

# Dublin has the fashion

THE DANCING spotlights zero in on the entrance to the catwalk and the chorus of yammering fashionistas is drowned in thudding music.

Suddenly, the models are on the runway – and the great designer's latest diaphanous fantasies waft past on the perfectly sculpted bodies of Gisele Bündchen and Adriana Lima.

There is an infinitesimal point, a split second when millions of dollars teeter on the fulcrum of the front-row's response – then the flash-and-whirr of the Nikons is submerged by the tinkling diamonds of the applauding fashionistas.

It could be Milan or Paris. It could be London, where the whole shebang descends on September 18 for seven days of glamour and excess.

But, as sure as legs are legs, it isn't Dublin!

True, tomorrow our local fashionistas will be out in all their finery for the launch of Dublin's very own Fashion Week, an event, organised by ex-model and PR queen Sonia Reynolds, that claims to showcase the best in Irish design.

But even allowing that the DFW is in only its third year, it still seems decidedly more Goatstown than Gaultier, more Cabinteely than Cavalli, more Dollymount than Dolce.

In culinary terms, if Milan is tagliatelle al tartuffo, Dublin is a breakfast roll with hash browns and Chef sauce.

For a start, Dublin Fashion Week isn't a week at all – it's three days.

And there will be no runway, no catwalk shows, no elite front-row and not a sniff of a supermodel.

## 'Fashion Week isn't a week at all – it's three days'

Instead, when the event kicks off in Dublin's Fitzwilliam Hotel tomorrow, the fashionistas will be expected to browse through hotel function rooms like loyal parishioners at a bring-and-buy sale or bargain hunters at a white-elephant stall.

Infuriatingly, the 24 young designers who will have to showcase their wares from coathangers and dummies are as talented and creative as any of those who drape Bündchen, Lima and Moss at the world's great fashion events.

Dublin is still fantastic at producing world-class designers – Philip Treacy, John Rocha, Paul Costelloe, Joanne Hynes, Lainey Keogh, Jen Kelly and Aideen Bodkin have all emerged from the capital. But almost all our indigent designers have moved their shows abroad – and key industry show



By **Georgina Heffernan**

attenders such as Anna Wintour, Suzy Menkes and Hilary Alexander have made it clear they just don't see Dublin Fashion Week in the same league as Milan, Paris or New York.

Hilary Alexander, the Telegraph newspaper's legendary fashion editor, says: 'There's a hell of a lot of competition because, in the past five years, everybody and his uncle has decided to have a fashion week. I mean, you've got fashion weeks everywhere – in Bali, Delhi, New Zealand and Russia, which has two. You've got them in Finland, Portugal and Spain... Dublin is jumping on board a very, very crowded calendar. Some fashion press from Britain will come to Dublin because it's a short distance – but I doubt buyers will come from Japan, for example, or America.'

'Ultimately, Dublin Fashion Week could be a good thing,' adds Hilary, 'but maybe it needs to be kicked off with something that's all encompassing, as part of an existing event or festival like the Theatre Festival or the Film Festival.'

'I think it's very unlikely that a huge tranche of international buyers and press are suddenly going to down tools and hot foot over to Ireland because they probably know very little about it. I don't think that many people are even aware the event is on!'

'For fashion editors and buyers, Dublin is just not a priority – many of them don't even know where Dublin is, let alone that it has a fashion week.'

Dolly Jones, editor of vogue.com, says: 'I've not heard that people will be adding Dublin to their list. When it comes to fashion, the Big Four is the Big Four – that's London, Paris, New York and Milan.'

'If there is any sign of a No.5 emerging, it will be Los Angeles because a lot of talented designers are launching themselves at LA Fashion Week – and it is generating a lot of press because of the celebrity obsession generated by LA's red-carpet culture.'

So the Dublin City Enterprise Board – a grey flannel-suited body not usually associated with the glamour of haute couture – has its work cut out to attract international buyers and big names. For her part, organiser Sonia Reynolds has managed to extract practical and financial backing from Brown Thomas as well as sponsorship from brands such as 3 Mobile and Absolut Vodka. In DFW's first two seasons, Sonia has managed to generate a certain amount of interest among buyers from the British multiples and small but influential European boutiques.

She argues that the event is impor-

tant and that it will grow with time.

'Dublin Fashion Week was started to provide Irish designers a forum to gain access to their domestic market to generate sales, primarily, and, secondly, publicity and brand awareness for their collections,' she says.

'Before DFW, we found that designers were spending huge sums going to shows in London and Paris and were getting lost among the hundreds of designers selling there – to the extent that they were not even gaining access to our own domestic buyers. DFW allows the domestic designers an accessible marketplace for the buyers, stylists and press to see what they are doing, and hopefully to buy from them and to highlight their collections.'

The young designers involved agree that, even in its current format, DFW is better than nothing.

## 'Most editors and buyers don't know where Dublin is'

'For a young designer like myself, who's just launching her own label, this is a wonderful opportunity,' 25-year-old Yasmin Velloza gallantly says.

'I think that if there's a fashion week in your country, it makes sense to show there because it's important to see how the market responds to your work. If it goes well in Ireland, you can then think about taking your work to a bigger audience.'

