

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Fashion Television's Nan Devitt Tremblay reminisces on the most memorable fashion fiascoes of the 80s and 90s.



Nan Devitt Tremblay with Karl Lagerfeld. (Courtesy of Nan Devitt Tremblay)

Contemporary fashion show environments have become notorious for their strict supervision and meticulous monitoring by a coterie of PR representatives—all of whom work to ensure each event runs seamlessly. Determined to impede any unprecedented difficulties that threaten to dismantle their designer's work, they have learnt from the mistakes of the past and as a result, 'fashion disasters' have become increasingly infrequent. Yet, perhaps it was the occurrence of these very disasters that were once one of the greatest sources of astonishment and sensation on and off the runway.

Nan Devitt Tremblay was one of Fashion Television's most intrepid reporters at the end of the 20th Century, responsible for much of the most cherished fashion footage captured during what many consider to be the 'Golden Age' of fashion. Having interviewed some of the industry's most iconic individuals—from Yves Saint Laurent to Karl Lagerfeld and chronicling her front-row experiences at the formative shows of celebrated designers such as Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, the Canadian journalist has seen it all – from the strikingly beautiful to the woefully bleak. Here, she underscores how the industry's response to times of crisis

has evolved by recounting her personal experiences at the forefront of one of fashion's most flawed, yet exhilarating eras.

Q1. The role of the PR agency in the orchestration of shows has become such a prominent part of the industry. Was this role as evident in the 1980s and 90s, or is their increased involvement a more modern development?

Yes, it is. Back then, press attachés certainly weren't considered cultural 'influencers' nor spoken of in popular media. But inside our much smaller world of fashion reporters at that time, there inevitably were people who we recognised were important to stay on the good side of. They would make sure we had an invitation, maybe a decent seat and they smoothed our way through the backstage door if we were in their sightlines. Certain people, such as the iconic Dominique Deroche, who worked for decades at YSL Communications, were highly regarded. Her discreet nods towards Yves' bodyguards would signal permission for us to get up close and talk to him. However, a lot of the time we were also just fending for ourselves, much more so than our counterparts today do anyway.

Q2. Can you recall any 'close calls' or situations in which a major 'disaster' was averted and a runway show was subsequently saved?

Certainly. Speaking with designer Lars Nilsson, who was Christian Lacroix's assistant for ten years, he told me that every show was a close call. They were always finishing things at the last minute! He recalls one day the deadline for showtime was looming and the head of the atelier said he would just finish a certain green jacket himself as all of the seamstresses were too busy. Lars' office was below the workroom, and suddenly, he saw green satin floating outside his window. His phone rang and the gentleman calmly said "Lars can you send me two bolts of that green fabric," he had accidentally cut through the front of the jacket and had to begin again completely, just before the show was scheduled to start...

Q3. Were backstage meltdowns, dramatic outbursts and internal conflict encountered often? Do you have any entertaining examples of this that you would like to share?

The biggest "meltdown" I experienced was at an Azzedine Alaïa show. We had been invited, had arrived early and hung around in position visibly before shooting the show. Then Azzedine, who was a somewhat tortured perfectionist, realised that there had been a camera crew filming. To say he was unhappy is an understatement – his emotions were running high. He sent his assistant- Sophie Theallet to tell us to take the tape out of our camera and give it to him. My cameraman John Cressey was never going to do that. So Azzedine came out

himself and well, it was very rough and quite loud. John said there were other shows we had shot on the cassette (which wasn't true), so he refused to give it to Azzedine and instead promised to erase the tape. Eventually, we managed to get out of there with all our equipment and our tape! I was never inclined to go back to one of his shows! Azzedine was a genius, of course, it probably did pain him to have a video record of something he considered less than perfect. Sophie says he was capable of working on one jacket for two years.

Q4. Out of the myriad shows you have witnessed, which one received the most unfavourable, adverse response?

People had mixed feelings about Jean Paul Gaultier's Hasidic collection! (*'Chic Rabbis' F/W 1993*) However, that's not to say it was roundly condemned! Some of the appropriation that people took for granted back then could never fly now. One of the wackiest examples was the Galliano show in the Gare d'Austerlitz (*Dior by John Galliano fall/winter 1998/99 - Diorient Express*). Pocahontas meets Spanish Reformation, all set in a souk ... in a train station. Layer upon layer of madness, and it cost a fortune! I interviewed a Middle Eastern couture client who was rolling her eyes at the decorative souk-inspired elements - we didn't have the vocabulary to describe appropriation back then, but she clearly found it disturbing. Otherwise, everyone was raving about the show!

Another time that had people making complicated backhanded remarks and the typical insults embedded in compliments, was when Karl Lagerfeld sent the "waifs" out including Kate Moss. I'm told that, off camera, a little gang of prominent fashion journalists went and lit into Karl for using short ordinary-looking models who ruined "the line" or the ethos of the fashion show. Different times. Not naming anyone. Can you imagine how out of line that would be now?

Q5. Did you observe any gatecrashers or disruptive intrusions while documenting these shows?

Well, there were always students from Central Saint Martins (looking fabulous by the way) around outside the Paris tents and we would pass our extra invitations to them!

There was also the first season that PETA were demonstrating, throwing red paint around in the street outside a show. This was the first of many disruptions from them.

Q6. What are your outstanding memories relating to unprecedented complications or adversity confronted both backstage, and at the forefront of the catwalk collections you covered?

Naomi tumbling in sky-high Vivienne Westwood heels in 1993 was something to witness I can tell you! She made it all look charming, popping up and flouncing off. But then I showed her the picture of her fall in the paper the next day and asked for comment. Her friends were all cooing that she was “so cute” but she didn’t seem impressed – a combination of being angry about the height of those shoes, mixed with annoyance towards some professional chagrin that she had toppled.

Q7. Can you recall any incidents involving wardrobe malfunctions, disorganised production or technical difficulties that were particularly difficult to witness, and subsequently left a lasting impression?

There were many wardrobe malfunctions but the models were magnificent at covering those things up. In my archive, there are clips such as Naomi Campbell making a quick catch of an earring falling off her ear at Lagerfeld’s “Skin Dress” collection. (S/S 1994)

I remember some shows started outrageously late. In the case of Mugler, sometimes garments were arriving through the door at the same time as us. Mugler and Claude Montana were the worst offenders, then Galliano. At one point the photographers staged a mini-strike outside a Montana show because they were so frustrated by the tardiness. Another time, a Mugler show started over an hour late and then, their lights didn’t work, after a few minutes they came on but then the music refused to play! The models walked with no music. The archive shows Carla Bruni having a really hard time keeping a straight face.

Perhaps in cases such as John Galliano, shows ran terribly late not because the clothes hadn’t arrived yet but because of make-up, hair, styling and general perfectionism. But he could really keep us waiting. Once Madonna came to his show - I was watching her across the way from me getting more and more irritated. Eventually, she got fed up waiting after an hour so she stood up and left!

She really ought to have stayed though – it was an extraordinary collection. It was that show with the old cars (S/S 1995) and Linda (Evangelista) wore that huge yellow tulle gown...



Nan Devitt Tremblay speaking to Linda Evangelista backstage for Fashion Television. (Courtesy of Nan Devitt Tremblay)