



There aren't many people who, while opening a tin of cat food, would envisage the can as a cuff bracelet or packaging for a fragrance. But the maverick mind of Jean Paul Gaultier taps a creative genius that has allowed him to see the world differently. Proof in point is Gaultier's *tour de force*: *Fashion Freak Show*. Arriving at the Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall for a limited run (from 23 Jul), audiences are treated to a theatrical spectacle that feels part music and dance, part fashion extravaganza.

The production is an autographical journey showcasing the highlights of Gaultier's career and is filled with all the eccentric exuberance and *joie de vivre* you'd expect from the provocative Parisian. Gaultier calls it a 'grand party', but scratch beneath the surface and *Fashion Freak Show* is about so much more. 'I want to show difference,' Gaultier says. 'For there is beauty to be found everywhere, it all depends on how one chooses to look at it. I've always loved freaks, weirdos, agitators, the mixing of different aesthetics, the unexpected encounters. This transgressive energy is on show for all to see.'

CHAMPIONING DIVERSITY

Putting difference centre stage is Gaultier's *raison d'être*. His diverse casting has seen ageing punks and black, trans and plus-size models walk the runways of his shows; he has put men in skirts, fashioned garments from bin bags and he took one of the most repressive garments in history, the corset, and made it a symbol of female sexual empowerment. 'I was always horrified by this expression "soit belle et tais toi" ("be beautiful and shut up"),' the designer reveals. 'I was brought up by women, by my mother and my grandmother, and I always thought that women were more intelligent and stronger than men. And I wanted to show it in my collections.'

Jean Paul Gaultier's corset, with its cone-shaped bra, was, of course, made famous by Madonna during her 1990 *Blond Ambition* world tour. But long before Madonna made the conical bra her own, as a six-year-old boy, Gaultier sewed two cones made of newspaper to the chest of his teddy bear, Nana. It is Nana who opens *Fashion Freak Show*, brought to life to ask the audience to 'travel inside Jean Paul Gaultier's memories, to penetrate his soul.'

LONDON CALLING

Many of those memories are based in London, a city that is woven into the fabric of the fashion legend's story. It was here that the young designer saw *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in the Seventies, a source of inspiration for *Fashion Freak* ▶

Le freak est chic

Don't freak out! Jean Paul Gaultier has swapped the runway for the stage to realise a lifelong ambition and, as **Kathryn Conway** discovers, it's nothing short of genius



Show, and it is London that Gaultier mined for some of the design cues that would become his signatures. While his favoured Breton stripe remains distinctly Gallic, his love of punk, David Bowie and his fascination with fetishism and gender-bending fashion, were all there in the city's clubs he frequented in the Seventies and Eighties. 'I love London; I almost moved here in the Seventies,' says Gaultier. 'London is dear to my heart and a constant source of inspiration.'

The capital also gave rise to a friendship that endures to this day: Gaultier first spotted renowned London milliner Stephen Jones sporting a fez in the video for Culture Club's breakout hit *Do You Really Want to Hurt Me*. Gaultier asked Jones to model for him, but having broken his leg, Jones was unable to. Instead, the milliner put together headwear sketches for Gaultier's autumn/winter 1984 collection, and the resulting sinister-looking fur felt and silk tassel fez announced Jones' arrival on the Paris scene.

For Brits of a certain age, however, Gaultier isn't just famous for his fashion. Throughout much of the Nineties and early Noughties, Gaultier was beamed into the bedrooms of millions of British teenagers courtesy of *Eurotrash*, a brash, bawdy and fabulously camp TV show the designer presented alongside his friend and fellow Frenchman, Antoine de Caunes. Naturally, de Caunes has a video cameo in *Fashion Freak Show*, but to reveal much more would rather ruin the surprise. Suffice to say, de Caunes is wearing a beautiful dress, one of the many creations Gaultier modified especially for the show.

'I was very happy to do it, because I love Jean Paul and anything that I can do for and with him is welcomed,' says de Caunes. 'In fact, when he had his big exhibition in London [*The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier* at the Barbican in 2014], we did a crazy video for that, so it's like a tradition. The current show is witty and funny and really looks and feels like Jean Paul, but it's a different kind of musical. It details everything

about his life, his hopes, desires and craziness.'

That sense of craziness often leads to Gaultier's work being somewhat misunderstood. This is a man who, despite not having any formal fashion training, worked with legends such as Pierre Cardin, and this forged a respect for the tradition of couture that is revealed in everything Gaultier creates. 'I have never set out consciously to provoke. If you do that it never works,' says the eternal *enfant terrible* of fashion. 'I would say that I work on a tradition and turn it on its head. Even though looking at my fashion shows, some people would say that my clothes are unwearable, it is not true. I have always designed real clothes and it was with the styling that I would turn them around.' Gaultier is the ultimate showman, so the London stage seems like his natural habitat.

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