his team are the magicians that make the wildest flights of fancy come to life.

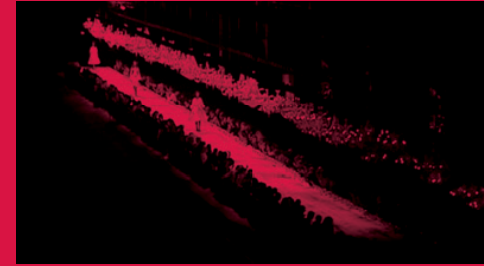
For someone who's work life now involves mixing with some of the most glamorous people in the fashion world, Etienne's initial training was way more prosaic. 'Initially I started at the Ecole Hôtelière in Namur' he remembers. 'You begin from the very bottom, peeling potatoes. After you've nailed that, you move on to chopping parsley. Then onions. It was crucial you mastered all the very basics' Far from finding it demeaning or boring, Etienne found this almost-military level education fundamental to his later work. 'It made me understand the need to be structured and the fact that even the biggest productions are the result of a chain of people. At the very top of the pyramid is the designer, the stylist etc. But if the set builders and even cleaners don't do their job to the best of their ability, the end result will not work'.

Excited to be part of the burgeoning fashion and music scene developing in Belgium in the early 80s, Etienne started working at the Mirano Continental, one of the largest clubs in Brussels, and soon began organising events for them. Learning as he went along, the parties grew ever more extravagant and creative, involving everything from sets borrowed from the city's opera house to - on one occasion - a 'castrato' singer wearing a Gaultier jumpsuit. 'It was a laboratory to discover and explore! I was allowed to pretty much do anything I wanted'. Becoming close to the legendary 'Antwerp 6' group of designers, he was invited by Dries van Noten to help organise the latter's very first show in Paris and the rest is history. 'It was totally organic - not really a business plan at all. I started working with other designers: Hermès in 1998, followed quickly by Hugo Boss. Then a game-changing meeting with Chanel in 1999...' The latter resulted in Etienne's newly created agency villa eugénie involved in every Chanel show for the next twenty years (and counting). That's alongside masterminding all the Dries presentations and doing regular stints with the likes of Moncler, Fendi, Dior and Burberry. In an industry that isn't exactly famous for loyalty and consistency, it's remarkable for relationships to be so long-standing: a testament to the quality and reliability of Etienne and his team. 'It gets easier with long term clients' he says, 'Some are very sure of what they want right from the very beginning' (it's not difficult to imagine that the late Karl Lagerfeld stood firmly in this group). 'Others give us carte blanche to come up with concept and strategy and really be involved in the total global message from the start. Most of course fall somewhere in between with a lot of ping-ponging of ideas between us both'.

So, back to those spine-tingling fashion moments. Where does someone who has worked on hundreds of shows think they come from? 'It's impossible to predict!' Etienne says with no hesitation whatsoever. 'It's complete synchronicity between everything from location and collection to casting, music, make up and hair. As importantly, it's the crowd and the electricity that happens between them as they arrive.' He describes it as 'the sizzle'. It's not just what's happening on stage but it's a total sensory and emotional experience involving not only the visuals and the music but the vibrations through the seat, the smells and the ambient sounds: all things that are almost impossible to recreate on a digital platform. I ask him if he can name an example of one of his true 'moments' and, after a few seconds thought,



Dries van Noten Spring/Summer 2005



Dries van Noten Spring/Summer 2005



Givenchy Couture Spring/Summer 2020



Givenchy Couture Spring/Summer 2020



Dior Menswear Fall 2021



Dior Menswear Fall 2021



he brings up the spectacular show he produced for Dries van Noten to both present his SS05 collection and celebrate his 50th show. Five hundred guests sat at a 150m long white table to eat dinner - served with military precision and timing by 250 waiters. As the meal drew to a close, the long row of chandeliers that hung over the table all rose in unison, Ravel's Bolero came booming out of the speakers and models started to stride down what now had become a runway. Fifteen minutes and fifty seconds later, the last model reached the end of the table and the lights dimmed at exactly the moment the music came to its tumultuous finale - a feat of precision all the more remarkable considering that, in those days, models had multiple changes of outfits so timing was always a precarious concept. (To make things run faster and smoother, Etienne had a fleet of golf buggies to ferry the girls from the end of the runway back to the behind-the-stage area. It's all about the prep work!). 'Just for once, I felt we touched perfection' remembers Etienne proudly 'A couple of seconds out and it would have not been so dramatic. I always look back with a critical eye but this is the only show where I can say I wouldn't change a thing. So much could have gone wrong but everything went right.'

This kind of magic, thinks Etienne, is impossible to recreate with a purely digital presentation. 'Shows like this are life moments - they need a live audience sat together to get a sense of the excitement. We are social animals and most people like an excuse to dress up and interact with each other.' He also touches on the elitist aspect of a fashion show and the cachet of having been invited and present: after all, it's hard to show off about watching a video. 'Before the pandemic, there was a lot of 'fashion fatigue' and people were spoilt, moaning about the effort and expense of the huge shows. Now they can't wait to go back and see that kind of thing again'. Etienne does acknowledge the need to change. 'When something is new, there is an eagerness to experiment and see what can be done. Covid amplified this and we were forced to adapt.' But his agency's approach for the most part has been to use digital technology to problem solve and work alongside live presentations rather than replace them. Indeed, a few days after our talk, a Dior menswear hybrid presentation in Beijing showed how the fusion can work. Here a collection was filmed on models in studios in Paris a couple of weeks before and then presented in front of 800 guests at an event that was entirely conceived, produced and run remotely from Europe through video platforms. 'Digital technology definitely has its uses' Etienne observes 'but at the moment I don't think it is strong enough to replace reality entirely'.

As our conversation wraps up, I ask what the next step is for himself and villa Eugénie. Frustrated slightly by the lack of permanence of most of their projects, the agency is moving into more tangible and less transient design and, after a successful project to redesign the Living World gallery at the Manchester Museum in 2011, future plans include shop concepts for Swarovski and a 120-room hotel in Portugal. Not surprisingly, it seems the future for Etienne still revolves around the emotion and 'sizzle' of a real physical experience.