



# Aloha Zen

*Lynne O'Neill is one of the most prominent producers in the fashion industry, though you've likely never heard her name. She meets with Lee Suckling to talk about a career that has gone from runway to runway.*

**L**ynne O'Neill has been one of the most sought-after fashion show producers in the world for three decades, but you'll only ever find her in behind the big black curtains backstage. "That's where I'm comfortable, in the background," she says. "The fashion world can be a stressful place, so it's my job to help make it calmer."

Born in Hawaii to Japanese parents, O'Neill's career began in the late 1970s when she moved to San Francisco. "I was co-ordinating volunteers at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, then I had an opportunity to go to [department store] Macy's, to work in PR and co-ordinate special events like the Macy's flower shows," she says. "It was meant to be a six month job, but I ended up being promoted to run the fashion shows and stayed five years."

Macy's was known for said fashion shows in the early 1980s – then low-key affairs where designers would personally appear and often sign their fragrances for customers, much like a book signing.

"During that time I worked with the real Gianni Versace, the real Tommy Hilfiger, the real Perry Ellis, the real Calvin Klein ... it was quite the experience," O'Neill recalls. "It was the Harvard of event show production."

Macy's was very fashion-forward at this point, O'Neill says. "We were on the cusp of commercialised fashion, but it still wasn't mainstream. It was high fashion. It was something very special.

"I remember doing shows with the Missonis and doing the first Comme Des Garçons show. I knew they were big designers, but I didn't know how lucky I was to be working directly with them. That kind of thing doesn't happen anymore."

Working several years for Macy's gave O'Neill a fundamental education in creating a fashion show that worked. "It's a creative process," she says. "Who is the designer? What is the idea? What is the message? These are all things the producer needs to know.

"It's then all about logistics. There's a technical formula to making a show work and we had to do it all ourselves. At that time, there were no professional dressers, no tailors backstage sewing and steaming. We were trying to figure all of that out.

"Today, I know every element of a show. I know how long it all takes, because we used to have to be so hands-on."

In the early 1990s, American fashion changed as the U.S. sought to put on its own fashion week for the first time, something previously exclusive to the European fashion capitals.

"New York Fashion Week emerged as a fully-formed production," says O'Neill, who was involved in the first ever NYFW in 1993, alongside designers such as Isaac Mizrahi, Tommy Hilfiger, Donna Karan and Carolina Herrera.

"As a producer, suddenly I wasn't so hands-on with the details. We had casting directors. We had dressers. We had people coming from theatre production. It was a major international event and I had the best seat in the house – I saw it all come together in the moment."

The theatre-like elements of a fashion show make it a "hypnotic" experience, O'Neill says. "Everything is quiet for a while, and we're all standing backstage. That first beat comes on, I call the first model, then on come the lights.

"Everybody gets to see the stage design, the staging, the costumes ... it's like a dance. All of these things happen at once. It's continuous and all really beautiful."

Just like in theatre, a fashion show producer always needs to be prepared for drama. "There are always things that are going to happen," O'Neill says. "I've had three models falling in one fashion show, and one time I had two or three of them faint.

"They don't eat, they're standing in high heels, it's early in the morning, they're standing under hot lights, they're undernourished ... and I just have to keep going. I just keep calling, because the show must go on."

Such a reputation for pulling it all together earned O'Neill an immortalisation on the TV show *Sex and the City*. She was portrayed by actress Margaret Cho in the episode 'The Real Me', albeit Cho's characterisation was far more potty-mouthed than O'Neill really is.

"I don't swear like that, it was a caricature for TV!" she says, referencing Cho's character's constant use of the 'F' word.

"I didn't actually know [the show's writer] Michael Patrick King was going to use me as the inspiration for a character. I knew he was doing a fashion show scene and he came to all these different shows because he wanted to get it right. I was introducing him to all these people I thought would make great characters, but somehow, it was me who made it [into the script].

"It's the episode where Sarah Jessica Parker falls on the runway and I just keep





*“I don’t love or hate any trends. I consider them all relevant. Mixing high and low is an all-pervasive trend that has really taken hold and is the way most of us dress today.”*













calling. Heidi Klum comes down the walks right over Sarah Jessica. That's how I run my shows. I just keep calling!"

O'Neill remains humbled by her dash with fame, preferring to be behind the scenes. "I love it backstage," she says. "That's my natural habitat. I get really calm just before a show: My husband calls it my 'Aloha Zen' – something that comes from being from Hawaii.

"I just feel really comfortable back there, my headphones on, talking to lighting, talking to the DJ, making sure everything is going to happen on cue. People think it's hysteria back there, but it's actually really quiet."

O'Neill's 'Aloha Zen' is taking her home to Hawaii this year for Honolulu Fashion Week. "I've spent two or three months back in Honolulu every year, and always wondered how I could work there.

"I never thought it'd be possible to do my job in Hawaii. But to come back home from New York and do what I do, I feel so fortunate."

O'Neill says Honolulu Fashion Week has a uniquely "island" influence, though it doesn't stop short of being high fashion. "Hawaiian design really influences globally," she explains. "You can see it at the Prada store in Florence, at Zara, in Marc Jacobs, it's everywhere.

"Yes, we're still going to have some board shorts and some great t-shirts, but we'll see the Aloha shirt redesigned and used in really different ways. It's modern, reimagined Hawaiian fashion."

This year, there is also an Aussie connection at Honolulu Fashion Week. Event partner Hawaiian Airlines is facilitating four designers from the airline's flight destinations to go "runway to runway" with their collections. "We're really excited to have Ellery come from Sydney, alongside designers from Seoul, Tokyo, and New York," O'Neill says.

Honolulu has the potential to be the capital of Pacific fashion, O'Neill believes. "It might be the most geographically isolated place on earth, but it's actually in the centre of everything," she says, noting it is the perfect location for Eastern and Western fashion to meet. "And of course, what better place to be the world's central swimwear market!" she laughs.

