

The colour! The power! The vision!

by Matt Potter

Every Halloween they drag it out: my humble Carpathian mountain beginnings, my early years sweating on the laboratory floor in Transylvania, my emergence as a Hollywood icon in the 1930's.

If you meet me at a party, in the fruit and vegetable section at the supermarket or on a blind date, don't bring it up. All those horror clichés are just that: my life is a different story now.

What's far more interesting is my fourth career in fashion. (My third was as a fixture on the washed-up memory lane dinner lecture circuit — also another story.)

Moving to Brisbane, Australia was a terrifying, risky move. But after visiting in the mid 1980's and experiencing Brisbane's warm, sunny climate and easy manner — a heady mix of southern California glamour and Transylvanian joie de vivre — I knew it was the place to put down permanent roots and pursue one of my two cherished dreams.

I moved into a backyard shed behind a clapboard house on Brunswick Street in inner-city New Farm, and waited for it to become fashionable around me. The shed was steel-framed, with sheet metal walls I carefully lined with a soft calico terracotta and burnt umber floral print, bought for a song at a fire sale.

Lining the shed was a bitch, fastening strips of wood to the steel frame, tacking the fabric to the wood, coating the head of each tack with coral nail varnish.

I filled the shed with secondhand office furniture, a cutting table and designing easel — all painted undercoat pink (I was an early exponent of that look) — and photos of friends from former lives: the Wolfman; Drac; the Mummy; my ungrateful Son; even my gold-digging, coat-tailer ex-wife.

And then it was finished. No air conditioning and unheated, not much bigger than a kennel and a shadow of my true dream, but it was real and it was mine and it had my undeniable stamp on it — my very first atelier.

Hanging my shingle on Brunswick Street — *Frank Einsteinz von Monster, Designer a la Mode*, down the driveway and turn left — was one of the proudest moments of my life.

Twenty years on and my name and image are fixtures on the Australian fashion scene. But it hasn't always been easy. My naturally shrinking violet personality took a beating on the runways, in the boutiques, and especially in the Brisbane fashion press. *Who is this man with the strange Carpathian mountain accent? What sort of fashion statement is khaki-coloured skin and bolts through the neck? Why does he hold all his shows in electric power stations?*

Through it all I kept my head above water — easier when you are eight foot tall — quietly plugging away with two collections a year: the summer collection, shown in August, which is winter in Brisbane, and the not-so-summer collection in February, when ironically it's hottest in Australia.

So what are my fashion influences? This amuses me as I sit at my larger-than-ever designing easel in my newest atelier on Merthyr Road, my original premises a distant charred memory (after a mysterious candlefire) just around the corner on Brunswick Street.

I have so many influences — I am constantly shocked by how many — from animals seen through the window of a local pet shop (the source of my 2005 summer collection, *Living in the Lappin of Luxury*), to the stock market crash of October 1997 (the source of my *Naked and Homeless* collection for not-so-summer 1998).

But individual designers? There is really only one.

Valentino Garavani.

Ah, Valentino! The colour! The power! The vision! His simple but dramatic designs outclass all rivals. His fashion empire spans continents and generations. His way with red is legendary.

So imagine my excitement when I heard a Valentino Retrospective was coming to the Queensland Art Gallery's Gallery of Modern Art! Right here in Brisbane. And now I would be seeing his work extremely up close and exquisitely personal!

Fashion friends begged me to see the exhibition with them. "Frank, you know more about Valentino than any highly-trained gallery guide would know," they said. "You must go with me / us / the group / the college / our entire town."

But worshipping at the altar of Valentino was something I had to do alone.

But what to wear? Basic black has always worked well for me. I know my figure flaws — boxy shoulders, loping arms, thick neck, knock knees (which no one ever sees, but still, they haunt me) — so a simple single-breasted jacket, tailored trousers, crew neck tee and uncomplicated boots are slimmingly best.

And isn't it better to present yourself simply, as the person you really are?

The air was moist as I drove into the city and parked beneath the Queensland Performing Arts Centre. Walking to the Art Gallery, my boots echoing amongst the endless concrete of the car park with each step, there were the usual stares and parents hurriedly telling their children not to point — the perils of celebrity — and soon I was inside.

The new Gallery of Modern Art is an impressive building, glass and gleaming metal, large exhibition spaces with movable walls and a breathtaking sense of the possible. Hallowed ground, I paid the admission fee — I would have paid triple, quadruple, quintuple! — and gave my ticket to the attendant outside the exhibition entrance.

The Valentino Retrospective? How shall I describe it? It was butter and cream and caviar and designer stubble, red and pink and black and white, taffeta and chiffon and silk voile and ruffles and layering and beading. It was a vision from the visionary of visionaries, a dream to last a lifetime and a nightmare to last forever.

