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# RUNWAYmoment

With just \$200, a makeshift sewing studio and three days to “make it work,” three talented fashion design students meet the challenge to create show-stopping looks for the runway.

## project: Creativ Catwalk

by Daryl Brower

It's every budding designer's dream to watch his or her creation walk down the runway to applause and admiration. On October 19, 2008, twelve Canadian fashion students were given the golden opportunity to do just that. Modeled after the hugely popular reality TV series *Project Runway*, Project Creativ Catwalk, which took place at Toronto's famed Creativ Festival, challenged design teams from four different colleges to create a compelling look for the 21st century inspired by a fashion era from the past. The rules were strict, but simple. Each team was given a small workspace on the Creativ Festival show floor, a sewing machine and serger (generously supplied by Bernina, Pfaff, Husqvarna/Viking and Janome) and \$200 with which to purchase fabrics and supplies from vendors on the show floor. The designers started sewing at 11 A.M. Friday, stopping at 3:30 on Sunday afternoon to send their looks down the runway to face the critical eyes of four judges: Vogue Patterns' editor-in-chief Kathy Marrone, Vogue Patterns' fabric and notions editor Penny Payne, designer/author Kenneth King and Jonathan Shimoni, manager of King Textiles, a hot spot for fabric in Toronto. The winning team, three second-year students from Toronto's George Brown College, used the famed Russian artist/designer Erté, and his costumes from the art deco period (1916), as their inspiration, pulling together an incredible look that included a detailed dress, reversible jacket, and artful accessories. The designers earned admiration for their focus on detail, creativity and interpretation of the challenge.

Prior to the Creativ Festival, George Brown College held its own mini competition to decide which students would make the team. The three chosen: Andrea Tucker, Julie DaCosta and



Bottom left: George Brown College: Julie DaCosta, Selina Tan, Andrea Tucker, teacher Carolyn Perry Donan. Here: The winning outfit inspired by Erté.



Selina Tan, had never worked together before heading to the event. They did, however, share the common thread of a childhood steeped in sewing.

Andrea Tucker, 37, says she was practically born with a sewing needle in her hand. As a girl she had dreams of studying fashion, but ultimately decided to opt for a more practical career path. Tucker spent a very successful ten years as a computer engineer, but her heart just wasn't in it. "I used to spend my lunch hours walking down Queen Street [the creative center of Toronto] staring into shop windows and hoping that some day I would get to fulfill my dream," she recalls. Two years ago she decided to stop dreaming and start doing by enrolling in the fashion program at George Brown. "I love it," she says. "I'm learning the techniques and secrets that go into making

## HONORABLE MENTION

We'd like to give a big round of applause to the three other teams that participated in the Creativ Catwalk Challenge: Below: International Academy of Design & Technology (Ciara, Poppy and Andrea); Bottom: Ontario College of Art & Design (Joanne, Hannah and Lauren); Right: Seneca College (Dianne, Berni and Jasmine)

a quality garment."

Julie DaCosta, 26, grew up in a family where "all the women sewed" and has been designing since she was a little girl. "My mother still has some of the booklets I used to draw designs for me and my dolls," she says, noting that she first sat down at a

sewing machine at age 6. "I made my Barbie a pair of jeans. They didn't fit right, but they were definitely jeans and I somehow got the concept of how to sew them." DaCosta's mother and grandmother taught her how to stitch, and fittingly, the industrial machine DaCosta sews on at home is the same one her mother used while pregnant with Julie. "I think I was destined to do something in this field," she laughs.

As a teenager in China, Selina Tan, now 26, spent her summer holidays helping out at her parent's clothing factory. When she immigrated to Canada four years ago, she quickly found work as a sewing machine operator. Having only worked on industrial machines, Tan says her biggest challenge was getting used to working on a model made for home sewing. "Working on a home machine was totally new for me," she says. "I didn't even know what one looked like." Not that her unfamiliarity hindered her sewing in any way. "Selina is a sewing goddess," says DaCosta. "We almost had to scrap the jacket on the last day because we thought there was no way we'd finish in time. But Selina said she could do it. Andrea and I left her with the machine while we cut fabric and made accessories. She was amazing." Tan shrugs off the praise, saying she was just getting the most she could out of the whole Creativ Catwalk experience. "I learned what it's like to work under high pressure," she says



"And now I know that I can handle it."

