SHOW BUSINESS

From coordinating Kanye to building a brasserie, show producer Etienne Russo turns catwalk-in-the-air visions into larger-than-life reality

I always say that if you see the trick, you lose the magic,” explains Etienne Russo, super catwalk producer and founder of the Brussels-based Vla Estagions—production company par excellence. “You don’t need to know the story, just enjoy the show.”

Despite such pretzels, fashion’s master of ceremonies is letting us in on his AW12 sets and calling us he’s seen first-hand the phenomenal rise of the catwalk industry. A $50 heart-shaped chocolate box for Moncler? No problem. Dancing pillars for Kenzo? Sure thing. All’s a day’s work...

“My job is to be a creative director, but also a conductor. To put on a fashion show requires a set, music, lighting, hair, makeup up, and above all, a collection. My role is to bring all of those talents together for one moment, in front of an audience. It’s more than a case of logistics; our responsibility is to convey the designer’s message for the season and make that show memorable. Of the 700 shows that a magazine editor has seen during the months, you want your client’s to be in his or her top ten.

There was no school for this career, so I was learning as I went, but over the years my business has grown beyond anything I would have originally predicted. When I was a student in the mid-80s, I worked behind the bar at Miracolo in Brussels and I met a lot of people including those who became the “Autorex 88”. Fashion and clubbing were the most important things to everybody at the time and people would spend all week preparing to dress up on Saturday night. I became closer with Dries Van Noten and Walter Van Beirendonck, and I started to organise parties, fashion shows and youth designer contests at the club. I worked for Dries as a model and at night after dinner we would dream about what we might do if we could put on a show. Then one day in early 1991, Dries called me and said, “I’m doing my first show in Paris, do you want to do it?” From then on, I was a fashion show producer.

I remember the moment in the mid-90s when the big players started to be involved and quickly we had become serious professionals. Martin Margiela, Dries and our friends went, at the time, just young designers trying to find a new way to communicate their collections. Then Tom Ford at Gucci changed everything — fashion became big news and everyone was interested in seeing his shows. The business groups – LVMH, Kering – all get behind the idea of presentation and suddenly there were much bigger budgets and fashion week became an event.

Today it is more important than ever for a designer to put on a memorable show because there is so much competition in the marketplace. Everybody is trying to find the best way to catch a buyer’s attention, but inevitably, if you don’t have a good collection, you can’t hide behind a show. It’s hit or miss, not like the theatre where you perform again the next night — you only get the one chance.

The way I work is different with each designer. There are clients such as Moncler, to whom we can propose anything and who are completely open to ideas. Then there are people such as Elie Saab, creative director at Lanvin, who has a ping pong game with us. We propose ideas and he comes back with others, but it’s not about who came up with what. There are clients such as Miu Miu and Chanel, when we become executive producers. Karl Lagerfeld knows exactly what he wants and we become part of a bigger team, where everybody works together for the end result.

It’s important that we keep bold new ideas and push boundaries of what a catwalk show can be. There has always been some drama in fashion, after all, but you shouldn’t overthink the responsibility of “bewowing” the audience. My biggest goal is to communicate the designer’s message, and usually there are 50 different ways to say it, with elements that can be whispered and things that should be shouted.

Quiet productions can be as effective as — at Dries Van Noten this season, a good soundtrack and beautiful lighting was enough to complement the collection. Lighting is an essential element — it’s technical but it’s also art. With designers such as Lanvin, we never use much decor because the lighting says it all.

What makes a perfect fashion show? Hard work. There is no perfection in this world and I have had to learn that after many, many years of trying. There was only ever one show, Dries’ first, when what I think about it still today, I wouldn’t change a single thing.

It’s a strange race to run because after months of preparation, the show is over and done in about 12 minutes. After all the build-up, there’s one tenth of a second where it is electrifying and then you’re back to normal. And then I say, “OK, good,” and I’m on to the next.”

THE SETS

PHILIPPE PLEIN

This was the most complicated show I’ve produced this season because there were platforms coming up and down with models. We divided up the show into three parts and there were 2,000 people behind the stage trying to drive them in and out with buttons, with plenty of room for human error. But part of the job is to make it all look effortless.”

THOM BROWNE

MONCLER GRENOBLE

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KANYE WEST 
KANADIS ORIGINALES

This presentation in New York probably had the biggest front row I’ve ever seen — all Kanye’s family and friends came. We couldn’t work with the team gave us his plans. He asked me to work with artist Vanessa Beecroft, and a management, and we responded with ideas for directions the show could take.”

LANVIN

DRIES VAN NOTEN

CHANEL

‘This season at Chanel, my personal role was on encryption and working with the models to ensure that Karl’s vision was delivered. The girls were given a bit of freedom to interpret their surroundings in the brasserie, but their placement at the table was carefully planned.’