



# ETIENNE RUSSO

With Etienne Russo, designers have the assurance that their fashion shows will be carefully executed and as fantastic as they desire. Russo founded the renowned villa Eugénie in 1996, successfully establishing it as the highest pillar of fashion show production. Working with the fashion industry's most esteemed strata, with clients such as Dior Homme, Thom Browne, and Lanvin, to name a few, Etienne Russo perennially demonstrates exemplary skill and perfectionism, organizing events around the world including ones for charitable causes.

*"He executes the vision of designers"*

Interviewed by Pierre A.M  
Portrait by James Law

**You have been producing fashion shows for top-brands for 20 years. What roused your passion and how did you break in to 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 Palace 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 meeting 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 showrooms. At lunchtime, we used to dream about what we could do for his shows. And at the end of the year in 1990, he informed me that he would present his first runway show in Paris, and asked me to be in charge of it. So, this is how it all started for me in Paris. I was still working in Belgium, 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 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.

**"I'm not a businessman, I am passionate"**

**The shows you have executed and continue to do so for Dries van Noten are some of the most iconic. What was it like having Dries as your first client in the early 1990's?**

Again, everything went organically and unplanned. As I said, I first met him in 1986 as a model, and sat for fashion pictorials for him, and then did runway for his collections when he started doing them, travelling to Florence and Milan with him while also modeling for British designers at the time. And, let's just 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 circumspect ideas. For his first show he wanted an Italian theatre with revolving backdrops. You 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 Albany Hotel in Paris, and the

**"I'm too young to stop! I think I'd be bored if I stopped"**

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 efficient team effort; a well-divided mix of friendship with an extremely professional relationship. Business is business, friendship is friendship.

And it worked perfectly well. I have a profound respect for him because he taught me so much. We grew up together and we helped each other grow. I would sometimes bring in knowledge learned from somewhere else, so it was always a real give-and-take. To this day we still question ourselves. We never say, "Oh, it's the ninety-fifth show..." There is a real call into questioning. The process is always the same: we go from an aspect of the collection and act as if the next show is the first one. So, we always inject the same intensity. There is no room for being too comfortable up to the day of the show, he might think that it's time for a change.

Every fashion show is a challenge, and though we've been working together for more than twenty-five years now, I do not see it as routine. The day, I see it as routine, I will ask myself serious questions about whether it's time to change my job again.

**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 just a natural progression. I never pushed to go faster than my own pace, never rushed to get ahead. I never wanted to be the biggest. Things happened because of good timing, and when timing wasn't on my side, I'd say no. If I don't feel like I can do something, if I cannot give the best service possible, I'd rather say no than do the job haphazardly.

Today, I have to say no to a lot of people because I've always been concerned with quality, not quantity. I don't have the will or the need to be the biggest player; I have never been interested in that. I'm not a businessman, I am passionate, and

yet business is a consequence of my passion. This is how I see things.

**Karl Lagerfeld is known to be incredibly demanding. What helps you to efficiently manage and meet his high standards and requirements?**

Yes, Karl is demanding. But, there is no moment when his requests are... how should I explain this? You know, when you work with Karl, he gives you this feeling of trust. So the pressure comes from that, not from his expectations. And when someone gives you their trust, you want to exceed yourself, especially for someone like him. I mean, he is a constant inspiration. He is a timeless phenomenon.

**After 20 years working in the same industry, what keeps you motivated and creative?**

I'm too young to stop! I think I'd be bored if I stopped. Well, I'd do something else. I'd probably be cultivating tomatoes, I don't know... I'd put my energy somewhere else for a year then ask myself "So, now, what?" This job is extraordinary because it's a constant resumption. You might have a twenty-five year experience but every time we do it, we do it from scratch. Even if it's the same designers, the data you work with are not the same. You can be with the same designer, in the same place, three seasons in a row, but the data isn't ever the same so we don't ask ourselves the same questions. And, actually, there are places where I've done perhaps twenty shows but I still go back every time I have to do something there. It's important for me to see each place with new eyes, keeping in mind what I will be doing. So, for me, as long as I learn, and I am constantly learning, I will still be doing my job.

As long as I have fun, I will still be doing it. As long as I have challenges, and these come every day, I will not stop doing it.

