

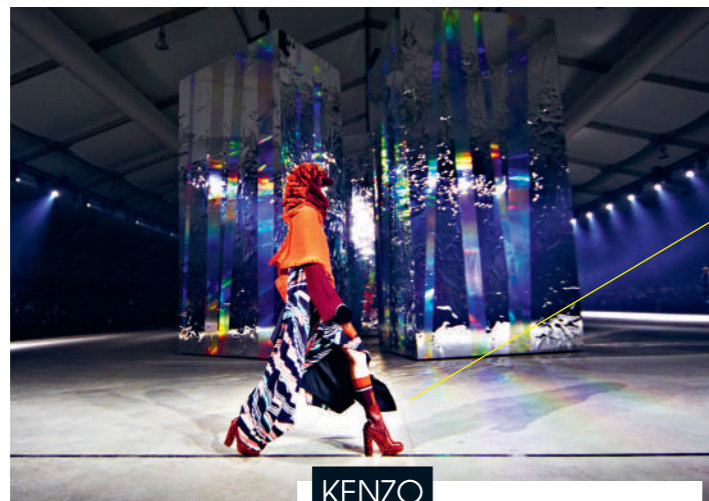


PHILIPP PLEIN

THE SETS

SHOW BUSINESS

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



KENZO

'This was more of a creative project for me. I first had the idea for the set about five years ago, when I saw this technology invented by a Swedish company. We turned it into a ballet with these towers moving precisely as they were programmed on the computer.'



KANYE WEST X ADIDAS ORIGINALS

'This presentation in New York probably had the biggest front row I've ever seen – all Kanye's family and friends came. He's cool to work with. The team gave us his plans, such as collaborating with artist Vanessa Beecroft, and a moodboard, and we responded with ideas for directions the show could take.'



DRIES VAN NOTEN

'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 Villa Eugénie – production company par excellence. 'You don't need to know the story, just enjoy the show.' Despite such protests, fashion's master of ceremonies is letting us in on his AW15 acts and telling us how he's seen first-hand the phenomenal rise of the catwalk industry. A 50ft heart-shaped chocolate box for Moncler? No problem. Dancing pillars for Kenzo? Sure thing. All in 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, make-up and, above all, a collection. My role is to bring all of these 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 their show memorable. Of the 700 shows that a magazine editor has seen during the month, 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 could have originally predicted. When I was a student in the mid-80s, I worked behind the bar at Mirano in Brussels and I met a lot of people including those [designers] who became the "Antwerp Six". 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 young 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 to become serious professionals. Martin Margiela, Dries and our friends were, at the time, just young designers trying to find a new way to communicate their collections. Then Tom Ford at



THOM BROWNE

Gucci changed everything – fashion became big news and everyone was interested in seeing his shows. The business groups – LVMH, Kering – all got 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 ultimately, 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 Alber [Elbaz, creative director at Lanvin] who I have a ping-pong game with. We propose ideas and he comes back with others, but it's not about who came up with what. Then there are clients such as Miu Miu and Chanel, where we become executive producers. Karl [Lagerfeld] knows exactly what he wants and we become part of a bigger chain where everybody works together for the end result.

It's important that we try 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 "wowing" 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 – 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 emotional, too. 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' fiftieth, where when 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.' ©



MONCLER GRENOBLE

'This was the most complicated show I produced this season because there were platforms coming up and down with models on. We dressed up cherry-picker lifts and there were 20 people behind the scenes trying to drive them in sync with buttons, with plenty of room for human error. But part of the job is to make it all look effortless.'



CHANEL

'This season at Chanel, my personal role was on scenography 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 tables was carefully planned.'



LANVIN

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