

Perry's project

Red carpet fashion favourite Alex Perry tells Neos Kosmos about his upcoming role as designer mentor on *Project Runway*, his own inspirations and his love for glamour

DELIMA SHANTI

Project Runway will be returning to the screens next week. But the usual bevy of design hopefuls will be met by a new line-up of fashion greats.

Spearheading the show will be Amazonian host Megan Gale, to be flanked by judges Kirrily Johnston and Jarred Clark. Meanwhile, the larger-than-life fashion designer Alex Perry will be filling in the well-polished shoes of his American counterpart Tim Gunn as the designers' mentor. With over 20 years' experience in the dog-eat-dog world of fashion under his belt, Perry is more than qualified to take on the job. Already, the former model agent has become something of a permanent fixture on *Australia's Next Top Model*, having judged on the showed for the past seven seasons.

Talking about his role as mentor and being more involved in the formative process of the up-and-coming designer, Perry says his role as mentor will be as a "reality-check button".

"It's about giving the designers a fresh set of eyes. I look at their designs and give them some constructive criticism on how I think things could be better to lead them on a good design path," he said.

Easily identifiable with his constant tan, immaculately chiselled figure and sunglasses perched on his head, the celebrated couturier also said he was expecting "fresh, new, brave design ideas" from the contestants, adding how it is important for them to set

themselves apart by taking risks and "have a new vision on what clothing is."

A self-proclaimed King of Bling, Perry is known for his designs that take cues from Old Hollywood glamour.

"The '40s and '50s was the golden age of fashion. I don't try to replicate that era, but I refer to it as great design principles. I'll reference things like that, but you've got to make it current; you have to give it a new lease on life," he said.

"I've got my own design aesthetics, but good design principles are good design principles, it doesn't matter whether you're doing evening wear, swimwear or resort."

With his incessant enthusiasm for design, it is easy to see that Perry is a good fit as *Project Runway's* mentor. The son of Greek immigrant parents, the Sydneysider got a foot in the fashion industry working for a mass-producing fashion house, later becoming a model agent. He started designing his own clothes in 1992 at the age of 28. Perry cites starting in the design business later in life as an advantage, explaining he had to learn from his

mistakes "the hard way" for the first six or seven years.

"I think young designers now are too quick, they want to open up their own business straight out of college," he said.

"I think it would have been a lot easier for me if I started out doing an apprenticeship at a fashion house, as many designers do traditionally."

When asked about challenges new designers breaking into the business today face, Perry talks about the vast competition they need to push through.

"It has always been competitive, but I think there are a lot more hurdles these days. Then designers need to think about financial realities to do with production that bigger brands can deal with but which may be difficult for newcomers," he said.

Perry may not have any of his own personal mentors when he started out, but he is certainly not short of inspiration in his line of work.

Being surrounded by glamorous women is all part of the job for Perry, but he sings praises for two women in particular, the most important of which is his wife, Mary Perry, who has stood

by Perry for over 20 years.

"It's always been about my wife, Mary. I've always thought she was beautiful, I've always loved her, her opinion always matters to me."

Perry also talked about his friend, muse and co-worker, Megan Gale, who will also be making an appearance on *Project Runway* as the show's host.

"She's a great role model for Australian women. I love the way she looks, I love her body shape, I think she's heaven."

And his final pearls of wisdom for budding designers?

"I know it sounds very old-fashioned, but you just have to work hard. If you're looking for a 9 to 5 job, then fashion is not for you," he explains.

"You've got to develop a thick skin, because as a designer what you do is subject to other people's opinions and tastes. Then you have to be able to be gracious when people look at your work and criticise it, and understand that's just somebody's taste."

The third season of *Project Runway* will return to the screens next Monday at 8.30 pm on Arena.



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