You have been producing fashion shows for top brands for 20 years. What moved your passion and how did you break into the field? It started very organically. In the mid-80s, I was both a model and Creative Director of a nightclub in Brussels which was installed in an old 1930s cinema and was the equivalent of the Palais in Paris. I was taking care of club nights, and at the time there was a strong creative movement in Belgian fashion so I became part of it, firstly as a model, but also by styling the fashion cognoscenti in the club scene. I then began organizing fashion shows at the club, which is how I met Walter van Beirendonck and Dries van Noten. I started to work with Dries as his model and followed him everywhere, doing showroom tours. At lunchtime, we used to dream about what we could do for his shows. And at the end of the year in 1998, he informed me that he would be presenting his first runway show in Paris, and asked me to be in charge of it. So, this is how it all started for me. I was 20 years old, but went to Paris after Dries proposed this great opportunity. For two or three years I was simultaneously working for both the club and for Dries. I always thought it was a nice blende, a great way to meet people from different backgrounds and with different interests. I didn’t stop working for the club until 1994, when I had to make a choice, as things got more serious. There wasn’t a choice to make actually this was the way to go. I decided to go towards what I wanted to do at the time. I had been working for the nightclub for ten years and it was time to move on.

“I’m not a businessman, I am passionate”

The shows you have executed and continue to do for Dries van Noten are some of the most iconic. What was it like having Dries as your first client in the early 1990s? Again, everything went organically and unplanned. I met him in 1986 as a model, and sat for fashion pictures for him, and then ran away for his collections when he started doing them, traveling to Florence and Milan with him while also modeling for British designers at the time. And, just to say, we had a good relationship which was already there before we started working on his shows. So, it wasn’t like a contractual relationship like the ones you have when working with an agency. It happened naturally. And he had quite precise and circumstantial ideas. For his first show he wanted an Italian fashion show, but it had to involve something. He could tell it was done with limited resources, but it was fun and somehow worked. This one was in the basement of the Saint James Abbey Hotel in Paris, and the runway was covered with grass, but because there was no light, the grass became yellow so we had to airbrush it!

You and Dries van Noten seem to have a very dynamic and positive relationship. How has it evolved over the years? It’s always been like an amazing ping-pong game. I’d have an idea, he’d have another, and we’d roll off of each other’s ideas. He may come up with something, and I’d suggest something else and vice versa. It was very much a natural and organic team effort, a well-distributed mix of friendship with an extremely professional relationship. Business is business, friendship is friendship.

As I said, I’ve always thought it was a nice blend, a great way to meet people from different backgrounds and with different interests. I didn’t stop working for the club until 1994, when I had to make a choice, as things got more serious. There wasn’t a choice to make actually this was the way to go. I decided to go towards what I wanted to do at the time. I had been working for the nightclub for ten years and it was time to move on. As long as I have fun, I will still be doing it. As long as I have challenges, and those come everyday, I will not stop doing it. For now, everything comes together for me to continue. For how long? WELL see. Maybe you’ll ask me the same question in five years and I’ll probably have another answer. But for now, I have incredible shows with even more incredible stories to tell; so, I cannot ask for better. I feel good at the moment, and I don’t have a reason to think about changing anything.

“I’m too young to stop! I think I’d be bored if I stopped”

You are a producer for the world’s most prestigious brands. What was your process when building this impressive client list? I have never knocked on people’s doors; it was always the other way around. Something, if I have been working for the nightclub for ten years and I’ll do it for the future and live in the present. We forget about them and we only keep the souvenirs, good or bad. I don’t live in the past. I use it for the future and live in the present. For me, the biggest challenges are the upcoming shows I have to take care of, but it’s a challenge to do something. This is my challenge. I cannot go back and ask myself what has been the most challenging because there are remix shows I have to produce in the next few days. That is my biggest challenge right now.
What skills are necessary to run villa eugénie or any similar large fashion production house?

"Enormous Enormity!" Keeping all proportions, I will like to consider myself an artist. This is how we see things: we're not a big production company, yet if you grow, it's only to get closer to our clients. We are not opening new offices in Paris and New York to quote new clients. But to be able to be closer to our clients and their needs or we can answer them quicker. My client enables me to grow. So, to run something like villa eugénie, you have to be well surrounded. And without delay. I think I have a fantastic team, which was created over time. They are individuals who are loyal and dedicated to the most extraordinary manner. I never had formal training. I didn't study business or production, so I have it in my instinct, and it is true. It starts with the stomach then rushes to the heart and ends up in the head. This is how it works for me. I always start with my instincts. I don't force things; I do them because I feel like doing them.