And the pressure certainly was on during the competition. "The most challenging part of the project was working in such a short time frame," says Tucker. "We designed a garment that was complex and ambitious and it was something we hadn't been specifically taught how to make." Then there was the pressure to find the right materials with little time to shop. "The fabric we had originally chosen for the top of our dress was sold out by the time we went back to purchase it," explains Tucker. "The color was key to our design so we had to scramble to come up with a new fabric with the same quality and wow factor." When the team couldn't find the fabric they needed for the jacket lining they created their own. "We were desperately looking for a red lining—something striking that would look fabulous when it was flipped inside out—but couldn't find anything that was right on the show floor," says DaCosta. "The solution? Use quilting stitches to transform a solid fabric into a stunning all-over embroidered design. "The lovely ladies at the Quilt Bat [an exhibitor at the show] let me use one of their industrial quilting machines to make it," DaCosta explains. The team also got creative with accessories, using silk cocoons found on the show floor to construct a beaded necklace and making felted flowers for the hat.

Also complicating matters was the simple fact that Tan, DaCosta, and Tucker had never worked together before. "We didn't always agree with one another on ideas," notes DaCosta. Not that there were any *Project Runway*-style catfights among the team members. Instead, differing opinions and the frustration of not having the leisure to shop for the exact materials they wanted resulted in both compromise and improvisation. "When you are working in a stressful situation you have to be adaptable," says Tucker. "Our strength was being able to come together as a team and do our absolute best. We utilized our individual strengths while maintaining a teamwork mentality." DaCosta, Tucker and Tan are quick to credit their version of Tim Gunn (the ever-patient fashion mentor on *Runway*), teacher Carolyn Perry Donan for her support. "She couldn't physically help us with the work, but she provided motivation and gave us confidence in our work," says Tucker. "We wanted to make her proud."

## SEE YOU ON THE RUNWAY...

You're in! The Creativ Festival is looking for new teams to take their turn on the catwalk. The 2009 Creativ Catwalk Challenge is open to all college or university fashion arts students (teams of three students per school). To register your team, contact the Creativ Festival at (800) 291-2030 or (905) 773-2092. Want to judge for yourself who should be auf'd? Get yourself to Toronto for the Creativ Festival, October 16-18, 2009. Visit [www.creativfestival.ca](http://www.creativfestival.ca) for more information and to watch a video of the 2008 competition.

The designers entered the contest hoping it would expand their learning experience beyond the classroom and stimulate their creativity—something that definitely occurred as the project came together. "We started with one concept, but new ideas kept coming to us as we were working," says DaCosta. "The dress and the accessories all just sort of evolved." Tan was thrilled with the opportunity to put what she'd learned in class into real world practice. "The best part for me was actually working on the project," she says. For Tucker the buzz came from getting the chance to see what she could do under pressure. "I was just excited to be a part of it," she says. "I felt like the whole experience somehow validated me as a designer." DaCosta says the experience gave her new confidence in her talents. "I'd been feeling kind of uncreative and I thought that if I could make the team all that effort and work would make me feel good about myself," she says. "And I did. It was an exhilarating experience—I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The stress, the pressure, even the frustration, was all good. I loved the challenge. It gave me that push to do something great!"

So what does the future hold for these design hopefuls? Both Tan and Tucker envision themselves finding work as a design assistant or a patternmaker after graduation. "I want a job where I can focus on technique," says Tan. Tucker is a little more specific. "I'd love to develop a collection of lingerie or accessories. It would be amazing to have my own clothing line," she says. DaCosta is a little less defined. "I'd love to go out and get a job right away, but I also want to learn more," she says. She's considering an internship with a designer she admires, but isn't sure she can financially manage going unpaid for a year. Then there's her passion for costumes. "I'm also thinking about getting into wardrobing for movies and theatre—I think I would be very much at home doing that sort of thing. But who knows what can happen between then and now?" Having seen firsthand what these up-and-comers can do, we're fairly certain that the members of this talented team all have a bright future in fashion. ●