

Fashion Designers - Fashion Designer JJ Schoeman

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Article by Jacqueline M. Svagrik
Photography by BOSSIO by ModelsMania photographer PHOTOGRAPHY Christopher M. Bossio L.L.C.

September 6th 2006 was definitely a memorable premiere night to New York's Couture Fashion Week. The 6th floor of the West End Loft on 37th St. was the place in witnessing the latest in fashionable elegance and sophistication. Produced by Andres Aquino, the show was to represent some of the best designers around the globe. Although I was not able to work as a model in one of the three days, I was still able to speak with a few of the designers and how they felt coming into the Big Apple to show case their work. One designer that stood in the forefront of my mind was JJ Schoeman from South Africa. When I first met him, it was at the fitting the night before the show. Pressed for time, all the designers scheduled to have a show on opening night were pooling models that were available to fit their garments. There was a bit of excitement and urgency in that both models and designers wanted the first night to be a success. Yet, with all the tension and excitement for a successful opening night, JJ exuded nothing more than poise and tranquility. Without breaking a sweat JJ casually came up to me and one other model, Dominka Van Saten, to try the opening pieces in the show. One piece after another, he and his assistant, Leon Mare, found the other girls to represent the new collection to the New York public. I was more than pleased in being one of the models selected. In fact, it was an honor.



Seeing this first hand, the collection brought back memories of old Hollywood. When the show began the lights dimmed and slowly illuminated with soft music playing "Strangers In The Night" and "It's Wonderful". This soft touch was added in with the opening dress with layers of divine French lace over silk organza. The second was a triple layered dress in pure devore silk with a pinked edging. Those that were in the first half of the collection were in these knee length dresses that is reminiscent of the days of Audrey Hepburn at "Breakfast at Tiffany's". Later in the collection you saw a little bit more skin but it never fell short from sophistication. The necklines were a little more plunging but there was a balance with the longer skirts. There was one gown that screamed 'show stopper' with black and gold as well as devore applique beading. It was towards the end I noticed the beading became more involved in each piece. The ending number was one of my personal favorites. It was a two piece ensemble containing a black and pearl white devore waist coast buttoned over a Venice Lido Ball gown. This particular number was accented with a ribboned lining at the hem and a four-buttoned hand bag.



Each piece, for the most part, was accented by hand sewn beads and ribbon. With such detail, it is hard to imagine one man did this by himself. JJ had mentioned the handy work was provided by people within his own community. The success of one man is produced by the help of others. Due to the unemployment concerns in South Africa, and the continent of Africa as a whole, Schoeman had informed, "The dresses that were beaded were worked on by disadvantaged individuals. What we would do is essentially teach each one a skill, a trade to perfect. In so doing, they are given a job and they can feed themselves as well as their families back home." Based on an online report I had read prior to our conversation from marginalrevolution.com, South Africa is reported to have 40% in unemployment and rising. However, its not to say that the income from the jobs available is inadequate. Schoeman had mentioned that the jobs he provided helped those with large families. After speaking about those he had helped back home, I couldn't help but to feel a bit inspired myself. What is so appealing about JJ Schoeman, besides the wonderful collection, is his passion in being a designer and what lengths he went in getting to where he is now.

Twenty years as a designer, he learned with the drapiers of Carolina Herrera and worked on countless jobs until he had something to call his own. "I've been to many places in the East but usually not for work. Coming into New York," he says, "is a dream come true. Its like that giant leap Armstrong made on the moon." He recalled how there were projects he got fired from when he started out as a designer and how all those little moments humbled him. Naturally, with the vast amount of experience he does have, JJ has lived and learned all the while carrying himself with a smile. His experiences in fashion and in life, without a doubt, shine in this new collection that premiered in New York City. His clothing, beautiful and rich, had also been influenced by the very person who gave him life. JJ Schoeman recalls the advice his mother gave when times as a starting designer were difficult. He said, "She always wanted me to invest in myself. And that if I want to then I can do it." Meaning, if fashion is where the heart is, one takes the time to make it work. Working long hours from 7 a.m. until 9p.m. on most days is only part of the stress. That's not counting the time of designing these pieces and getting the ideas to paper. Asides from taking the advice in investing time to make things work, JJ put a physical reminder within each piece of exactly what his mother was like. In each piece, Schoeman had described, "My mom is in the clothes. In every single one. Seeing them reminds me of when she used to go to the theatre and see a show. The music playing altogether reminds me of what my father used to listen to while growing up." In saying these words you can see in his eyes the amount of love he has not only for fashion and creativity, but also in where he comes from.

Of course, had he not pursued as vehement as he did or keep his mother's words of wisdom close to heart, I wouldn't have had the joy in

meeting JJ Schoeman. Also, the 37th St. West End Loft would not have been the same without him. With a touch of South Africa, a dash of silver screen beauty wrapped in European elegance, Schoeman has made his stay in New York a marvelous one. It is hoped that one day JJ can come back and this time open up a boutique for the Western World to see what they had been missing. If you would like to see JJ Schoeman's boutique in Johannesburg, check out his website at www.jjschoeman.com