



Fashion fusion

Words Nadine Fares Kahil

Ella Zahlan's multicultural background paves her way onto the international fashion scene



At the core of ebanese designer Ella Zahlan's vision is a cross-culturally influenced work ethic to create a strong image of femininity. After recently presenting her autumn/winter 2007-2008 collection in Rome at the AltaRomAltamoda fashion week – a great success for the internationally acclaimed designer as she is the only Arab female to have done so – Ella takes a breather to talk to Skin about her journey so far.

How did you become a designer?

I was born in Africa and raised between there, Europe and the Middle East, so I ultimately grew up with a fusion of cultures. I stepped into this wonderful world directly after graduating from C.A.M.M. (Ecole Artistique de la Mode Moderne). I trained myself by traveling to Paris and Rome, where I entered this amazing world of design whose wide doors led me to where I am now.

What is design to you?

For me design is a passion, a craft, but mostly a creation. I fell in love with the field ages ago, and I backed it up by my education and studies. I believe that fashion design is an art in itself – it keeps the brain searching for imaginative creations. It is this search that is at the core of design for me.



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How did you deal with obstacles?

I faced a lot at the beginning, like everyone else I suppose. But I faced them with a belief in myself and my talent. I think the most important factor in overcoming all difficulties is patience. I was patient and it paid off at the end.

Has being female created more difficulty for you in the industry?

Not at all, on the contrary. Being a woman, I understand perfectly what a woman needs, what she wants to show in her dress. Also, a woman prefers to have another woman as a confidant rather than a man, and who better to hold that position than her designer?

What's it like being in the midst of so many male designers in the Middle East?

I feel that they that they do take me into consideration. I am on the same line as them but with a different style in the fashion field generally, and in haute couture specifically. I consider myself the only flower in this big garden!

You're not big on accessories, are you?

My main interest is fashion. Accessories are important to me, but they are neither

my priority nor my main focus. Sometimes I make a gesture with certain VIP clients in creating a full wedding package of bed linens, towels and nightgowns to maintain a particular theme, but this takes a lot of energy on my behalf. Searching for a signature line that can express my style and at the same time not cost a fortune is not exactly my insignia of creativity.

What sort of materials do you prefer to work with?

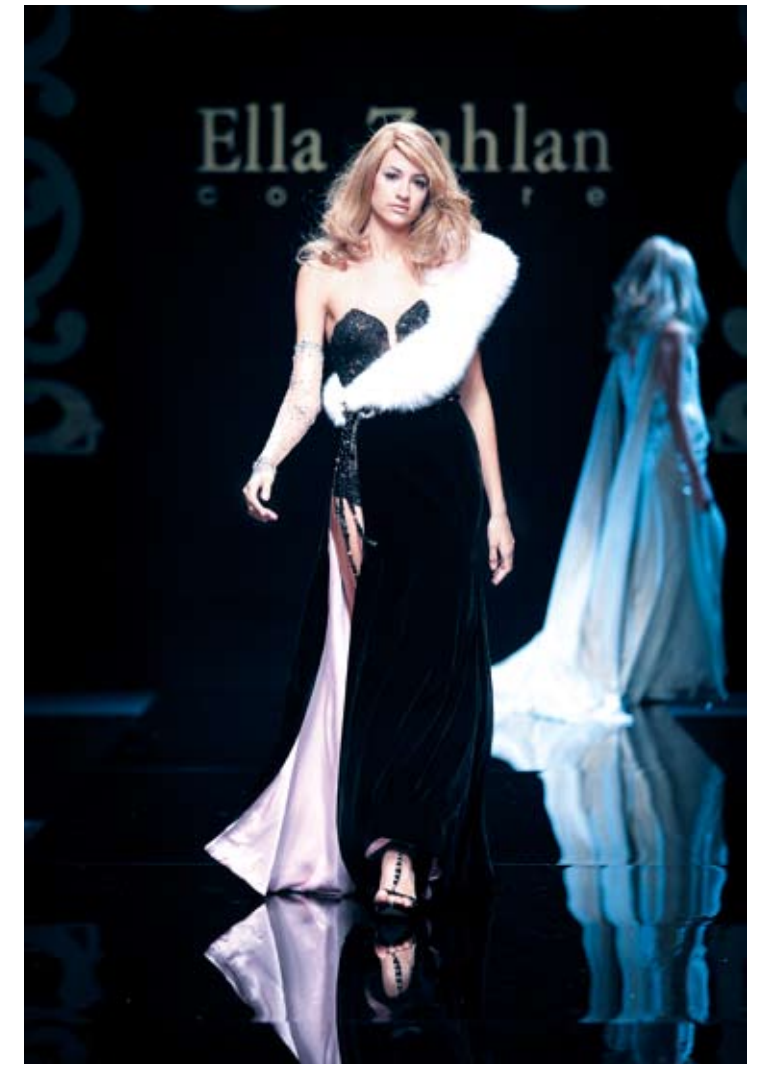
I always like to renew them, depending on the spirit or the theme I am creating. But I have a certain inclination towards tulle, chiffon and lace. They give a certain sense of femininity. They tend to sort of fly on the catwalk, and they are fascinating to work with while draping or cutting. And the end result is often miraculous. They make a woman elegant, thinner, dashing and full of zeal.

How is it being member of the Council for Arab Business Women?

I am very proud of being an active member. I find myself with a lot of friends and acquaintances from different fields gathering to prove that the role of women and what they can do, if given a chance, is powerful, effective and important to the economic, artistic and social elements in society. As for being the first

Ella Zahlan

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international Arab designer in the official calendar, it is exhilarating. Many may join in afterwards, but being the first will always be remembered, and I am quite proud of myself.

In terms of fashion, where do you think Arab women succeed and fail?

The Arab woman succeeds when she knows what to wear and when to wear it, but fails when she follows the fashion without taking into consideration her body type, her style, her age, or the occasion.

How has presenting in Rome helped you?

I am at the beginning of my journey towards international fame. I am working towards this goal with a carefully studied plan. This post is the fruit of many years of hard work, during which I gained a lot of experience and, of course, it is a huge responsibility at the same time. Reaching Rome after the meticulous study of my file by the committee of AltaRomAltaModa and the approval of my involvement came unexpectedly. I was the only one accepted along with a German designer among hundreds of applications presented from all around the world. That was quite an experience for me.

What do you think are the steps necessary to reach international podiums?

To reach the international catwalks is a huge step in a career; it is the goal of any fashion designer. In order to attain this position, the designer should create a strong image for him or herself and maintain it. He or she should always present new creations and innovative concepts so that they catch the eyes of the public and the press. Once there, the designer should maintain their rank in order to reach the next one by mesmerising everybody watching with their originality.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

We will have to wait and see. What I know without a doubt is that I have a plan and a developed strategy. I shall work hard, putting my goals in front of me so I can accomplish my dream.

What advice would you give today's emerging designers?

They should be true to themselves about their talents. They should know that if they do not love what they do, they shall not succeed. It is very hard work. They should not be attracted by the rewards of this field, which pass in just a few hours as opposed to the many hours and hours of hard work that you need to invest in your creations..