Oooing and ahing, I breathed in the scent of workmanship and detail and yes, oh yes, the mighty green-eyed goddess of envy rose in my throat like bile, for how could I — or anyone — possibly compete?

I wanted to sink against a gallery wall and just gaze, for most of all, more than anything, my brain and my body and all my senses were limp, with exhaustion.

So what were the dresses like individually? Don't ask me, see it for yourself! Or go online and buy the catalogue.

But for me, buying the catalogue could never be enough. I don't know what possessed me — a force of nature coursing through me like lightning, a current so strong all thoughts of propriety were mercilessly quashed — but I had to have a piece of Valentino. Not had to. MUST.

I looked around the exhibition hall. I was alone amongst the mannequins. But then I saw movement against the doorway: a large, shiny black-booted bruiser security guard, crew-cutted and beamy and ruthlessly moustached, the kind of lesbian who gives both hope and despair to the perpetrators of women's haute couture.

Was she looking my way?

I sauntered around the floor. Gusts of cool air blew through the gallery, ruffling the fabric, but the security guard — her name badge said 'Barb' — stood stock still, her crewcut ramrod straight. She looked at me out of the corner of her eye as I passed.

"Lovely day," I said.

She grunted.

People say there's a lot of pressure on women to look good all the time, but clearly some are resisting.

I smiled, and executing a perfect 180 degree catwalk turn, disappeared amongst the mannequins again.

Crouching behind a 1960's mid-orange evening gown with bell sleeves and African-style detailing at the neck, I snuck a look to make sure Barb couldn't see, then surveyed the choice before me. Which would work best with my basic black ensemble? And which would work best with the décor in my atelier? My plan was to dip

the garment in wax, firstly to preserve it so it could be framed and mounted on the wall, and secondly to make it impossible for my emasculating also-ran shrewish ex-wife to steal it and wear it herself.

I saw what would work. I tiptoed — not so easy in boots — to a late 1960's, floor-length white chiffon evening gown with huge, huge, huge black dots. Sure it was probably size 10, or 8, or something, but of all the dresses, it looked big enough. With lightning speed, I slipped it over the head of the mannequin. It ruffled so softly in my hands I had to catch it before it fell to the floor. Thank goodness it wasn't crackly taffeta or lead-lined linen — in the chapel-like interior, any noise would have resonated against all four walls.

The chiffon fell over my flattened crown without a murmur, the folds of the bodice and skirt cascading across my shoulders and over my arms. And then panic! The cowl neckline caught on my neck bolts! My instinct was to wrench it down, but the prospect of ripping that divine fabric? Popping my head above the now-naked mannequin, I saw Barb's broad back turned my way, and breathed out.

I struggled out of the dress. Unbuttoning my jacket as I hunkered down, I turned the chiffon arms inside the dress and then folded it in three. Placing the dress across my chest so it looked like a shirt, I smoothed it out and then buttoned my jacket over it, tucking the edges under my lapels. There was no mirror but I did my best to make it appear perfectly normal for a tall man to be wearing a bulky shirt of white chiffon with a large black spot lurching up from the crotch, under his simple black jacket.

And I walked past Barb and out through the entrance to the exhibition.

It was that easy.

Around the corner but still in the building, I gathered my thoughts, felt beads of sweat break out on my forehead, and breathed out again. And was suddenly gripped by a desperate need to urinate.

I found the toilet, rushed inside, closed the door behind me and sat down. One of my quirks is that I always sit down, no matter what I'm doing. Being so tall, my knees touched my chin.

I was reaching around for the toilet paper, white chiffon still inside my jacket pressed between my legs and chest, when a ham-fisted knock thundered on the door.

"Open up! I know you've got a frock in there!"

Two shiny black boots appeared under the door.

I had to think quickly. It was either her, or me and the dress.

And while some people might think it was conforming or reverting to type, please consider the circumstances.

I stood up, pulled my trousers up, tucked the dress inside my jacket, turned around, gripped the toilet bowl with my arms, and like I'd seen in the climax of my favourite Ginger Rogers' movie *Forever Female*, ripped the toilet from the floor, charged out of the cubicle and with a massive groan hurled it through a window. It smashed on the ground two storeys below, a ceramic splintering heard as far as Bees Knees City Realty three blocks away on Cordelia Street.

Barb screamed and ran out of the room. She might have been a scary diesel dyke, but I had an entire history of horror at my disposal and in a pickle, I wasn't afraid to use it. And it was amazing how freeing it felt — almost a weight off my shoulders — getting back to my roots after more than seventy years.

Miraculously I made it back to my atelier with the dress, but it's hot, wanted in all six states, two territories and overseas as well. So I'm laying low until the Valentino Retrospective leaves town. My designing career is probably over.

But with every slammed door a new one opens. For my fifth career I'm going to become a porn star. Because inside every eight-foot man with khaki-coloured skin, a flat head and bolts through his neck, is an *Inches* coverboy screaming to get out.

