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YOU CAN LEAVE YOUR HAT ON

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Albertus Swanepoel
PHOTO: Craig McDean

An Anna Wintour darling, having worked with brands like Oscar De La Renta, Donna Karan and Target, the milliner of New York has inspired true craft and old-world charm in a time of rag trade and commercial gall. Sometimes he is quoted as saying “A hat is a dot on an i” and this attention to detail is evident in his speech and even more so in his work.

Albertus Swanepoel is as down to earth and authentic as it comes with strong opinions and a handsome smile. Daniel Scheffler spends some leisure time with the fascinating milliner in his Flatiron studio in the pivot of New York City.

What gives you a creative revelation?

I must be honest - I'm slightly jaded, and very hard on myself. Not a great combination. I hardly look at fashion for inspiration, unless it's Rei Kawabuko and a few other visionaries. I find creative inspiration in other things. In terms of a revelation, sometimes it comes after weeks of thinking about a certain solution, or unexpectedly seeing something in the design field or daily life that sparks an idea.

Who wears hats today?

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Cool people! It is a niche market, especially at my price point but in NY a lot of people, old and young, wear hats as part of their daily wardrobe. It is not too much here a statement piece or show off piece, more an extension of a personality, or for functional reasons of course. Men are wearing hats a lot more than women actually, I find. In other cities, like London (and maybe Pretoria!) hats are worn more on occasion, as if to show off.

What did you think of the hats at the Schiaparelli Prada exhibition at the Met?

Elsa Schiaparelli was a great designer. She collaborated with artists like Cocteau and Dali in her day, which had a great intellectual and creative impact on her work. She understood whimsy and provocation - both essential elements for a good hat. I'm a huge fan and the only vintage hat I own is by her.

Your creations are pure beauty. Do you see yourself as an artist or a designer?

Thank you! I'm definitely of the 'fashion is not art' school. Fashion is disposable; mostly trend driven or seasonable but timeless art is not. I think it's artistic, and certainly a craft. I've had a few hats in museum exhibitions now, but I don't create art. Having studied Graphic design (under Ernst de Jongh), I think about design principles when I make my hats - proportion, texture, positive and negative space- and take it seriously (much more than merely decorating a shape), but it remains a commercial object at the end of the day. I think I have an artistic temperament though.

Your signature paired down elegance is so unique. Where does that aesthetic come from?

It is interesting to me, as I am a more is more person. I love Baroque, Hollywood Regency, opera, Africa and most things over the top, yet my designs are mostly paired down. I strongly feel that hats, being worn so close to the face, should not overpower the person, and I guess therefore I bring things a notch down. I still try to evoke richness in my designs, maybe by the combination of colours, textures or elements I use. I really dislike over designed hats with the kitchen sink on them.

I also think living in NY for so long has something to do with it - it is a very no fuss kind of living, and most people, unless you are a devoted fashionista, just want to put something great on and get on with it, not obsessing for hours about a complicated design.

I know that you love theatre and opera. Tell me about some of the most inspiring productions you have seen?

What comes to mind immediately is seeing very long ago- The Seven Streams by the River Ota- directed by Robert Lepage (who did the new Ring Cycle for the Met), Lohengrin and especially The Black Rider, directed by Robert Wilson. Anna Netrebko singing Anna Bolena this year at the Met, Madam Butterfly at the Met directed by Anthony Mingella, the production of Chicago (with Bebe Neuwirth and Anne Reinking), various Pina Bausch pieces, Natalia Osipova dancing Don Quixote at ABT- and the list goes on.

How did you decide to come to New York?

Me and my then concubine, Shaneen Huxham, came here in October 1989, actually to be with my dearest friend, Prina Fenster, who came to do a creative writing course at Columbia University. It was my second time 'overseas', and I was immediately smitten (and startled) with this city.

After growing up in Pretoria, this was quite a shock to my system. I, by fluke, got a job offer after three days, and never went back.

What are the current design trends for hats?

There is a movement towards wider brims now. It started with the floppy hat (think J.Lo), but that, thank heavens, is over now. So now fedoras and other shapes are tending towards wider brims. I think the Schiaparelli/Prada exhibit might have an influence as well, as I get many press requests for surreal hats. I also like the idea of wearing a felt hat in summer, I like the contrast.

Caps and military inspired helmets have also been very popular, mainly sparked by a Givenchy collection last year, and Miu Miu following suit.

What do you do think of the fashion industry back home?

This is a slippery slope for me to answer. I go there yearly and I am constantly inspired by design in South Africa - industrial, advertising and graphic, but fashion leaves me mostly cold. Being a stickler for technique, I find that the infrastructure there is busy collapsing - no more schools that train pattern making and fit properly. Trust me, I also thought I was a big fish and knew a lot when I left there, but after walking through Bameys once you soon realise you have so much to learn about technique. I think getting decent fabrics is an issue there, which cannot help. I really feel upcoming designers in SA should travel overseas and intern with a big house, before becoming a 'couturier' there! And let me say - there is no couture in South Africa. With the exception of a few designers there, I just mostly don't see people wearing the clothes on the street - it tends to be costumey and geographically restricted.

Tell me about your Target collaboration.

Anna Wintour 'suggested' to Target that they should do a collaboration with me. Ed Filipowski (who owns the mighty PR company KCD) then arranged a meeting with them. They were a dream

to work with. I handmade all the samples in my studio, they were sent to China and after several rounds of approval meetings 130 000 hats were made. I was very impressed with their quality at that price-point. It also got my name out to a very different segment of the market and I received priceless publicity.

In terms of design, what do you love?

It is a wide field, I will throw out some whom I admire. In terms of clothing/fashion: Cecil Beaton, Oliver Messel, Tony Duquette, Christian Lacroix Couture, Alexander McQueen, Hussein Chalayan, Rei Kawabuko, Junya Watanabe, and most period clothing.

In terms of interior/home design: Hollywood Regency style, Zaha Hadid, Art Deco, mid-century modern, Santiago Calatrava, Kisho Kurokawa, Christian Liaigre, Bugatti and Dorothy Draper.

Your love is the African bush. How does that influence your work?

My family came to SA in 1678, so my roots are pretty deep. I grew up going to the NKP every winter vacation. I love nothing more in the world (except shopping at Bameys) than driving through the park, windows open, listening to opera music and feeling humble, yet connected. The silence but also the sounds and unforgiving brutality of nature, the animal prints of course, the starry nights and fantasies of being a game ranger inspire me!

When you come back to South Africa occasionally what do you enjoy about being back on African soil?

Mostly my incredible friends there. After 22 years, I still have more friends in SA than here. I think people cherish friendship there more than here. It is a very different lifestyle of course – here you just can't pop in to someone's apartment and stay for dinner. There is always guardedness here, and so I love being totally myself there. As I said, spending time in the bush or veld, and I do love the sea. People in SA are very privileged to live with all that beauty so accessible.

What's the best quote you've ever heard or read?

Happiness is a shortcut to mediocrity.

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