

THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

What does a career as a choreographer in fashion entail? Eric Christison shares a glimpse into the enigmatic world of fashion movement direction.

I first encounter Eric Christison over a Zoom call on a downcast March morning, a mere day after the conclusion of Paris Fashion Week. Despite his self-professed exhaustion, his demeanour exudes a quiet confidence- his calm composure and enthusiastic conversational style immediately draw me in.

In an age where brands sell not only a product but an image, the 34-year old dancer and choreographer has mastered the act of making the aesthetic portrayal of clothing as appealing as possible. Trusted and highly sought after, Eric's talent as a movement director (a relatively new position within the Fashion industry) enhanced the mood of this season's shows such as Vaqueira, Simone Rocha, Coperni and Mugler. "Eric is the best out there," photographer Carlijn Jacobs, told Dazed in 2021, "He has amazing ideas for placement and is such a pleasure to work with – he has such an eye for details."

Christison was at the pinnacle of his career as a professional ballet dancer when he found himself at a creative crossroad. "As a teen I was more interested in fashion and pop culture than I was dance," he admits, yet at the age of 17, he joined the Canadian National Ballet in his native Toronto, an augury to over a decade of professional dancing. In 2016, Christison made the crucial yet daunting decision to branch out on his own "I think there was a moment where I realised that I had to jump ship now or commit to this for another ten years. It felt like the right time." He did this despite the glaring lack of Fashion Movement Directors to whom he could aspire. "I didn't have any real reference of having somebody, besides Stephen Galloway to look to," he recalls, "I didn't really know if it was possible". Yet it is this originality and perseverance which makes Eric truly remarkable and has equipped him to forge a future in a profession that has only just started to garner momentum.

The dancer compares his methods of movement to 'a game of Tetris'. He blocks routines in an almost mathematical manner- fusing both contemporary and classical influences whilst building on the traditional ballet techniques that his formal training has provided, "I'm constantly thinking of the inner-rotation of the leg, turnout and the correct placement of the scapula, then I manipulate time and space in a more modern way." Describing this style as 'Neoclassical', it reflects a confluence of influences. "Part of my process is seeing ideas through images," he says of his research process, "I'm impacted by everything from a very obscure video on social media to people's interactions on the street, my camera roll has 90,000 photos on it." When crafting a narrative in his own work, Eric likes to discern these smallest of details in everyday life, which often form a basis for entire phrases of movement on which he then builds. While working with designers, he endeavours to stay true to house codes and the DNA of their designs. For Simone Rocha's recent AW24 show, "There was this dress with the most incredible boning," Eric says, "seeing the arms in front distracted from the shape of the dress so we placed them in the back which affected the body and therefore the garment." Such considerations have come to characterise the fastidious nature of Christison's work.

Modulating between runway, editorial and commercial work is no easy feat yet Eric successfully navigates the intricacies involved in each. "I think that I've come to a place where I can look at the work I did with Alessandro Michele's Gucci and see how that has shaped my current approach. During that era it was all hands on deck and everybody had to be aware of everybody else's objectives for it to really be successful, that is now something I try to consider when I approach other projects." Now he works with discretion and dedication whether that is backstage or behind the camera, with his foremost guiding principles being honesty and attentive listening. "That's ultimately what makes movement in any medium successful," he explains. "This cohesive incorporation of ideas with stylists, photographers and even marketing teams is what challenges me."

Challenged would most definitely describe how Eric felt when he was approached by Coperni's Sébastien Meyer. Affirming the brand's fascination with futurism, Eric was commissioned to design a sequence for robots developed by Boston Dynamics for their SS23 show. "Coperni gave me the freedom to direct the robots however I wanted," Eric revealed, however these robots were much more adept than he had anticipated, "they had an infinite amount of possibilities." To fully understand their parameters, he held multiple conversations with Boston Dynamics weeks in advance. "Everything was preconceived, right down to the last centimetre- I was drawing maps and pinning points where they would go." The robots were then programmed before travelling from Boston to Paris. Once they arrived, Eric coordinated their meticulous movements with those of the models', resulting in a show that was a resounding success. "It was incredible, I think their vision really succeeded," Eric says of the experience.

Eric's skillset isn't strictly limited within the confines of dance, "I'm equally as interested in the technical elements of sport as I am in dance," he shares, "Both are really precise and analytical in their execution of movement." As a child he dabbled in everything from gymnastics, swimming and taekwondo to running track and field, hence grasping the skills required for each. So when working on the concept for the recent Vogue World commercial- which amalgamates high fashion with different sporting professions, it was a happy coincidence for the choreographer. "It allowed me to showcase my full range of movement, I could experiment with as many types of sporting styles and techniques as possible," he acknowledges. Working alongside Gigi Hadid, he offered her a series of directions that you would typically expect at the Olympics rather than

Vogue such as how to do fencing movements, how to hit the final dismount from a gymnastic jump and suggesting the correct position from which to jump off a diving board. Yet that was exactly Eric's intention.

The dancer's current base in Helsinki, allows him to compartmentalise his personal life from that of his work. "It's the separation of church and state," he remarks, "I have been quite adamant about keeping it that way as it allows me to come into every job as fresh and as clear minded as possible." In between projects, he satiates his cravings for solitude by spending up to five hours alone in his studio and "moving all day." As documented through sporadic instagram posts, Eric executes his own introspective improvised routines, his 6ft 1 frame moving in spellbinding synchronicity to his selection of music. Reaping its therapeutic rewards, he asserts that "It's like journaling, releasing ideas that I've had pent up, to try to make sense of them" he pauses. "It's my way of analysing where I'm at in the world."

As for Eric's aspirations for the future, he discloses that he has been working on an arcane personal project, "It's going to gather dancers together- people from different backgrounds that are genuinely interested in movement," he says with a smile. Not wanting to give too much away, he promises that it will take the form of an immersive "live experience, where people will have a space to create," an idea which imparts his wish to make the industry more accessible and engaging to all.

In current times, with the amount of media that is being distributed digitally, Eric recognises that the attention span of the modern consumer has become quite different. "I think that movement and dance really count right now in image making-they are dynamic, popular and they perform well across different types of media" he considers, "That's where this role has become a more integrated part of the industry, as dance can leave a lasting impression." It certainly has for Eric.

Travelling to New York the following Monday for a commercial shoot, Eric is unfazed by the constant stream of work but rather galvanised by it as he continues to lead a life that is incessantly demanding yet rich in creative fulfilment.

