

From The Ramp TO THE RACK



Ajai Singh, founder of Colombo Fashion Week (CFW) tells Harin Fernando of the future of the event as it beckons a new dawn for the fashion design industry in Sri Lanka.

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How was CFW 2008 received?
When I started this whole thing, I strongly believed that after three years, CFW would firmly hold its own on the Asian fashion week calendar.
In this regard, I think we have over achieved thus far. The response for CFW 2008 was over-whelming. The event exceeded our expectations and even most invitees

were pleasantly surprised. Despite my initial worries about the event, I can now confidently declare that we are well on our journey.
One of the most encouraging responses I received was from Bibi Russell. Russell and her mother together are known as the ‘art and culture’ revivalists of Bangladesh. Russell shows at London Fashion Week every year and is very much involved in reviving the weaving and handlooms of both India and Bangladesh. Russell, who claims that her ‘stars’ are not the models but the weavers, has also been bestowed acclaim as an Indian and UN State Ambassador.
Russell, who was the first YSL model from Asia, also spearheads an initiative ‘Fashion for Development’ that helps rural weavers to uplift themselves. Her mum who was a huge celebrity in her homeland in fact passed away the very same day Russell flew in to show at CFW.
When I queried Russell if she would like to return to Bangladesh she replied, “I have made a promise to come and show, and that is what I will do.” Russell’s show was a great success and she proudly dedicated it to the memory of her late mother. Many Asian press houses picked up on this and reported as such.
Following CFW, when Russell was asked about what she thought of the event, she commented that whilst she could not compare it with Milan or London, she was of the belief that it was on par with shows in Madrid, Barcelona and the European circuit. She further added that all aspects of the production were very tight and guided by a distinct cultural direction.
Russell works in even tougher environments that Sri Lanka and therefore if she can develop the design industry, so can we. Thus when a third party of the calibre and credibility of Russell commented positively on our efforts, it felt very meaningful. Bali Fashion Week also contacted me, and were very keen to work with us upon hearing and seeing about our event.

The experience for the new designers that were involved?
We experimented with six new designers. Three of them were already attached to local garment houses, whilst the other three were part of the design schools. They worked as groups and individuals on the line.
If they opted for the latter, we then helped them to create a saleable brand name and our team also then worked alongside them to match the essence of their design with a good brand name, something we can market, even in the future.
Sling, Zoo, and Maia were the lines that were created by these up-and-coming designers. We also had input from Indian fashion experts who were able to guide them with regard to new designs and current trends. Based on critiques I read

about in foreign magazines and press, I am very happy to say that the new designers fared very well.
Presently I am talking to a number of local and foreign retailers in order to ensure the transition of these new designers, from ramp to rack. The designers are also in the process of providing us samples for their soon to be released second collections. I am sending these samples to a lot of interested parties, in order to ensure completion of the cycle. At CFW we not only give designers the opportunity to show, but we also implement a developmental programme, via the CFW Technical Committee, that sees their work continue in a meaningful manner, both commercially and personally. I believe it is very important that we keep on developing young blood, whilst senior designers establish and strengthen their collections.
We hope our initial efforts, will stimulate others to showcase their abilities, in the hope that one day they can make it onto the shelves of leading fashion retailers worldwide.
Our developmental role at CFW, means that designers will show just once a year, but our teams work throughout the year to develop them to another level.
At present, local retail outlets are dominated by export surplus and I want to at least, replace some of them with local designer items. In this sense, CFW is very important to the local fashion industry, critical even.
At this time I must place on record my concern for certain parties who are interested in only showing what foreign designers are showing.
What I would like to request of them is to appreciate and encourage what our local designers are showcasing as well and not to be critical of them, because if we reject them now, they will never come back and five years from now, we will still be waiting for designers from other parts of the world to come here and show, whilst our local industry stagnates in this infancy.
Who knows, if we continue to support and purchase local designers, who is to say that in five years time we may have a CFW with 90% Sri Lankan designers. So it is critical that both consumers and retailers play an active role in this cycle.
On a personal note, I never wanted CFW to be merely entertainment. I wanted something that would be of a deeper perspective, thus offering our designers the same opportunities as others in this region.

And the established designers?
CFW was instrumental in facilitating senior designers to interact with the industry. As a direct result of showing at CFW, Buddhi Batiks was given a ‘single designer launch’ in Chennai, early March 2008. ‘Single designer’ status is usually bestowed

on those who have made a name for themselves across India and overseas. Buddhi Batiks will now have their own exclusive showcase space within a large retailer. This is a first for a Sri Lankan designer.
Darshi Keerthisena must also part be credited to the discipline we try to instil by giving a very specific brief at CFW. Following this Keerthisena translated the brief and discovered her inspiration from the southern township of Galle and the weaving activities there. Following two showings at CFW Buddhi Batiks is in both Bangalore and Chennai.
I must also mention Sonali White and Middle Finger, both whom had showed tremendous collections, Sonali's retro feel was very encouraging and caught the eye. Middle Finger was quirky but wearable.

CFW 2009?
As per the plan, the format will now encompass four days and 20 shows will all be staged under a marquee in the gardens of a five-star hotel. In the morning, there will be an exhibition featuring fashion items, leather items, shoes, bags, designer jewellery and fabric and accessory suppliers from outside. I also hope to organise a number of working seminars between young and experienced designers.
It is my hope that CFW, in an attempt to become more Asia centric will extend invitations to designers in Indonesia, Thailand, and other major cities. CFW is also in the process of in-creasing the number of new local designers who take to the ramp, thus making the total number 12.

How do you see the event evolving?
It depends on how much the market can take and what kind of retail orders designers get. Fashion weeks across the world can be classed as the 'most glamorous business meetings in the world' a single venue where buyers and designers come together.
For example there would be no point in having two fashion weeks in a single year, if designers will not have buyers for their collections. However if there is a market and an interest in a viable commercial and economic environment, we may consider the merits of two shows in one year.
CFW is a serious attempt to kick-start the local fashion design industry and we support this effort with a multi-faceted approach that includes nurturing, exposing, and ensuring the continuity of those designers involved.
The next Colombo Fashion Week will be held in February 2009.

Photo Captions – Colour from the ZOO collection pic 2-3, Paul Michael on show pic 4-5, Elegance from Lakshika Rajapaksha Pic 6-7, A statement of style from Maia Pic