

THE MILLINER OF MANHATTAN

Albertus Swanepoel moved to Manhattan more than 20 years ago, and has spent the years in the Big Apple building his hat brand. His pieces sell in boutiques like Barneys, and last month he launched a range for women in South Africa. **Daniel Scheffler** visited him in his studio in Midtown, New York, to chat about his work, his dreams and his great love for South Africa. Photo: **Merwelene van der Merwe**

What is new in your life?

I am currently doing a small collaboration with fashion brand Club Monaco in the US. Three styles and they will be going into their flagship stores. We are producing the hats in my studio in Manhattan. I also launched a women's clothing collection in South Africa in April this year.

I want to know more about the time you are now spending in South Africa and this new women's range you are bringing to shore.

It is a sportswear collection — easy, well-designed pieces for every day. I'm not interested in making a statement. There is a market for that, but I'd like to see women looking great every day. I always wanted to do something in South Africa again, so this was the perfect opportunity. It was launched during South African Fashion Week in Johannesburg on my birthday!

What challenges do you anticipate in coming to South Africa from the United States?

Fabrics are definitely the biggest issue. It is curious to me, as one would think there are great wools and cottons there, but it does not seem the case. We are trying to use fabrics made there, but there are only a few mills left, so it's difficult. So much good design or workmanship can disappear when the fabrics are bad. Customers also need to be educated on good fabrics and that takes a whole long process.

What is different in terms of product and design for a South African market?

There are wonderful things happening on the design front in South Africa. I would like to add to the mix but I think there is a gap in the market for well-designed and not terribly expensive clothing. With a mega-brand like Spain's billion-dollar fashion retailer Zara coming into the country, people have more access to great basics as well.

And what makes South Africa so special for you?

The breathtaking beauty of the country and, of course, the wonderful people. There is still some odd sense of wonder, a kind of innocence to me: it is hard to believe. My roots are very deep there, and I will always love the place.

You've been in the US for over 20 years working and designing. What makes New York, and in particular Manhattan, so special for you?

I just simply love this city. This morning I was downtown, some guy with a speaker on a trolley screaming his gospel, and I looked uptown, seeing the Chrysler building and thought, how amazing it is to live here. I love that it is so modern, so "filmatic" and that you can fly your freak flag.

Also there is a true mix of very high and very low. My list is endless.

The Summer/Spring 2013 New York Fashion Week wrapped recently. You work every season with a host of different brands collaborating and designing their hats — what did you do this season?

I did several shows: Tommy Hilfiger, where my hats actually opened the show; Ohne Titel; Tome, a great new label that I love; Bibhu Mohapatra; and Timo Weiland were some of the others I worked on.

Do you want to do more collaborations similar to the work you did with the retailer Target?

Yes!

What makes a hat extraordinary?

When it sort of becomes one with the person. I don't like statement millinery, except for Philip Treacy's work. He is a technical "genius" and I think his influence on hats is global.

What is happening in the fashion industry? Tell me about your predictions, the zeitgeist, and the desire from clients and people in general. I want to know everything you're thinking.

Times are tough. There is too much merchandise in the world, and no one needs anything. Times are over when a designer predicted trends. Now it's all over the map so it's super-important for a designer to have a story to tell for the brand. This entices consumers and makes them loyal. It is very difficult for a small company to "make it" — whatever your definition is of that. One needs major PR, funding and tenacity. I'm in a fortunate position in that I'm in such a niche market. That is both good and bad, actually. I call hats the "orphan accessory" as it is the last thing most women think about!

In this day and age and in a place like South Africa where hats are scarce, versus a place like New York where hats are seen everywhere, tell me who are the wearers of hats?

Very few people! People with confidence and the ability to accessorise definitely wear them.

What is your favourite line from a book or a movie or, of course, an opera?

"I love the audience and the audience loves me, because we never had enough love in our childhood. And that's showbiz kids," from the musical *Chicago*.



• Albertus het al verskeie pryse ingepalm. Hy het die Suid-Afrikaanse Coty-toekenning gewen, was een van die finaliste vir Vogue se CFDA-modestofontoekeuning, is by die WGS-toekenning vir Swarovski se CFDA-toekenning vir bykomstighede en beste ontwerper van bykomstighede benoem en sy werk is al in Londen se Victoria & Albert-museum uitgestal. Besoek sy amptelike webwerf, <http://albertuswanepoel.com>, om meer omtrent Albertus uit te vind.

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DIE HOEDEMAKER UIT MANHATTAN

Albertus Swanepoel het meer as twintig jaar gelede na Manhattan verhuis, waar hy sedertdien naam gemaak het as hoedemaker van formaat. Sy skeppings is in boetieks soos die gewilde Barneys in New York te koop, en hy het onlangs ook 'n reeks vroueklere in Suid-Afrika bekend gestel. **Daniel Scheffler** het by sy ateljee in Midtown, New York, gaan inloer om met hom oor sy werk, drome en liefde vir sy geboorteland te gesels.

Foto: **Merwelene van der Merwe**

Waarmee is jy nou besig?

Ek is tans besig om op klein skaal met die Amerikaanse modenaam Club Monaco saam te werk om drie style te skep wat in hul vlagskipwinkels te koop sal wees.

Die hoede word in my Manhattan-ateljee gemaak. Ek het ook in April vanjaar 'n reeks vroueklere in Suid-Afrika bekend gestel.

Vertel ons van die nuwe klerereeks vir Suid-Afrikaanse vroue.

