

# Honour role

Welcomed into the *LEAGUE* of haute couture, a LABEL founded by Australians is earning *STAR* approval.

WORDS: HARRIET QUICK

**K**neeling down with her gaze fixed on the grand sweeping skirt of a midnight-blue gown, Tamara Ralph gestures with her hands. “Just a centimetre up,” she says. A seamstress swiftly pins the new hem length in place and the fittings model gracefully exits the room, the voluminous skirt, topped by a bodice covered in hand-cut Perspex flowers, fills the atelier like a cloud. Ralph, petite and blonde and wearing an ivory shift dress with nude flats, appears doll-size by comparison.

The 32-year-old Australian-born creative director and designer of Ralph & Russo, a label she set up in London in 2007 with her 34-year-old fiancé, fellow Australian and company CEO Michael Russo, is preparing for her second haute couture show, and the Paris atelier is buzzing with intense activity. One room is occupied by the brand’s Lesage-trained embroiderers, who painstakingly hand-sew every tiny pearl, bead, sequin and feather onto acres of tulle, chiffon and silk gazar. The work is so intense, the detail so minute, it is almost too excruciating to watch. In the main reception room, finished pieces, including a crystal-embellished column and a one-shouldered, side-bustled siren gown, hang awaiting their catwalk debut. Even without adorning a model, the pieces have presence. The 370-square-metre space on the Rue François 1er is gently perfumed with the scent of Roja Dove candles. “The oud note is a particular favourite of our Middle Eastern customers,” says Russo.

Similar preparatory scenes are being played out at couture houses throughout Paris, as creative directors and their highly skilled ateliers work towards what is the finest showcase of fashion, aspiration and

imagination: the biannual haute couture collections. The haloed area around the Rue François 1er has a special ambience: it’s home to Givenchy, Christian Dior and other fabled Parisian names and has conjured up the most spectacular of dresses over the decades. Right now, as if in preparation for the arrival of the world’s titled, wealthy, powerful and privileged, its pavements appear to have been scrubbed clean.

In the rarefied, elite world of haute couture, Ralph & Russo is the new kid on the block. Last year, the company was invited to show on the official haute couture schedule. In cuisine terms, the accolade is comparable to three Michelin stars. There is no greater affirmation of quality and craftsmanship than the recognition of haute couture status by French fashion body, the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*. “We expect savoir faire, which is being lost, and Ralph & Russo have it,” said Didier Grumbach, the *Chambre*’s former president. Designers Ulyana Sergeenko and Bouchra Jarrar, as well as revived houses Schiaparelli and Vionnet, are other newcomers to the couture “club”, each of them helping to redefine luxury in the 21st century.

“We only wanted to show on the Paris haute couture schedule and we kept the brand exclusive until that point,” explains Russo of the company’s great expectations. Russo, a serial entrepreneur who has previously built successful start-ups in various fields including music video streaming, oversees the big-picture strategy. Wearing a smart navy suit, he talks quickly and moves nimbly around the atelier as Ralph oversees the fittings of her Cinderella creations. Both small, slim and attractive, the couple make a model pair.

**THE WORK IS SO INTENSE, THE DETAIL SO MINUTE, IT IS ALMOST TOO EXCRUCIATING TO WATCH**



Tamara Ralph and Michael Russo.



Fine artisans' details are a signature of the label.



Backstage at Ralph & Russo's haute couture show in Paris.



A skilled artisan works her magic.



Final adjustments made pre-runway.

“The business has grown by word of mouth and by making one beautiful dress after another and being recommended,” says Ralph, who started making dresses for private clients in Sydney. “Suddenly we were dressing 20 then 40 ladies and now we have hundreds of clients. The ages range from three months to 90 years old,” she says. (Somewhere in the world there is a lucky baby with a bespoke Ralph & Russo dusty pink coat.) While some clients might order one special-occasion piece, and others an entire wardrobe, or a bridal gown with a price tag reaching into the stratosphere, transactions and expectations are high. Royalty, high society, music and movie idols are all Ralph & Russo clients, and the well-documented patronage of Angelina Jolie, Beyoncé and Sheikha Mozah of Qatar has helped turn the brand into a global name.

Over the years the house has gained a reputation for exquisite gowns and tailoring that is classic and romantic in its ideals of femininity. Cue 1950s New Look silhouettes in duchesse satin covered with crystal beads; belted siren dresses in lilac embroidered tulle; and grand gowns that “make” those red carpet moments. As the world’s ultra wealthy rediscover the joys of exquisite one-off pieces (which can be altered and changed by the atelier over the years), Ralph & Russo’s fortunes have blossomed. Turnover has increased 400 per cent year-on-year, according to Russo, and the company now employs close to 100 staff.

