



 @GAVINRAJAH

WHERE IS THE LOVE?

How can the fashion industry grow when there is no support between designers and organisers, asks *Gavin Rajah*

There's a line in Arthur Miller's acclaimed play about the 17th-century Salem witch trials that goes, 'PROCTOR, looking at Abigail now, the faintest suggestion of a knowing smile on his face: "What's this mischief here?"' My story has nothing to do with witches, nor any dark wizardry, nor is it set in the late 17th century. But there are clear similarities between my tale and the events in Salem.

My story is about people in the fashion industry; nothing more, nothing less. But first, the facts. I designed a collection and showed it at Cape Town Fashion Week in July this year. Someone then accused me of copying a Lebanese designer's dress. This person posted images on social media and went through my past collections to find pieces he said were also copies of other designers' dresses.

I would not normally pay heed to such accusations, but in this instance I was urged to do so by my clients, my friends and many other business colleagues. While something may objectively look the same, it does not mean it is the same. I also acknowledge that people reacted to this allegation based only on what was fed to them. I tried to manage this as best I could and decided to open our studio to the public so they could see my design process, our references and even the dress in question. It was a great thing to do because people who had a keen interest in my work were invited to our studio and, having been presented with the facts at hand, were left to make up their own minds. In some way, though, it left me

feeling like I had been burgled; like I had my personal space invaded.

It was a dress – perhaps not an unusual silhouette – which, after some research, turns out to have previously existed in more than a dozen variations, including one created by Erté, the famed art deco costume and set designer, in the 1960s. But what floored me was not having to defend my innocence or assert a dress as my original creation; it was rather the reaction of some people in the fashion industry and those claiming to be part of it.

Never in my life had I encountered people so determined to burn someone at the stake; so desperate to find ammunition to justify their hateful behaviour. Veiled by the anonymity of the internet, people vented their opinions, passed judgment without first-hand knowledge and embarked on cyber-bullying on a massive scale. Ex-staff members were approached to speak, editors were called for opinions and I was called upon endlessly to explain my dress. Everyone expressed so much concern for the 'fragility' of the industry, while conveniently getting their 15 seconds of fame. Anyone who could form an opinion with 140 characters did so.

Perhaps I should explain why I think this happened. Last year I was asked by my accuser to be part of a fashion show in Durban. It irked me that established

and well-known designers were not part of the line-up. Most notably, one of South Africa's best designers, Gideon, was not invited to show. On speaking to Gideon I came to hear of the rather autocratic selection process and the nepotism that lay behind the show. So I wore a T-shirt at my showing with the slogan, 'Why isn't Gideon showing?' I have since learned, to my cost, that hell hath no fury like a Durban fashionista scorned – whence comes, I believe, the motivation to try to shame me.

So what is our industry coming to when we are not permitted to question an organiser's motives or query the exclusion of designers on platforms paid for by taxpayers' money? Rumour has it this organiser wants to take on all Fashion Weeks in the country so perhaps this is a little bit of a power struggle – a flexing of some event-management muscle? Is this the type of person who believes that public assassination of another will lend gravitas to their motives or character or endear them to the fashion industry at large?

Were we in any other profession, would this situation have been handled in this manner? I think not. Just about every profession has a governing body or professional association that adheres to a code of conduct. Many of these associations represent the interests of their members and would have ensured a due process of mediation and enquiry. But there is no such support for me or others who may find themselves in the same circumstances.

Don't get me wrong: I understand the sniping and backbiting that characterises the fashion industry the world over – I did call a previous collection #itsadirtybusiness, after all. But what I don't understand is how we can all be talking of building an industry when we are so hell-bent on destroying each other. Where is the support that we should be showing each other? How is it that we have come to this? Where is the love? I think we deserve better... We owe it to ourselves to be better human beings. □

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