'Irish fashion is unique – a lot of traditional materials are used and we've a rich craft tradition that we should play to. Yes – our fashion week is smaller than Milan or Paris but having our own showcase helps to promote the work of Irish fashion designers abroad. And something like this is desperately needed.'

Dolly Jones agrees that Dublin certainly has the expertise and the style to compete internationally.

'Ireland is harbouring a lot of design talent and an event like this helps to raise the profile of young designers,' she says. 'But people consider Paris the fashion capital of the world. Milan is the commercial and manufacturing centre and New York is the financial powerhouse. However, from Australia to Hong Kong, smaller events are making people sit up and take notice. These smaller fashion weeks teach new designers the practical and commercial side of the business before they take to the world stage.'

So everyone agrees that Dublin deserves a fashion week and that our world-class young talent deserves a local showcase. It's just that most of us think they deserve a better one.

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**No catwalks, no industry moguls and not a hint of a supermodel... just fashionistas browsing through hotel function rooms like loyal parishioners at a bring-and-buy. Our world-class young designers deserve a much better showcase**

## Seven trendsetters who are already making their mark abroad

### Eilis Boyle

Born in the Caribbean into an Irish-Spanish family, Eilis Boyle has spent much of her life travelling the world and being educated in places as diverse as Bolivia and Japan. She graduated from the European Institute of Design in Madrid and moved on to collaborate with some of Spain's top fashion designers such as Isabel Berz.

Now based in Ireland, Eilis began her own label three years ago with a range of contrasting fabrics and neutral colours constructed from the most exquisite yarns from Scotland and Italy. This label is all about quiet yet powerful elegance, creating understated, feminine silhouettes. It has been showcased twice at Dublin Fashion Week, three seasons at Paris Fashion Week and is fast gaining international success.

### Yasmin Velloza

Born in New York City, Yasmin Velloza was raised in Florida, London and Dublin. She studied in Dublin at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and graduated in 2003 with an honours degree, having achieved various awards, including the Leonardo Da Vinci scholarship in 2002. She worked with Michael Mortell and was then

headhunted by Eve New York to become their design director at only 22.

In 2006, Yasmin decided to begin her own label, Yasmin Velloza, and has established design studios in Dublin and Shanghai. At DFW, she presents her debut collection for spring/summer 2007. The label features sexy embellished layers in skirts that can be turned into strapless cocktail dresses.

### Jennifer Rothwell

Jennifer Rothwell was born in New York, and raised in Dublin. Having graduated from NCAD in 1995, she won the Irish Board of Trade Award. Her first job was with renowned New York designer Norma Kamali, where she stayed for four years, before moving on to Katayone Adeli, Calvin Klein, Language and Yigal Azrouel. Labels of the calibre of Rogan and Darlyn K tried to recruit her but Jennifer had made up her mind to return to Ireland and launch her own label.

The J Rothwell spring/summer '07 collection, inspired by trips to New York and Thailand, uses silk, chiffon, French lace and beautiful braided trimmings.

### Leighlee (Leigh Tucker)

Leigh Tucker, was born in Dublin in 1973 to Irish designer Brian Tucker and prominent

retailer Billie Taylor. Leigh attended NCAD, graduating in 1997. She spent some time working in the family store, Costume, before deciding to strike out on her own and establish the Leighlee label in 2000.

Leighlee can be found showing at Dublin Fashion Week, Paris Sur Mode and with agents Beuys & Beuys in Dublin.

### Caoimhe O'Dwyer

After qualifying in languages and business studies at Dublin Institute of Technology in 1998, Caoimhe gained a BA in design from the NCAD in 2003. Work experience and study followed in Paris and Rome, then jobs with Anna Sui and Living Doll, New York, and La Perla, Bologna.

In 2003, Caoimhe launched her Intimate Apparel range, available exclusively from Bridal Wraptures of St Stephen's Green, Dublin and Mizelle Lingerie of Athy, Co. Kildare. She has since been invited to collaborate with La Perla on collections for 2006/2007. Inspired by delicate flowers, photography, art and antique lingerie, Caoimhe's designs are modern, feminine and elegant.

### Shecanko (Gillian Sheehan)

Shecanko is the baby of Mallow-born Gillian Sheehan who lives in Brisbane,

Australia, and travels home twice a year to show her collections.

Without formal design qualifications, she started with a dressmaking course – and began developing her first collection in 2003, which she exhibited at Pure in London. Six seasons later, Shecanko is has a strong foothold in the Irish market.

It is obvious from all of her collections to date that she loves colour. She likes to use bold, contrasting tones and textures and spring/summer 2007 is no exception.

### Aideen Bodkin

Aideen Bodkin is one of the brightest stars of the Irish fashion industry. She studied design at NCAD, where she was the recipient of numerous prestigious awards. Her talents for design and tailoring helped her secure work with various well-known Irish designers.

Having perceived a demand for high-quality clothes in luxury fabrics, Aideen branched out on her own and set up her eponymous label in 1998. The Aideen Bodkin range is currently sold in carefully selected designer boutiques throughout Ireland and Britain.

Aideen's talent for design and tailoring has attracted much attention and interest overseas and her label is now available in Britain, Europe and the US.