



From top:
Chanel's spring
2012 show;
Etienne Russo
backstage at
the Lanvin spring
2013 show.

The Ringmaster

In the circus of fashion, Etienne Russo is always on top of the performance. Alexandra Marshall meets the man for whom “no” is not an option.

IT'S 10:30 ON AN OCTOBER MORNING at the Institut National de Judo, in the south of Paris, where the Kenzo spring 2013 show was supposed to have begun 30 minutes ago. Lateness is de rigueur in fashion, but this is starting to push it. Outside, as street-style photographers snap away, editors, buyers, and the odd celebrity (the singer M.I.A., Nicolas Godin from Air) are beginning to crowd the venue's narrow entrance. And in the main hall, things are getting hairy. It turns out the video art that was commissioned to run on massive backdrop screens as the models walk on a trapezoidal runway has not been properly edited. Important chunks are missing, and while there is one good cut, it's low-resolution. Lighting teams are still sorting out their cues, and production staffers keep running back and forth with questions.

One man, wearing a cumbersome multichannel headset that goes oddly well with his Rick Owens dhoti shorts and basketball sneakers, is in the eye of the hurricane. He is Etienne Russo, 55, founder and head of the Brussels-based production company Villa Eugénie, which is responsible for helping to conceive shows like this one as well as many more for labels including Hermès, Lanvin, Moncler, Chanel, and Dries Van Noten. Right now he is not pleased. After one last push to improve the video edit, Russo crosses his fingers and finds seats for

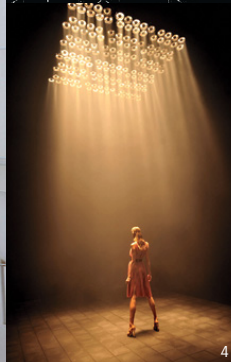
Russo's profession is not a recipe for Zen. What if the horse on the runway had been spooked by a flashbulb and stampeded into the crowd?

his three daughters, who are 14, 6, and 2. Five minutes later, he is sitting cheek to jowl with a phalanx of photographers, calling for each model's exit, cursing, whisper-yelling, and pleading for the lighting to come out right.

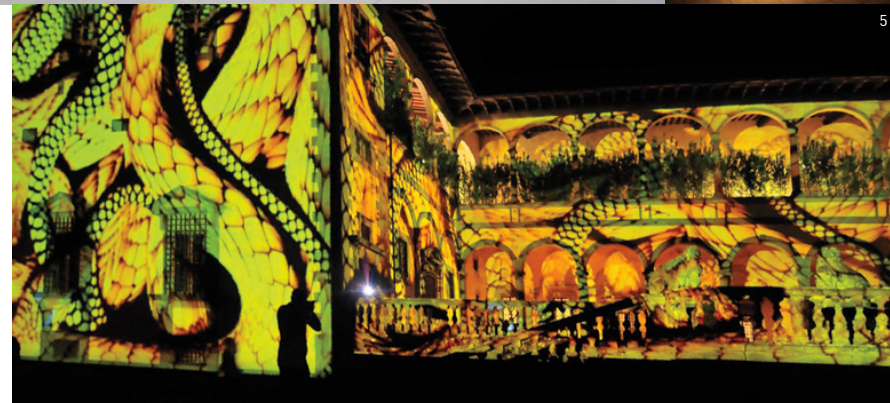
People who don't attend fashion shows on a regular basis might not understand how much work goes into producing every second. At a stadium concert—an event with comparably high-impact visuals and a similar number of moving parts—the audience is with its star for a good two hours. If Mick Jagger decides to jump into the crowd, the crew is prepared for it, having taken the same show to dozens of other venues; if Beyoncé stumbles onstage, she still has five more songs that will make everyone forget what just happened. At a fashion show, there are no do-overs and no room for improvisation. Between New York, London, Milan, and Paris, there are hundreds of different presentations in the space of a month—and the bar for attention-grabbing spectacles is raised every season.

