

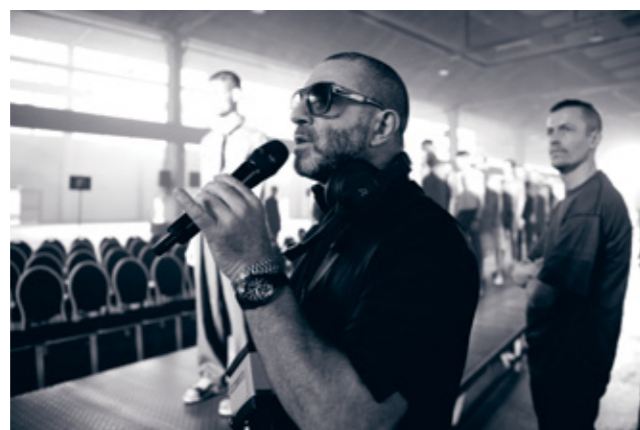
ETIENNE RUSSO

THE

MIXOLOGIST

For 22 years he's been the mastermind behind some of fashion's most remarkable shows and events. DANSK talked to Etienne Russo about cooking for Dries Van Noten, the Olympic Ceremony, and a landmark meeting with Chanel.

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It might only last 10 minutes, but the planning and production of a fashion show demands talent and creative skills. Behind the scenes, Etienne Russo works his magic making scenography and producing shows for industry staples like Chanel, Thom Browne, Hermès, Miu Miu, Kenzo and Lanvin. At his company Villa Eugénie, he creates his hard-hitting cocktail of people, ideas, fantasies, and skill, making sure that fashion shows reach new heights each season. A mixologist he calls himself. And his mixing skills can be traced to the very beginning of his career — in the early eighties when Etienne Russo worked as a bartender in Brussels.

“I was working as a bartender at the Mirano, a big club in Brussels, and was

also producing their parties. It was another time; people really dressed up and it was an amazing mix of types, personalities and styles. Going out back then was different. Now it's just teenagers,” he laughs, as I interrupt his holidays with a Skype call.

But everything didn't just happen because of the lavish parties of a time long gone. Russo worked in the fashion industry as well.

“At the same time, I worked as a model. I travelled a lot, but I wasn't really keen on modelling. I don't like having my picture taken, it feels like they take a part of my soul every time. That's kind of a problem, when you're a model...”

Thus, it was the runways and the production — the light, the make-up, the hair, the music — that really interested Etienne Russo. He sucked in as much as he could, and used it at his club, where he also began to throw fashion events. And at the same time, fashion in Antwerp became something you couldn't ignore. The Antwerp Six, consisting of designers like Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck and Ann Demeulemeester, who all graduated in 1980-1981, emerged.

“They were so strong and I did some modelling for them. I started helping Dries with the trade fairs in Milan, Paris and Florence, so we travelled around together — and I enjoyed it a lot more than modelling,” he says, trying to retrace the steps of a budding career.

“I worked closer with Dries, driving the car around, setting up the showrooms, cooking for the whole team. We were dreaming about one day doing a show in Paris. We had tons of ideas, but no fuel.”

We jump a bit forward, to “late 1990 or early 1991,” as Russo says, when the first gig was landed.

“Dries asked me if I wanted to do his first show in Paris, it was such a blast,” he grins, noting that he was a bunch of nerves on the day of the show.

“Right before the show, I locked myself in the toilet, I was so scared. It's 22 years ago now and a lot has happened since.”

A lot would be an understatement. Olivier Theyskens and A.F. Vandevorst's first shows followed, Hermès called and asked him to do street castings, and soon he also did light, choreography, the whole production. And in '99, Hugo Boss came along, as did a landmark meeting with Chanel.

“I was working with Michel Gaubert, who does the music for Chanel. He invited me to one of the couture shows, and I had a dream of doing one myself. He introduced me to Virginie Viard, Chanel's studio director.”

