

Montreal Gazette

As good as GAULTIER; everybody's talking, even the mannequins, at museum's brilliant fashion exhibition

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Illustrations: ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE / Jean Paul Gaultier poses with a likeness of himself at the opening of The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk.; / An invitation to the exhibition. The samedesign appears on the cover of the show's catalogue.; DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE / Former model Francisco Ranz with a talking mannequin upon which his face is projected.; ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE / ALLEN McINNIS THE G Jean Paul Gaultier named the Chic Rabbis collection (1993-94) as one of his favourites.;

Prepare for wonder and laughter.

At the top of the grand staircase at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, bathed in a vivid blue light with Jean Paul Gaultier's name in white neon letters, stand two groups of mannequins: one in his signature sailor stripes, the other madonnas with halos of stained glass, crochet or golden spikes.

The mannequins wink, blink, move their jaws and speak. The effect is a little creepy, very funny and quite brilliant.

"What will happen, what will happen? What to do, what to do," one dummy murmurs. Another, in a parrot-feather bolero, sings an aria. Hauntingly.

They are alive, just like the creator of the costumes - the irreverent, funny, jovial, muchloved original enfant terrible of fashion. "I am the old terrible," Gaultier joked at one of the many celebrations and previews this week for The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk, opening to the public Friday.

In a mark of just how much Gaultier is

adored and admired, more than 2,000 guests mobbed the museum Tuesday night, queuing halfway up du Musée Ave. for their sneak peek of the show - initiated by museum director Nathalie Bondil, curated by former model Thierry-Maxime Loriot, and with mannequins' faces animated by Denis Marleau with Stéphanie Jasmine of Montreal's UBU theatre company.

The faces of real people - Melissa Auf der Maur, Francisco Ranz, Ève Salvail and others - were filmed and projected with technical wizardry onto the mannequins, made by Quebec company Jolicoeur International.

What makes this exhibition special is the living, breathing aspect of the designer (and those mannequins).

Montreal's Yves Saint Laurent retrospective in 2008 opened days before his death; in New York, Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty comes just over a year after the designer's suicide.

At first, the idea of exhibition was like a funeral to him, Gaultier said at a media conference. But he said he accepted because of the special team from Montreal.

"Za purpose was not to show all zee clothes one after one," he said in his accented English. ("You will see zee accent is not fake; it is real one," he joked.)

"The idea is more to show what I want to say through clothes. It is to make clothes that you will love and wear.

"The production is fantastic. It's like a dream. Like Nathalie (Bondil) says, it is very, very alive.

"The movement and the life is the most important thing."

In talks and interviews, Gaultier recounted his familiar tales of inspiration: the film *Falbalas*; his chic grandmother; the prototype for his corsets, made for his teddy bear Nana when he about 10 years old; the Arab bar in his suburban Paris neighbourhood where he first encountered a different kind of beauty; being a different kind of boy and having his sketch of a Folies Bergère dancer in feathers and fishnets pinned on his back by a mean teacher to punish him. (The ploy backfired and he became a hero to his schoolmates.)

What emerged from this background is a designer who has defied convention and provoked society, taking the process of liberation in dress quite a few steps beyond Saint Laurent. He put men in skirts and bustiers, women in corsets and suits, blended genders and ethnic dress and, perhaps most significantly, championed nonstereotypical beauty.

"Jean Paul Gaultier is a contemporary artist, and what he says goes beyond fashion," Bondil said.

That message is about humanistic values, she added. "You can see a new kind of society."

The exhibition of ensembles, plus sketches, photographs and films dating to 1976, is organized in six themes: the Odyssey of JPG, the Boudoir, Skin Deep, Punk Cancan, Urban Jungle and Metropolis.

About 130 ensembles are presented, with those from haute couture accompanied by the detail of how many

hours it took to create. A man's lace and sequin bodysuit, from the 1997 haute couture show, took an astonishing 353 hours to make. A lovely peachy salmon tutu creation, worn by Carla Bruni in 2002, was a labour of 210 hours.

Beyond the blue-lit grand entry, one enters the Boudoir, with a quilted flesh-coloured satin display box containing the iconic corsets worn by Madonna.

Sketches for the costumes, Mondino's 1990 portrait of the singer and a 1983 photo of Cindy Sherman in a corset pantsuit augment the exhibit.

Nana has his (or her?) own Plexiglas case, and it is a must-see, as is the cone-bra lilac velvet dress from the 1984-85 Barbès collection.

The meaning of the corset is totally socially constructed, said Valerie Steele, a fashion historian who has studied corsets extensively and directs the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

"It has changed tremendously over time," Steele said.

"The popular modern interpretation of the corset was that it was dangerous and oppressive."

When the punks appropriated corsetry as a sign of kinky sexuality, designers followed and meanings began to proliferate even more, Steele said.

"When Madonna wore corsets for Blond Ambition (her 1990 concert tour), it was very much in the process of overtly saying, 'No, this is about female sexual empowerment,'" Steele said.

But it doesn't always mean that, she added, noting that corseted wedding dresses are historical references.

See for yourself. Also check out:

- A white tutu paired with Converse sneakers, black leather biker jacket and studded bustier from Gaultier's first collection, for spring/summer 1977. It is as contemporary today as it was then.

- The hairstyles of Odile Gilbert, including a mini top hat of hair from 2006-07 that is a little creepy, and an elaborate Ukrainian-inspired do from the haute-couture collection of 2005-06.

- The Punk Cancan dress with a lining printed with fishnet kicking legs, shown on a carousel of Parisian themes. The dress, from the current haute-couture collection, is always photographed with the model in high kicks. The outer side is fluffy white tulle.

- The Moins que zéro jetbeaded burlesque costume from the Parisiennes 2010-11 haute couture collection. It was worn by Dita Von Teese on the runway.

- Miles Aldridge's Immaculate No. 3 photograph of a madonna with a crown of chili peppers.

- A TV screen with footage of Gaultier, in fishnets, briefs and jacket, from his stint hosting Eurotrash, a satirical TV show that ran in London from 1993 to 1998.

Considered by many as the heir to Saint Laurent, Gaultier conceded hesitatingly that he may hold that place in fashion history. "He influenced me and I have enormous admiration," he said.

Gaultier was pressed to name some of his favourite collections. "It's not for me to say. I don't know.

"Maybe something that is right for the time," he said, finally naming corsets from the Dada collection.

Other favourite collections: James Bond, High Tech, Chic Rabbis, Tattoo, perhaps his first couture show - "but it was for men" - and his first menswear show, the Male Object.

Then he was cut off with a question about Lady Gaga. "She is very good and very innovative. She does clothes that Madonna did already; maybe she does it in the way of today."

The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier runs from Friday to Oct. 2 at the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1379 Sherbrooke St. W. Cost: \$15 for adults 26 to 64, with reduced rates Wednesday evenings and for students and seniors.

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