

David West Returns

Contributed by Jennifer Searle
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After a six-year sabbatical, David West returned to South African catwalks at the Sanlam South African Fashion Week's regional show in Cape Town and will be opening his first store in November.

David West

blazed onto the South African fashion scene in 1998 after graduating from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. His experimentation with fashion was awarded and he was soon dubbed one of the top young designers to watch. After five years he exited from the designer fashion scene because, as he puts it, "I was burnt out, frustrated and wanted a normal life."

West's normal life was working for Truworths for six years on the LTD and Ginger Mary brands. He considered Truworths to be the most fashionable retailer and said that he gained invaluable experience while working for them. "My people skills improved, my understanding of business and commerciality too. It really changed the way I look at designing a range, and taught me a lot about understanding my customer."

This year he decided to relaunch his company as he considered it to be the right time for his work. "I think people are far more supportive of local designers now than when I started. People like WhatIfTheWorld motivated me – just seeing the impact that they have had on Cape Town inspired me to get out of my safety zone and go for it again." He showed his Holbol collection first at the Design Indaba in February this year and then at the WhatIfTheWorld gallery in Woodstock.

Early this month he showcased his latest collection at the regional shows of Sanlam South African Fashion Week. The music, which migrated from meditative drumming to spacey climaxes, and clothing while complementary on stage had a deeper connection. "The collection was directly inspired by the music of Acid Mothers Temple and the Melting Paraiso UFO, a Japanese Psychedelic rock band that I saw live in Tokyo. It was specially edited and mixed for the show."

Models glided in with glazed faces and colours of the rainbow painted on their faces reminiscent of colour therapy and chakras. The clothing initially showed a juxtaposition of simple cuts with heavy detailing and pleating. According to West the make up came directly from the Holi festival in India. "[The basic ensembles] are almost 'classic' silhouettes for me, I have always used them and its become part of my handwriting," he said. "I looked at spiritual attire from the East – Lungi's, Sari's, Kurta's, Djebala's – and tried to interpret them in a modern way, this is why the braiding fell on the raglan sleeves as opposed to the normal neck position, almost hybridizing sporty and traditional."

The spiritual calmness of the show was abruptly broken with heavy detailing, pilgrim-style hats and a structured raincoat, which felt like a cross-reference between late 1960s sci-fi films and scenes from The Wizard of Oz. "For me that end sequence was all about the moon, the black sky, and twinkling stars. The witches were almost priestesses to me, strong black pillars parading under the full moon. The hats were taken directly from the 1973 Alejandro Jodorowsky movie, The Holy Mountain – a movie that is heavily referenced in the music of Acid Mothers Temple."

For West fashion shows are interactive and he prefers not to prescribe his intentions or inspirations. "One of the most rewarding things about doing a show is hearing peoples' ideas around what I have done. My process is very instinctive so [other people's] reflections on the work are as valid as mine. I think people are not used to exploring ideas when they watch a fashion show – unlike going to see an art exhibition, when you expect to not really be told what is

happening in the work, and are expected to think and draw conclusions. I think most people want to be entertained (at a show) and want to be told what the range is all about, which leads to fashion often being quite obvious and predictable. My work is open to interpretation, it's about ideas and moving forward. It also challenges notions of beauty by being comfortable with ambiguity and contrast." While his show really stood out against the usual ready-to-wear shows he just aimed to present a show, which was original and thought provoking. "People who know my work should not be too surprised by the garments as they are very much in line with what I have always offered, but I would hope the theme would be refreshing and new."

In addition to the melting pot of references within the show, there were certain technical talking points. Although impossible, it looked as if West had used pleated cotton and the repetitive tying and draping of fabric added an effortless look to each piece although they were quite specifically constructed. "The tying and knotting came from Hare Krishna references, but I moved these elements into unexpected garments and parts of the garment for example, legs of pants, back of shirts, the back of masculine blazers, adding heavy drape into a classic white shirt, the collars of jackets became knots. Another thing was splicing t-shirts into the back of jackets that gave them a nipped feeling. The pleating was very raw and intended to look like cotton, but was 100% Polyester."

Moving forward West is looking to build his business within South Africa. "My main focus is building my local business, something that I didn't get right the last time." He said that previously he thinks he tried to do too many things and expanded too quickly. "[This time my business] will be kept small and focused, in terms of both scale and product range, until such time as I am ready to expand. It will be a business focused on design and creativity first," he said and he added that he would do this by not trying to be everything to everybody. "[It is important to] focus the range and make it clear what you offer. Don't waste money on fancy shows, studios and marketing. Stay true to yourself and do everything your own way!"

Currently he stocks six shops in Cape Town and Johannesburg and he will also be opening his own store, Weekend Special, outside the Old Biscuit Mill on Albert Road, Woodstock on 7 November. The store will stock his entire collection and have special pieces added. "I have sub ranges like David West T-shirt, David West & (a collaborative T-shirt line) and the scissor label that will be a plain, basic T-shirt line." The shop will only be open on Saturdays. "This is the day when the area transforms from a busy industrial street to a shopping area, we will see how it goes and perhaps look at opening during the week, or on Sundays." Having previously exported to Japan successfully West that he would like to do this again. "Japan is the largest high fashion market in the world, also the world's second largest economy. They have a particular fondness for experimental design and clothing that is not 'sexy' first. They have a great interest in things that are from another country and that are rare and difficult to access."