

HEADS

UP

IN HIS FLATIRON STUDIO IN NEW YORK, PRETORIA-BORN ALBERTUS SWANEPOEL CHATS WITH **DANIEL SCHEFFLER** ABOUT LIFE, LUXURY AND HIS NEW SOUTH AFRICAN SOUTH AFRICAN CLOTHING LINE, LAUNCHED LAST MONTH AT SA FASHION WEEK

Albertus has been in New York City for the last 23 years building his millinery business. He has worked on New York Fashion Week again this past season for big brands like Tommy Hilfiger and more interesting smaller designers like Bibhu Mohapatra. With tradeshow in Paris and New York and a small



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collection of hats for the big retailer Club Monaco in the US, it's a busy time for this tall creator of hats.

He recently returned home for the launch of his South African women's wear collection with South Africa Fashion Week (SAFW) in mid-April.

HOW OFTEN ARE YOU GOING TO BE IN SOUTH AFRICA WITH YOUR NEW COLLECTION AND WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS?

My hope is, if my new collection is a success, that I will spend more time there. Hopefully I will be able to travel to SA three or four times a year. We would like to build a 'luxury' sportswear company and then later, diversify into more categories like accessories and a complete lifestyle brand.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO MOVE TO NEW YORK?

It wasn't really a decision. My then wife and I came on holiday and by fluke I got a job offer from a South African, a guy by the name of Maurice Rahmani, who had a sportswear company. His accountant overheard me speaking Afrikaans and introduced us. Working in Paris was actually my big dream at that point in my life, not New York.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES IN NEW YORK OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES

I'll talk about the highlights today, as I have a lot of sob stories too! Literally in my first week here, I went with my very dear friend Pnina Fenster (now editor of *Glamour Magazine* in SA) to the American Ballet Theater to see *Gaiety Parisienne*, a ballet with costumes created by my all time favorite designer, Christian Lacroix. Then, in those first few months, I went to the Met opera to hear Pavarotti in *Rigoletto*. When we came outside, it was snowing, and it was the first time

I'd ever seen snow - and I still love the snow to this day! Another highlight was when I found my first studio space here in 2006. Not working out of my apartment anymore was a real plus. And then of course, I was a runner up in the *Vogue/CFDA Fashion Fund Competition*. Having one of my creations featured in *Vogue* and becoming part of the *Vogue* 'family' and then consequently being invited to several amazing parties here is still a thrill to me.



HOW DO YOU THINK LUXURY DIFFERS IN SOUTH AFRICA COMPARED TO THE UNITED STATES?

I'm getting older, that's for sure. When I was young, and living in South Africa, I considered having something from 'overseas' the essence of luxury. Now I think having dinner with friends is a luxury. I think the lifestyle in SA can lend itself to more luxurious experiences. I don't really equate spending money as luxury; that's a very American notion.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS LUXURY TODAY?

I think luxury means different things to different people. To me, it's something more personal, genuine and handmade. Or as some say, it's time. Like the word 'couture', luxury is a very overused word. I think some companies have truly established themselves, through craftsmanship and branding, as luxury companies – think Hermès. But some items, a Louis Vuitton handbag aren't luxury items to me – they are status symbols.

HOW HAS YOUR PERCEPTION OF LUXURY CHANGED?

It's tricky - for less privileged people, luxury might mean a warm bed or a family vacation. From another vantage point, going to a private game lodge in a chartered plane might be luxurious but is that really luxury? I do feel that in the time we live in now, it means something personal - something with an emotional connection.

WHAT MAKES A DESIGNER'S WORK TRULY LUXURIOUS?

I think real couture, handmade and bespoke in Paris, is the essence of luxury. It involves very complicated draping, hundreds of hours of handwork by very skilled hands, several fittings and a dedication to keep the craft alive.



WHO DO YOU THINK IS VISIONARY IN THE FASHION WORLD?

Rei Kawakubo. Amen.

ANY DESIGNERS YOU FEEL ARE UP-AND-COMING AND AMAZING?

J.W. Anderson. Christopher Kane. Mary Katrantzou. Tome in New York.

YOU MENTION LOUIS VUITTON EARLIER... HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BRANDS LIKE LVMH AS A CONTEMPORARY BEACON FOR LUXURY?

I think these brands aggressively pursue consumers to believe they are producing luxury products. Personally I don't think a \$6 000 handbag, of which thousands are produced, is a luxury item. It's just conspicuous consumption. Bottega Veneta's bags are more in line with luxury to me – they don't come off a production line. 🍷

For more info on Albertus, visit www.albertuswanepoel.com

