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COVER STORY

SENDING GARMENTS DOWN THE RUNWAY AT MELBOURNE SPRING FASHION WEEK IS A LUCRATIVE OPPORTUNITY FOR NEW DESIGNERS, WRITES RACHELLE UNREICH.

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Imagine you are an up-and-coming Melbourne fashion designer. You have been subjected to enough hype to ensure frequent magazine editorial appearances, but you are not yet a household name. It is important how people view your **brand** - editors, stylists and consumers alike. So, it is with great excitement that you become involved in Melbourne Spring Fashion Week, a City of Melbourne-run program dedicated to supporting local fashion designers, brands and retailers (75 per cent of the 150 designers and retailers involved are from Melbourne). There is only one problem. When your outfits come down that catwalk, you have almost no say in how they will appear. They might be combined with hairstyles you cannot abide, or worn by models whom you dislike. For the designers - usually seeing their shows for the first time, alongside the consumers - it is a matter of pot-luck.

But, according to some, that adds to the excitement. "You get it for free, so you either want to be part of it, or you don't," says Rosemary Masic, who is behind the label Nevenka, which she describes as "eclectic and bespoke". She is all for the fashion week. "It means a lot to my clients. The impact it has is massive, mainly because social media has changed things over the last two years. The shows are instrumental in **brand** awareness. They feel very European, and of a high standard."

Running from August 30 until September 7, the for-the-public fashion festival is now in its 20th year, and hosts 212 events, 151 of which are free. The main runway shows are ticketed events (which start at \$35) held at the Melbourne Town Hall, a spectacular venue for a catwalk show. Voxfrock.com.au editor Janice Breen Burns says "there's something about the space and the loftiness and the gorgeous Victorian architecture of the town hall that makes it such a beautiful space - you walk up the stairs into the grand building, and you get such a sense of occasion".

Other events (which include talks, film screenings and even a **wine**-and-fashion-pairing event) are held in unexpected locations. Diba Beylie, of Dot Dot Dash, is co-producing some of these, including the opening-night runway show, which will take place on Little Bourke Street, temporarily shut down to transport. "We're going to be stopping traffic quite literally with fashion," she says, adding that it will be a mad dash to make it all work within the tight time frame.

The State Library of Victoria will be the locale for Liberty of the Press, a catwalk-meets-19th-century salon. It focuses on the famous "press dress" constructed of Melbourne newspapers and worn by Matilda Butters to the mayor's fancy dress ball in 1866. The evening's running sheet will take inspiration from the articles that appeared as the dress's panels. (For example, one piece was about **Chinese** immigration, so there will be a traditional **Chinese** performance.)

It is often these cultural events that spark the most discussion. Breen Burns remembers one talk held between Material By Product's Susan Dimasi and fashion insider Robert Buckingham, "which was so absorbing - it was like going into a parallel universe for about an hour, if you really love fashion".

Even so, the shows are not being beamed around the world in the way a Paris show would be, allowing the creative minds to run somewhat free. For fashion week hair director Kevin Murphy, this is a boon. "We can appeal to the public, rather than to fashion magazines, which can be a bit jaded. The public like a bit of theatre, so we can push the envelope. We don't have to rely on being simplistic. In a lot of fashion shows, hair takes a back seat, but here, we get to use a lot of colour." Some choices have worked - purple wigs, Christmas beetle wigs. Others haven't. "Last year we did these spear lilies that we thought would really flow when they walked down the catwalk, and fly up when the models walked, but instead the hair was really stiff; it didn't move at all."

Designers will also give their sometimes-esoteric briefs to the hair stylists and makeup artists, who are then expected to interpret. Liberally. For example, "Akira Isogawa [who will be part of Runway Three] is very inspiring," Murphy says. "He will come up with things like saying that the clothes should be inspired by air. In that case, we tried to make the hair look like hot-air balloons. It's tricky, because you have to do something that can be redone 40 times, on the 40 models in the show."

The sheer amount of work it takes to make the festival work is dazzling. Tony Baumann, head of artistry at Mecca Cosmetics, says Melbourne Spring Fashion Week is "our makeup Christmas". "Thirty artists from all over Australia and New Zealand come together to apply makeup to 250 female faces and 80 male faces, using over 200 bottles of foundation, 100 sets of false lashes, 60 bottles of nail polish and over five litres of body moisturiser. When you have that number of creative people working together, the energy is so intense, and that's when the magic happens."

And it's not just designers who get to parade their wares; the fashion week has long been a launching pad for new modelling talent. Matthew Anderson, director and Melbourne manager of Chadwick Models, says that getting good experience during Australian shows "is the perfect springboard for the major international shows, so we encourage participation". Participation in fashion week comes at a price, though. "Shows do not pay particularly well," Anderson admits. "In fact, models can earn five times as much by declining them, but the upside is the social aspect, plus the opportunity to meet top stylists, hair and makeup artists and designers."

One of the creative producers of the shows, Valentina Jovanoska, points to the "cultural diversity unique to Melbourne" as one of the themes being injected into this year's festival. "We are looking at fashion, art, design and entertainment in a cultural sense, and giving people a 360-degree cultural experience that's focused on Melbourne." But, Anderson counters, that does not necessarily extend to the selection of models. "For years, I've thought there is a problem in Australia, because of the lack of cultural diversity in advertising ... that said, the fashion weeks around the country freely use African, indigenous Australian and Asian models, but still I don't think it's terribly balanced."

