For 22 years he’s been the mastermind behind some of fashion’s most remarkable shows and events. DANSK talked to Etienne Russo about cooking for Dries Van Noten, the Olympic Ceremony, and a landmark meeting with Chanel.

“It might only last 10 minutes, but the planning and production of a fashion show demands talent and creative skills. Behind the scenes, Etienne Russo works his magic making scenography and small-scale shows for industry staples like Chanel, Thom Browne, Hermès, Miu Miu, Kenzo and Lanvin. At his design firm Villa Eugénie, he creates his hard-hitting cocktail of people, ideas, fantasies, and skill, making sure that fashion shows reach new heights each season. A mixologist he calls himself. And his mixing skills can be traced to the early eighties when Etienne Russo worked as a bartender in Brussels.

“I was working as a bartender at the Mirano, a big club in Brussels, and was also producing their parties. It was another time; people really dressed up and it was an amazing mix of types, personalities and styles. Going out back then was different. Now it’s just teenagers,” he laughs, as I interrupt his holidays with a Skype call.

But everything didn’t just happen because of the lavish parties of a certain type. It was all about work. “I worked with Michel Gauvret, who does the music for Chanel. He invited me to one of the couture shows, and I had a dream of doing one myself. I introduced me to Virginio Viard, Chantal Thomasse and Olivier Theyskens.”

A couple of months later, they called him in for a meeting. Arriving at Chanel with all his video cassettes, this meeting seems a key moment to Russo as he looks back.

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“The growth has been very organic: Nothing has been forced, it’s been a pretty long process. I’m quite spiritual and believe that everything happens for a reason,” he says, in a serious tone, before cracking up and looking himself on the top of his head.

“Luckily, I’ve never had to knock on anybody’s door. Business was a consequence of my passion, not the other way around.”

And so Villa Eugénie was founded. Named after the villa he once rented an office in, it’s not a name that’s very revealing of the company’s activities.

“The day I had to go to the notary, in early ’93, I just took the name of the villa with me. I like that it’s a bit poetic of attention to detail and composition. And you can’t always pinpoint what we do.”

He broadly assigns his clients into three different approaches; the ones that know exactly what they want, “like Karl and Chanel,” brands like Dries and Lanvin, where “it’s a ping pong match and a process of constant progress,” and the ones that want Russo and his team of 15 employees and a bunch of freelancers to make a full concept and production.

“There are as many processes as there are customers,” he claims, when I ask him how they work at Villa Eugénie, but one thing is for sure: here’s a man that is very sensitive to his surroundings. “I work a lot with what’s already in the venue. Most of the time it starts there; I want to hear what the space communicates to me.”

But Etienne Russo isn’t only into fashion — contemporary art has been a passion for years now, with him working with the boundaries of art and fashion, especially at the launch of the Maison Martin Margiela and H&M collaboration in New York — a favourite event of Russo’s.

Speaking of favourites, I ask him if there’s one moment in his career that stands out in particular. He thinks for a while, saying that there may be too many good memories to pick a few, but after a while, he lighten up and remembers.

“When I look back at old events, I always find small things I could have done better. But with this one, everything was perfect. It all came together perfectly, so beautifully,” he notes, before he paints a picture of a legendary show he did for Dries Van Noten.

“It was in a rough neighbourhood in Paris, in a long warehouse. We served 500 guests dinner at one long table, and with 250 waiters, everyone was served at exactly the same time. Everything was choreographed,” he says of the event, which later transformed the table into a runway with a perfect ending.

“The last model stood at the end of the runway at the very last note of the music. We also displayed Dries’ golden book, with light reflecting in the pages. So everybody was bathed in a golden light. It was truly beautiful.”

Making big events like that means a lot of communication and coordination. Because the venue was big, the models were driven back to the dressing room in small golf carts when they exited the runway.

Still, he wants to sound himself with something really, really big. He’s dreaming of doing a huge event — the opening ceremony of the Olympics, for example.

“I would love to do a hotel concept. I’ve travelled for 320 days in 2012, so I would love to create what for me would be a perfect hotel. They always seem to lack something. Another big challenge would be a ceremony opening,” he says, recalling Jean-Paul Goude’s 1989 celebration show of the 200th anniversary of the French revolution as a major inspiration.

Lastly, he’s been working with a natural history museum in Manchester, which has given him new dimensions and perspectives. Working closely together with scientists, he’s been a new world.

“They showed me a fossil with big long teeth. Apparently it was from a dolphin, and it was 450 million years old. Can you imagine that? I still today can’t visualize it. I don’t know what 450 million years means, and I gave me new questions and perspectives. I would love more work like that.”

While stating that he might as well have worked in theatre or movies, he does admit to be a lover of clothes.

“I’m interested in fashion, I’m excited by it. Yeah but am I a fashionista? I don’t think so. I’m not so trendy, yeah. But am I a fashionista? I don’t think so. I’m not so trendy.”

People say fashion is superficial. It can be, yes, but often, designers are ahead of their times with the messages they deliver, like social and cultural analyses. And fashion gives dreams to the people. And in the world we live in today, we need that. We need these dreams.”