For Ralph’s part, her journey to the top echelon of fashion seems almost predestined. Four generations of her family

have been involved in fashion and dressmaking, including her mother, grandmother and great grandmother, all of whom have been involved in designing and making clothes for Australian dignitaries and society ladies. Her grandfather was a master shoemaker. “I spent a lot of time with my grandmother; she taught me how to drape and stitch and how to create patterns,” says Ralph. Her mother, who now works as an interior designer, also worked in fashion. “I would watch them sew until I was allowed to do it myself. I’d drive my mother crazy cutting up and modernising designs from her library of *Vogue* patterns. Apparently, when I was four, I would refuse to draw anything except dresses,” she says, laughing. And by the time Ralph was 10, she was often found sewing in her room.

“The icons of fashion and Paris couture were so removed from everything in Sydney. I loved all of them; I had a huge wall covered in images and portraits – Armani, Dior, Valentino – everyone,” says Ralph of her formative years. After graduating from Sydney’s Whitehouse Institute of Design, Ralph left Australia for London, aged 23, her suitcase and Kylie Minogue’s address in hand (she’s close friends with Minogue’s personal assistant).

On her first day, and by chance, she bumped into Russo on Fulham Road as he was walking back from a Chelsea football match. The two Australians bonded and soon business and romance blossomed and plans were mapped out. Russo’s business savvy and Ralph’s design prowess make for a successful union. Both share an



Exquisite details embellish haute couture gowns.



Ralph & Russo haute couture autumn/winter '14/'15.



Backstage at Ralph & Russo.



Ready to walk at the show.

implicit understanding that haute couture requires exceptional client service and discretion. If a client desires a bridal gown so voluminous that it's too big to be sent in the largest boxes permitted on an aircraft, so be it. (The dress in question was shipped by freight.)

If a customer requires a last-minute fitting in Qatar, Ralph will hop on a plane. Money is no object but time often is, and at this end of the design spectrum, haute couture clients are competitive.

Right now, the clock is ticking on the fitting schedule. British milliner Stephen Jones arrives at the atelier. "The hats are spectacular, darling," says Ralph upon greeting Jones. The duo quickly get to work with Jones fitting a black tulle hat that glides over the head like butterfly wings. Meticulous adjustments are made before it is given the thumbs up. Jones, having worked with John Galliano in the haute couture ateliers at Dior, has an expert eye. "It's amazing to see such a young designer with such an authority of cut. The work really is grand," he comments.

The burgeoning business recently attracted passive investment by British telecommunications billionaire John Caudwell. "We have turned down a lot of offers, preferring to let the business grow organically," says Russo. The deal, however, was too good to miss and the investment

**"THE BUSINESS HAS GROWN BY WORD OF MOUTH AND BY MAKING ONE BEAUTIFUL DRESS AFTER ANOTHER"**

will allow growth to the next level. The Paris atelier was the first step and new showrooms in London on Sloane Street, Hong Kong and New York will follow, together with investment in training and an expansion of their team, which already includes some Russian- and Arabic-speaking client relations managers. A new showroom and bridal atelier will also open at Harrods this month. "The company was valued in the millions – nine figures," says Russo proudly.

Helen David, Harrods' fashion director, says: "Ralph & Russo is in a league of its own as a young couture house. At Harrods, clients can browse the house's extensive archive of hand-drawn illustrations and past collections for inspiration before letting their imaginations run wild and commissioning their own custom designs. Tamara Ralph will spend as long as she

needs to with each customer to ensure that

she understands exactly what she needs to design to ensure she gets it just right. The fit and wearability of the brand is second to none."

Interest will also be piqued by Ralph & Russo's autumn/winter haute couture collection '14/'15, which presented at the Pavillon Cambon Capucines on the Rue

Cambon. The collection was broadly inspired by the vivid work of interior photographer Massimo Listri. Ralph leafs through a glossy Listri tome, pointing to sumptuous, palatial interiors such as the mirrored hall at Versailles and the magenta-hued Friedenstein Castle in Germany. "I love the detailing and the way the photographer has captured it. Look how intricate it is," she says, pointing to a picture. The rich magentas and baroque extravagance are reflected in the designs. Ralph & Russo's show closed with a bridal dress worn by model and Lancôme face Hanaa Ben Abdesslem. The off-white silk tulle bridal creation required 2,200 hours of hand-embellishment and included a six-metre train and a metallic-printed underskirt.

Following the show, hourly appointment slots were fully booked from Thursday to Sunday as clients old and new placed orders. The duo also hosted a private dinner at the Georges V Hotel for a select group. For Ralph and Russo, it seems the streets of Paris, London, Hong Kong and New York are paved with sequins and pearls.