Dit is 'n reeks sportdrag, en bestaan uit gemaklike, goed ontwerpte kledingstukke vir elke dag se dra. Al is daar 'n mark vir ontwerpers wat graag 'n stelling wil maak, was dit nie my oogmerk nie. Dit was die perfekte geleentheid, want dis my wens dat vroue goed moet lyk, en ek wou nog altyd weer iets in Suid-Afrika doen. Ons het die reeks tydens die SA Modeweek bekend gestel, op my verjaardag nogal!

Watter uitdagings bied Suid-Afrika nou dat jy gewoon is aan die VSA?

Materiaal is beslis die grootste kwelpunt. Dis vir my vreemd, want mens sou dink dat daar wonderlike wol en katoen in SA moet wees, maar die werklikheid is dat daar net 'n paar tekstielafabriekes oor is, wat sake erg bemoelik as jy probeer om net plaaslike materiaal te gebruik.

Soveel van die goeie ontwerpe en vakmanskap is daarmee heen as die materiaal self van swak gehalte is. Klante moet ook ingelig word oor hoe goeie materiaal lyk en voel, en dis 'n lang proses op sy eie.

Wat is anders aan produk en ontwerp vir die Suid-Afrikaanse mark?

Wonderlike goed is op ontwerpgebied in Suid-Afrika aan't gebeur. Ek wil graag ook 'n bydrae lewer, want ek dink daar is 'n gaping in die mark: goed ontwerpte klere wat nie té verskriklik duur is nie. Met dié dat reusehandelsname soos die Spaanse handelshuis Zara se klere deesdae in die land beskikbaar is, kry mense darem ook kans om goeie basiese stukke aan te skaf.

Jy is nou al vir meer as twintig jaar aan die werk en ontwerp in die VSA. Wat is vir jou so spesiaal aan New York, en spesifiek aan Manhattan?

Ek is net eenvoudig dol oor hierdie stad. Vanoggend stap ek in die middestad verby 'n man wat sy oortuigings op 'n trollie staan en uitbasuin, en soos wat ek verby hom in die straat stap en opkyk, sien ek die Chrysler-toring en besef ek hoe ongelooflik die lewe in dié stad is. Ek is gek oor New York omdat dit so modern en rolprentagtig is, en dat mens jouself kan uitdruk nes jy wil. Dit het ook 'n lewensegte mengsel van die gewone en buitengewone. Die lys is nimmereindigend.

En wat is vir jou so spesiaal aan Suid-Afrika?

Die asemrowende skoonheid van die land, en natuurlik sy wonderlike mense. Ek sien steeds 'n vreemde verwondering onder mense, amper iets

soos onskuld, wat moeilik is om te glo. My wortels lê baie diep en ek sal altyd vir die land liefbly.

Jy werk elke seisoen saam met verskillende modehuise om hoede vir hul versamelings te ontwerp. Saam met wie het jy tydens die pas afgeloopte New York- modeweek vir 2013 se lente- en somermodes gewerk?

Ek was by verskeie reekse betrokke. Vir Tommy Hilfiger het my hoede die vertoning geopen, en dan het ek ook saam met Ohne Titel; Tome, 'n wonderlike nuwe naam waarvan ek baie hou; Bibhu Mohapatra; Timo Weiland en nog 'n paar ander gewerk.

Sal jy graag weer saam met 'n ander handelsnaam wil werk, soos die projek wat jy saam met die kleinhandelaar Target aangepak het?

ja!

Wat maak 'n hoed besonder?

As dit één word met die mens wat dit dra. Ek hou nie van hoedemakery wat 'n stelling probeer maak nie, maar Philip Treacy se skeppings is die uitsondering. Hy is 'n tegniese genie en ek meen hy beïnvloed die voorkoms van hoede wêreldwyd.

Wat gebeur tans in die modebedryf? Wat voorspel jy, wat is die zeitgeist en wat wil klante en die publiek graag hê?

Dis baie kompetender. Te veel goed word vervaardig en niemand het werklik meer iets broodnodig nie. Ontwerpers kan nie meer neigings voorspel nie, omdat alles so wyd uiteenlopend is. Dis dus uiters belangrik dat ontwerpers hul handelsnaam se storie moet vertel. Dit lok klante en wen hul lojaliteit. Dis baie moeilik vir klein sakeondernemings om bo uit te kom, waar jy ook al dink 'bo' mag wees. Mens het goeie persbloomstelling, befondsing en deursettingsvermoë daarvoor nodig. Gelukkig vir my werk ek in 'n nismark, wat sy voordele én nadele inhou. Ek dink hoede is die weeskind van bykomstighede, omdat dit gewoonlik die laaste ding is waaraan vroue dink!

Wie dink jy dra hoede in Suid-Afrika, waar mens deesdae so min hoede te sien kry, teenoor die skares met hul hoede in New York?

Baie min mense! Diegene met selfvertroue en die vermoë om bykomstighede te meng en te pas, dra beslis hoede.

Wat is jou gunstelingaanhaling uit 'n boek, 'n fliel, of selfs 'n opera?

"I love the audience and the audience loves me, because we never had enough love in our childhood. And that's showbiz, kids!" uit die musiekspel *Chicago*.



• Albertus Swanepoel has several awards to his name. He has won the Coty Award in South Africa, been one of the two runners-up for the CFDA Vogue Fashion Fund Award, been nominated for the Swarovski CFDA Accessory Award & Best Accessory Designer at the WGSN Awards and has exhibited at Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Read more about Albertus on his official website <http://albertuswanepoel.com/>

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