For now, everything comes together for me to continue. For how long? We'll 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 clients 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 am sure you have encountered countless challenges we could not imagine. What have been the most challenging moments in your career and why?**

There are a few. But, you know, once they're done, 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. So for me the biggest challenges are the upcoming shows I have to take care of as from tomorrow. This is my challenge. I cannot go back and ask myself what has been the most challenging because there are twelve shows I have to produce in the next few days. That is my biggest challenge right now.



**What skills are necessary to run villa eugenie or any similar large fashion production house?**

“Enormous! Enormous!” Keeping all proportions, I still like to consider myself an artisan. This is how we see things: we’re not a big production company, yet if we grow, it’s only to get closer to our clients. We are not opening new offices in Paris and New York City to gain new clients, but to focus and be closer to our current clients and their needs so we can answer them quicker. My clients enable me to grow. So, to run something like villa eugenie, you have to be well surrounded. And, without false modesty, I think I have a fantastic team, which was created over time. They are individuals who are loyal and dedicated in the most extraordinary manner. I never had formal training. I didn’t study business or production, so all I have is my instinct, and I trust it. 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 instinct. 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 soon as you do what you really love, there is no insurmountable hill. But you have to be tenacious. You can never take no for an answer. When people say no, this is when I wake up and say, “Let’s sit and talk. 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 take on things. And, you have to be persevering. Today, people want to get to the top very quickly. I understand that everything done 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 I started off, I started to peel potatoes, about a hundred kilos a day! When I was peeling them perfectly, I would then go on to learn how to chop parsley, then onions etc. When I was ready to go onto the next step,

I would. So, you need to assimilate things perfectly 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 sound, because I understand technical elements, I can speak about security, décors etc. So, you have to embrace everything, you have to open your eyes and keep your arms open to everything. You have to be excited by problems because finding solutions is the most exciting part.

**What is villa eugenie’s next endeavour, and how do you see it evolving in the future?**

I 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 a 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 consistent, 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 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 films are said to be replacing fashion shows. What would you riposte to those insisting that fashion shows are no longer relevant?**

I often ask myself this question and, I sometimes wonder if the answer I have is coming from the producer in me, or from my personal feelings.

*Dior Homme*



Dior Homme S/S 2016 Fashion show venue by Kamil Kustoz for villa eugénie

## “In the middle of the 80s, I was both a model and Creative Director of a nightclub”

It probably comes from both. I think shows are relevant. How would you present a collection otherwise? With the economic crisis, some people decided to present films. Great films made by ultra-talented people. So, at the time, there were a few articles from people that we won’t name, but working for important newspapers, who posed the question down: “films or shows?” I don’t think we can drive similar emotions with a fashion film as there is no sizzle. You know, when you go to a restaurant and you don’t know what to order, 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 meters away from you that you like, you get a feeling you can never replicate with films. There is something else that film can’t recreate: socializing. How can you replace this? It will evolve, and today, everyone is trying to figure out a personal way to present an eight to twelve minute show. I think there will be

an evolution, but not a revolution. We all thought the Internet would change the way we present fashion shows. Yes, we live-stream, and there is all types of social media involved, but it correlates with the shows and doesn’t replace them. In addition what would you as journalists, do? Attending a show in real life is something we cannot replace. Add to that the backstage moments before and after the show, the human contact with the designers. 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, life would feel meaningless without my philanthropic work. It’s very, very important. At some point, I realized that even though we don’t advertise, we create special bespoke gifts for our clients or favors. I questioned myself that we were spending so much money for people who have everything, so why not spend this money, on their behalf, for a good cause? For me it was a simple decision and is related to what I care about most: women’s rights, children’s education, and ecology. Within these, we found charities where our contribution was relevant and created a real difference. We opened seven wells. Two in Ethiopia and five in Bangladesh. I was happy to know that people didn’t have to walk four hours to bring back water that was barely drinkable. We planted a thousand teak trees, and

endured that they are kept alive for twenty-five years, instead of the usual ten years before being cut down. Children’s education is incredibly important. We do a lot of research on our causes. We launched a mobile school for children in Latin-America, a school that goes directly to people who cannot travel to school. In South Africa, we supported a school that would give classes to people who want to become magicians! We also made it possible for seventy-two kids in India who were born with cleft lips to undergo surgical procedures free-of-charge. 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 to 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 the most of my trips. And when I’m on holidays, I have to accept that I must sometimes work during them. I try to have moments when the machine slows down. But, everything is linked you know.



Thom Browne S/S 2016 Fashion show venue by Mathieu Ridelle for villa eugénie