“You want the editor of a big magazine to remember you and to say, ‘I want to shoot this!’” Russo explains, talking at his usual double speed in a throaty French accent. Russo collaborates with designers over a period of months for each show, suggesting venues, performers, and all manner of tricks and effects, but he has only mood boards and fabric swatches from

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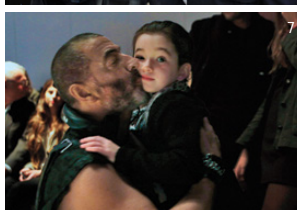


1. Russo backstage at the Chanel spring 2013 show. 2. Moncler Grenoble's fall 2010 show. 3. Maison Martin Margiela for H&M party, October 2012. 4. Lanvin spring 2012 show. 5. Hugo Boss Orange event, 2008. 6. Russo backstage at the Lanvin spring 2013 show with Alber Elbaz. 7. Russo with daughter Isabella backstage at Kenzo's spring 2013 show.



which to spawn ideas. While the designer works until the last minute to complete the collection, Russo usually gets to see it in person just a few days before the show; the entire cast of models is often not in place until about a half-hour before curtain. This has nothing to do with Russo, and it's not a recipe for Zen. What if a member of the Parkour troupe had broken his neck while somersaulting from the bleachers onto the stage (Kenzo, men's spring 2013)? What if the live horse on the runway had been spooked by a flashbulb and stampeded into the crowd (Hermès, women's spring 2011)? It's not surprising that Russo took up yoga 10 years ago and that he and his partner, Virginia Sanz, a former model who also works at Villa Eugénie, live in Brussels, where Russo has, he says, "no clients at all," so that he may maintain some distance from the circus.

Russo claims he was prepared well for this line of work as a teenager, thanks to an apprenticeship in the kitchen of a fancy restaurant in Belgium, where his Sicilian parents had immigrated before he was born. "They'd make me peel 50 or 100 kilos of potatoes all day long," he says. "Only when I knew how to do that could I move on to onions. Every day they'd be kicking our asses! Nowadays they could probably get sued for that. But I say thanks to those people, because after 35 years, I haven't forgotten a single lesson I learned." Next came tending bar at the club Mirano Continental in Brussels and modeling for designers, including Dries Van Noten. "But I didn't really like having my picture taken," Russo explains, so he started helping Van Noten with other aspects of his business—from schlepping the collection in a tiny truck to trade shows around Europe, to cooking for buyers, to eventually producing Van Noten's first ever show, in 1991. "Of course I said yes without even thinking about it. But 20 minutes before it started, I was locked in the toilet, shaking," he remembers. That was when Russo discovered that, deprived of soil, fresh grass turns brown



"Impossible is not Etienne," Russo said as he got a florist to weave thousands of roses into a massive garland in the middle of the night.

even before you can get a model dressed to tread upon it. "But you go buy some green paint, and you airbrush it, and this is how you learn," he says.

Since then, Russo has mastered a lot of other things most of us will never have the occasion to, such as how to suspend 80-ton, 300-foot-long blocks of ice from a set of railroad tracks in 95-degree heat in Berlin, as he did for a Hugo Boss event in 2003. (Answer: drilling and chains.) Or what to do when you can't simply chuck another giant block of ice into the Hudson River to melt after the Y-3 2008 show on Chelsea Piers' Pier 40. (Answer: You truck it back to upstate New York, where it came from, and let someone else worry about it.) Or how to make it look like a dancer is trapped behind a huge wrinkled immobile white curtain at the party for Maison Martin Margiela's collaboration with H&M in October in New York. (Answer: plaster casting.)

"Impossible is not Etienne," Russo said to the air during a rehearsal for Lanvin's spring show when the designer, Alber Elbaz, decided at 11:30 p.m. that the industrial-looking set needed a touch of romance. "We will find a solution." That meant getting a florist in the middle of the night—in Paris, a city where "overtime" is not part of anyone's vocabulary—to weave several thousand red roses into a massive garland that would frame the door to the runway. "We've thrown him a lot of curveballs," recalled Humberto Leon, one of Kenzo's creative directors, before their presentation. "And he's never said no. We said we wanted fresh-baked Magnolia Bakery cupcakes at one of our shows here in Paris, and he was like, 'Okay, let's fly the people out and figure out a kitchen.' This time, it's cookies from Momofuku—and what do you know? Someone is making them as we speak."

Lately, Russo has been gravitating toward the art world, something he has wanted to do for some time. For the Margiela event, he collaborated with the artists Daniel Arsham, Noémie Goudal, and Frédérique Chaveaux, as well as the dancer Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. Villa Eugénie created the Manchester Museum's Living Worlds Gallery, which was shortlisted for 2012's Design Week Awards and the Museums + Heritage Permanent Exhibition Award. "I was so happy to do this, because with what we do, I'm often delivering a Polaroid for a designer," Russo notes. "This project is up for 10 to 15 years. We worked for two years with the museum scientists to develop it."

For the moment, though, the ephemeral remains Russo's bread and butter—bread and butter, and cookies, in fact. For all the preshow angst at Kenzo, in the end the video worked. Russo gathered his team for a fairly involved debriefing, but the press left happy. They were getting Momofuku crumbs all over the backseats of their town cars as they—and Russo—moved on to the next show. ♦