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Rainbow's end

Katerina Bocci brings the whole Detroit gang to NYC's Fashion Week



Katerina Bocci surrounded by her models.



A Bocci design graces a Detroit model



Stylists work their magic.

Photos: Karen Shernit

By [Margaret Hundley Parker](#)

It's a good day for an ark. As Tropical Storm Hanna turns umbrellas inside out and wreaks havoc on carefully coiffed hair in midtown Manhattan, Detroit clothing designer Katerina Bocci and her crew calmly prepare for her runway show. It's Saturday night at New York City's industry-huge Fashion Week. There's house music, international stars and people with no last names.

Backstage pre-show, soaked from the deluge, I expect another storm. Instead I find something close to serenity. They are ready. The models lounge on the floor, bat at each other like puppies, tap on their cell phones, and Bocci herself marches around in curlers making sure everything and everyone is OK. The people from Detroit's FIGO salon work on hair in the corner. Rainbow-colored evening gowns gleam on the sidelines.

It all makes perfect sense. About her spring 2009 collection, Bocci says, "I'm inspired by the story of the flood, Noah's Ark — so the colors of the dresses are going to be of the rainbow. I want to be the rainbow at the end."

Bocci came to Couture Fashion Week last year and was invited back. She agreed, but with a caveat: "I'm bringing Detroit with me." They balked — most designers use local talent — but Albanian-born Bocci quelled fears by replying, "I will promise you a beautiful show."

Why bring Detroiters when it'd be so much cheaper and easier to hire them in New York?

"I like my energy following me," Bocci says. "I believe in supporting businesses around town. I want to promote Detroit. This is where we pay taxes, our mortgages — I want to tell New York that fashion is from all over the world."

As soon as she found out she was returning to Fashion Week she "called RINO at FIGO — we are going to Fashion Week!" He said 'yes' right away, never mind that they'd have to pay their own way.

It makes sense that Bocci and FIGO (FEE-go) work together — they both keep winning best designer and best salon in area awards. RINO and his wife Kristina Marra own FIGO, a salon that blends fashion and hair. Bocci and FIGO began a business relationship about a year ago when the salon used one of Bocci's gowns in a fashion show.

The salon wasn't the only piece of Detroit Bocci brought with her. Each model, including Miss Michigan, Miss Italia U.S.A, and Bocci's 16-year-old daughter, is based in Detroit. Bocci also worked with a Detroit stylist (now New Yorker), who called the designer just before the show to ask if she'd like to make dresses for Aretha Franklin to wear on her album cover. (Yes, Re Re's wearing Bocci too.) Bocci has also designed gowns for local

celebs from 2008 Miss Michigan to WDIV anchor Rhonda Walker to Miss Universe 2007. Even singer Fergie has a Bocci gown.

New York City's Fashion Week is where top designers go to see and be seen, celebrities dot front rows of runways, editors from *Vogue* and *Cosmo* and every other major glossy take notes, and buyers come see what to get for two seasons ahead. It's part media frenzy, part party, and it's all business. It's a competitive, expensive endeavor, and the best way for a designer to get noticed or even stay on the radar. Couture Fashion Week runs alongside it, a place for top-notch couture designers to show their art.

I spoke with Bocci the day they arrived in New York and met them at their hotel room that afternoon where the designer, RINO and Kristina sat, ready to chat. Bocci can speak with Kristina in Albanian, and RINO in Italian and, of course, in English. It was hardly the seedy underworld I imagined as two of Bocci's three daughters ran in and out of the room.

We were seated on the couch talking in the sticky heat when suddenly a tall angular figure called Tiki swirled into the room all hip bones and shiny gold. Seeing a model up on the runway is one thing, but having one whoosh into a room of "normal" people, clad in gold, is quite striking.

The dress she wore was luscious and decadent, gilded silk draping elegantly down the front. When Tiki turned around, she revealed an onion butt — in fashion-speak, that's a butt that looks so good it makes you want to cry. And the dress did it every favor.

"I like to show off a woman's curves," Bocci says. "If you walk into a restaurant in a tight dress, every head turns."

Another bond between Bocci and FIGO is a passion for all things Italian. Bocci attended the SITAM School in Padove, Italy, and RINO grew up in Italy. Bocci and RINO agreed that "a woman in Italy will put on lipstick and heels to go to the grocery store." Something got lost in translation, because here in New York the result of everyday heels and lipstick is a little more *My Cousin Vinny*.

Even Vanna White wouldn't wear Bocci's dresses to the grocery store; these are dresses for the red carpet, the aisle or the stage. They're for special occasions. But Bocci and FIGO do not want to scare you off: "It is not expensive! We work with everyone. Come and meet us, have a glass of Champagne."

It hasn't always been rainbows and Champagne for Bocci. She grew up in communist-run Albania in the late '70s, watching her father make suits in secret. "I remember Dad's little bedroom, with the sewing machine on a desk that he would hide with a blanket when the neighbors came. A doctor would come over at 10:30 at night to get fitted for a suit."

She went from that to having the largest design studio in Michigan, a 3,200-square-foot studio in Shelby Township. "Dad didn't want me to do this. He wanted me to become a

translator, an ambassador, a writer. But growing up — this is my love. I have my father's genes." And for a minute she looks like she's about to cry. "Sometimes I feel so bad for my father."

After Italy, Bocci returned to Albania and opened a design studio there. Then she moved to Detroit in 2001, where her uncle lives. When I asked her about the transition to the United States in such a trying year, she replied, "Personally, I came here after a tragedy. I lost my father and my house in a tragic way. This was my promised land. I came here in June. It was a terrible year. Then the sparkle returns to her eyes. "I always adjust. I can walk in high heels or barefoot. I always adjust."

The rain eventually stops and Bocci's rainbow appears across the runway. All seats are filled and people cram the doorway to get glimpses. The lights dim, the music thumps, and Tiki kicks off the night in that luscious gold gown. Her wild hair sets the tone. RINO says it's "slick and textured, inspired by the dresses."

Applause grows as the colors of the dresses reflect the rainbow — each is a solid color of rich red, orange, yellow, emerald green, blues and purples. There are evening gowns and cocktail dresses, all in silky fabrics that cascade like water down the models. Some dresses drip with Swarovski crystals. From a clingy-in-all-the-right-places metallic silver mini cocktail dress to a diaphanous electric yellow evening gown, they're sexy yet not too revealing.

At the end of the show, when the designer usually comes out for a bow or a hello, Bocci strolls the runway holding a little girl's hand. The first thing Bocci says is, "This show was made in Detroit. Everything you saw came from Michigan." The crowd applauds. Then she introduces the little girl from a charity Bocci supports, who had just gotten a cochlear implant turned on the day before and could hear the music for the first time in years.

In stark contrast, a designer from a previous show is drunkenly making out with a fan in the front row, while Bocci, wearing a gold-and-white dress that mirrors the gold dress that opened the show, took her bow with the girl, both of them seemingly full of hope and renewal. Sometimes we all need a little rainbow.

See Katerina Bocci and FIGO on Oct. 4, during Detroit Fashion Week.
detroitfashionweek.com.

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