A couple of months later, they called him in for a meeting. Arriving at Chanel with all his video cassettes, this meeting seems a key moment to Russo as he looks back.

“Chanel knew I existed! I was so happy, it was such a blast. I never thought for a second that I would end up doing the show, though,” he says, flashing a charming smile as his memories wander. He ended up producing the following couture show.

“The growth has been very organic. Nothing has been forced, it's been a pretty long process. I'm quite spiritual and believe that everything happens for a reason,” he says in a serious tone, before cracking up and knocking himself on the top of his head.

“Luckily, I've never had to knock on anybody's door. Business was a consequence of my passion, not the other way around.”

And so Villa Eugénie was founded. Named after the villa he once rented an office in, it's not a name that's very revealing of the company's activities.

“The day I had to go to the notary, in early '95, I just took the name of the villa with me. I like that it's a bit poetic and that you can't pinpoint it. Just like you can't always pinpoint what we do.”

He broadly assigns his clients into three different approaches; the ones that know exactly what they want, “like Karl and Chanel,” brands like Dries and Lanvin, where “it's a ping pong match and a process of constant progress,” and the ones that want Russo and his team of 15 employees and a bunch of freelancers to make a full concept and production.

“There are as many processes as there are customers,” he claims, when I ask him how they work at Villa Eugénie, but one thing is for sure: here's a man that is very sensitive to his surroundings.

“I work a lot with what's already in the venue. Most of the time it starts there. I want to hear what the space communicates to me.”

But Etienne Russo isn't only into fashion — contemporary art has been a passion for years now, with him working with the boundaries of art and fashion, especially at the launch of the Maison Martin Margiela and H&M-collaboration in New York — a favourite event of Russo's.

Speaking of favourites, I ask him if there's one moment in his career that stands out in particular. He thinks for a while, saying that there may be too many good memories to pick a few, but after a while, he lightens up and remembers.

“When I look back at old events, I always find small things I could have done better. But with this one, everything was perfect. It all came together so beautifully,” he notes, before he paints a picture of a legendary show he did for Dries Van Noten.

“It was in a rough neighbourhood in Paris, in a long warehouse. We served 500 guests dinner at one long table, and with 250 waiters, everyone was served at exactly the same time. Everything was choreographed,” he says of the event, which later transformed the table into a runway with a perfect ending.

“The last model stood at the end of the runway at the very last note of the music. We also displayed Dries' golden book, with light reflecting in the pages. So everybody was bathed in a golden light. It was truly beautiful.”

Making big events like that means a lot of attention to detail and coordination. Because the venue was big, the models were driven back to the dressing room in small golf carts when they exited the runway.

Still, he wants to outdo himself with something really, really big. He's dreaming of doing a huge event — the opening ceremony of the Olympics, for example.

“I would love to do a hotel concept. I've travelled for 320 days in 2012, so I would love to create what for me would be a perfect hotel. They always seem to lack something. Another big challenge would be a ceremony opening,” he says, revealing Jean-Paul Goude's 1989 celebratory show of the 200th anniversary of the French revolution as a major inspiration.

Lately, he's been working with a natural history museum in Manchester, which has given him new dimensions and perspectives. Working closely together with scientists, he met a new world.

“They showed me a fossil with big long teeth. Apparently it was from a dolphin, and it was 450 million years old. Can you imagine that? Still today I can't visualize it. I don't know what 450 million years means, and it gave me new questions and perspectives. I would love more work like that.”

While stating that he might as well have worked in theatre or movies, he does admit to be a lover of clothes.

“I'm interested in fashion, I'm excited by it, yeah. But am I a fashionista? I don't think so,” he says, flashing yet another smile before ending our long conversation.

“People say fashion is superficial. It can be, yes, but often, designers are ahead of their times with the messages they deliver, like social and cultural analysers. And fashion gives dreams to the people. And in the world we live in today, we need that. We need those dreams.”