Fashion photographer Peter Coulson - who is enthusiastic about fashion week in general - goes one step further. "Models [in Australian shows] are cast based on their waist size and hips and boobs and height - nothing is about their face," he says. "With hair and makeup, they all look identical. They do use [some ethnic] models every year, but these models still fit the right box in terms of their measurements. The biggest problem is that Australian fashion shows are retail shows, which is basically about sending mannequins down the catwalk."

Whatever the case, designers themselves are not complaining. Gwendolynne Burkin says: "I feel very supported by MSFW, and I like that it's got a very Melbourne slant on it, as well as a community feel, too. Fashion isn't a highly funded endeavour and I feel grateful, as a taxpayer, that the Melbourne City Council is putting it on. And it's a good time for the industry - it's definitely when people rethink their wardrobes and come out of hibernation. The whole mindset changes; we all start eating less and tanning, because our legs are going to be on show."

That is apparent when you walk down Melbourne's shopping strips. On the High Street precinct, Megan Park's Armadale store is ablaze in colour, her floral prints matched only by massive floral bouquets, placed completely over the mannequins' heads. Milliner Richard Nylon - whose headpieces will appear in designer Jason Grech's runway show - puts it this way: "When spring happens in Melbourne, it happens with a bang. All of a sudden, the plum trees are out. As Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* lets you know, this is a beautiful spring but a violent spring. There's something about the earth opening up and everything bursting forth that comes across in the shows. And Melbourne is an intellectual city - we know how to make glamour our own." Nylon adds that Melbourne's change of seasons help. "We go from a seven-degree winter's day to a 45-degree summer's one, so we get to wear a lot of different clothes. That's what makes Melbourne such a great city for fashion."

Designer Jason Grech says that for him, part of fashion week's appeal lies in the ability to meet his customers after the show: "Guests aren't just coming to see a parade, they're coming to possibly have a chat." Expect grand things from this designer: "I'm using a lot of textures and layers in my show - things like rope, chain and lacquered feathers, inspired by birds such as the falcon and eagle."

Melbourne Spring Fashion Week, Nylon says, "is about people buying spring fashion in the shows". "It's a testament to how much Melburnians love fashion that they will pay to see a catwalk show and then **buy** that stuff almost immediately."

Lord Mayor Robert Doyle says "last year's event attracted more than 45,000 people and generated \$3.5 **million** into our economy".

Buying the catwalk creations just got that little bit easier, too, thanks to the app Bluesky, which will be officially affiliated with fashion week for the first time. Bluesky managing director and co-founder David Mah says his **company** will be taking photographs from the shows, and the collections will be up online within 30 to 60 minutes, all available on one universal app regardless of whether different labels appear on the runway. With a user base that already includes 230,000 people - mainly women between the ages of 20 and 50 - there is a good chance this will be the most lucrative spring fashion festival yet.

And it doesn't hurt that Melbourne hosts that other major event, the Spring Racing Carnival. Donna Player, **group** executive of merchandise at David Jones, says "spring is very important to the **business** overall, because we focus on a lot of dresses, and that's amplified in Melbourne because of a carnival that seems to be all-encompassing, and involves head-to-toe dressing".

Arthur Galan, of Arthur Galan AG, says: "Spring is one of our best times of the year when it comes to selling suiting to the boys and dresses to the girls. There's a lot of stuff on with the spring carnival and more functions that people go to.

It's a time when they go outside their comfort zone and venture a bit further. The guys want to look just as good as the girls these days." Or better.

Justin Lacko, the male model face of fashion week, says that come spring racing, "men might not get the hats, but you see shirts and ties in vibrant colours".

"Women love to shop, but men love to get a bit of attention, too. They don't mind having fun with a polka-dot tie if it means that a woman will come up to them and have a cheeky moment about it."

In the end, Melburnians are more than a little ready to celebrate the end of a particularly cold winter, and show off their fashion nous.

"A lot of young women in fashion, they're dusting off their bikini tops already," says Janice Breen Burns. "In winter, you put fashion on. As summer approaches, you take it off."

thatsmelbourne.com.au/msfw

ticketmaster.com.au/msfw

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

Can't work out what to see?

Here's a cheat sheet:

RUNWAY FOUR. Two of the local labels in this show - Livia Arena and Kuwaii - are the favourites of Liz Sunshine, of Melbourne street style blog Street Smith, who also happens to be one of the MSFW "Influencers" - one of the hand-picked fashion bloggers who'll help cover the event. "I've been following both these designers for quite a few years and am always excited about their use of colour and clean lines," she says.

MSFW MODEL COMPETITION. Just what it says, with the winner set to walk the runway. Would-be Kate Moss types can also visit the Mecca Maxima Beauty Star Search, with the winner to appear in Maxima magazine. (Two females will be chosen, as well as one male.)

MR RUNWAY. One for the blokes.

Plus performances by Gossling, Mell Hall, Yeo and the Pierce Brothers.

NIKE SHOW. Looks will incorporate the latest sportswear products from Nike, styled with pieces by Alice McCall and Thurley, among others. You might recognise a few athletic types, too. "Athletes are at the

heart of everything we do, so it wouldn't be a Nike parade without a few popular faces on the runway," says Juliana Nguyen, marketing director at Nike Pacific.

MSFW INDUSTRY DAY. The impressive list of speakers includes Yasmin Sewell (the consultant who helped launch the careers of Rick Owens and Pierre Hardy), Jodie Fox (from Shoes of Prey) and Gordon Devin, the general manager of Lululemon. RU

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