What advice would you give new talent trying to follow in your footsteps?

Do what you love in life. Really. As you see as you do what you really love, there is no unmeasurable hill. But you have to be conscious. You cannot take no for an answer. When people say no, this is when I wake up and say, "Let's go! Let's work! Why not?" I like to know why a no is a no. And, when you understand why it's a no, you must be able to find a solution. So, you have to take another try on things. And, you have to be persevering. Today, people say they are the only one who understands that everything around us is made to go fast, but I don't think it's always the best way to do it. You cannot miss steps on your way to the top. You know, my initial training is in catering. Catering school is extremely strict, even stricter than the army, so when it came off, I ended up in potatos; about a hundred kilos a day! When I was pumelling them perfectly, I would then go on to learn how to deep fry potatoes, then onions etc. When I was ready to go onto the next step, I would. So, you need to anticipate things properly before moving to the next level. And having no formal training in production, I had to make myself become a specialist of generality. I can speak with you about lights and decor, I can speak about security, decor etc. So, you have to embrace everything, you have to open your eyes and keep your eyes open to everything. You have to be excited by problems because finding solutions is the most exciting part.

What is villa eugénie's next endeavor, and how do you see it evolving in the future?

Never ask myself this question. We have a board of people working on this kind of thing. So, we speak about three-year plans, a five-year strategy. But, I'm always asking myself what it all means. I'm not a brand that has to open certain amount of stores. I look at the market; there is an evolution practically every six months and so we navigate visually. You have to be flexible. We had a world economical crisis in 2008, we had another one in 2011, and we will probably have another one soon. So the only strategy is to be constant, to be solid, and to be able to answer our clients' demands whatever the market's situation is. I remember in 2008, at the beginning of the crisis, I got my team together and I told them, "What we have to do is be closer than ever to our clients. They have to feel that they've made the right choice by being with us for the past ten years and that we are making the right choice in sticking with us for the years to come." Today, this is our only strategy. A year ago I didn't know we would open an office in New York City. Things go naturally with time.

Arguably, fashion shows are said to be replacing fashion shows. What would you riposte to those insisting that fashion shows are no longer important? Explain your point of view.

The Internet would change the way we present fashion shows. Yes, we live-stream, and there is all type of social media involved, but it continues with the shows and doesn't replace them. In addition what would you as a journalist do? Are showing a show in real life is something we cannot replace. Add to that the in-between moments between the show and after the show, the human contact with the designer. A designer will never say the same thing if he's sitting in his studio as he would in a showroom. There is a whole emotional aspect that is irreplaceable.

You also spend a lot of time helping children. Why is philanthropy important to you?

Despite my career, I've never lived in the US. I'm not a philanthropist. I've been involved in education, and ecology. Within these, we found the possibility to make a difference. We do a lot of research on our causes. We partnered a school that would give classes to people who want to become magicians! We also made it possible for seven-two kids in India who were born with cleft lips to undergo surgical procedures for free. We don't have a lot of resources, and at first I thought it'd be a drop of water in the sea, but it's not true. Everyone, on every level, has the possibility to make a difference. And it's important to do that, I'm extremely committed to it. Our last effort was building two schools in India. I am very, very proud of that.

What is your mantra about life?

I have two: "Never take no for an answer." Secondly, "If you see the trick, you lose the magic." You're extremely busy and seem to enjoy your work. But what do you relax?

My job doesn't allow me to take full time-outs. If I take four days off without my laptop and my phone, I have to work twice as much before and after. But what I learned to do is balance. I always make sure I have at least one or two days of bad days a week. But working for important newspapers, who print the question down: "Film or shows?" I don't think we can define cinema or with a fashion film as there is no style. You know, when you go to a restaurant and you don't know what to eat, you look at the menu and all of a sudden you see a dish passing by, and it smells amazing, and that's what you want. So, it's the same. When you see a collection two, four, or six men away from you that you like, you get a feeling you can never replicate with films. There is something else that film isn't capable of: socializing. How can you replicate that? It's not social, and today, everyone is trying to figure out a personal way to present as sight to twelve minutes show. I think there will be an evolution, but not a revolution. I've thought the Internet would change the way we present fashion shows. Yes, we live-stream, and there is all type of social media involved, but it continues with the shows and doesn't replace them. In addition what would you as a journalist do? Are showing a show in real life is something we cannot replace. Add to that the in-between moments between the show and after the show, the human contact with the designer. A designer will never say the same thing if he's sitting in his studio as he would in a showroom. There is a whole emotional aspect that is irreplaceable. And it's important to do that, I'm extremely committed to it. Our last effort was building two schools in India. I am very, very proud of that.

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