

the future of fashion

FLAREstar

*toronto's Fashion Incubator, the first of its kind in the world, celebrates 20 years of launching new designers
Aya McMillan Photography by Chris Chapman*



(Left to right) Arthur Mendonça; Susan Langdon; model in Arthur Mendonça; Nada El-Khazen of Nada; mannequin in David Dixon; David Dixon; mannequin in Desperately Different by Katya Revenko; Katya Revenko (winner of the 2006 TFI New Labels design competition); model in Mercy; Jennifer Halchuk of Mercy

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ith the already cut-throat fashion world now inundated with the creations of socialites and celebrities, consider the fledglings who are rarely given a leg up—even if they're

bursting with talent. It's

there where the Toronto

Fashion Incubator steps in. Established by the City of Toronto, the volunteer-run non-profit organization develops the nation's future stylemakers by encouraging both their creative talent and business savvy. The first of its kind in the world, TFI is now celebrating its 20th anniversary as a modern-day patron of the arts.

In today's market, designers can no longer hide behind their models' skirts while catering strictly to a few wealthy clients.

"Designers need more than raw, creative talent to survive. They need to understand what marketing and cash flow mean," says executive director Susan Langdon. "That's where TFI comes into play. No one else in the country is offering this type of niche-market information. I see TFI as the hub of a passionate design community that wants to keep jobs, production and industry here in Canada." And its influence is not just felt at home: "Many cities around the world copy the TFI model," she says. Similar programs have popped up in places such as New York, Los Angeles, Auckland, New Zealand, and in the U.K.

But the worth of an organization such as TFI wasn't always recognized. Not unlike other Canadian industries, it was the draining of our burgeoning fashion talent to New York and other stylish hubs that provided the wake-up call. Two decades ago, members of the Toronto Economic Development Corporation and a volunteer organization called the Fashion Industry Liaison committee argued that the city's fashion industry—which anchored the whole of the industry in Canada—was in need of some serious investment. And 20 years later we have Langdon to thank for championing our homegrown talent.

It's Langdon who's devoted all her time and provided an enormous amount of support to what she affectionately refers to as her "baby." And like any responsible parent, behind a calm, diplomatic manner is an enforcer of strict standards. She acts as a mentor, advisor and sounding board for the designer wannabes, screening the applicants, who must have a developed business plan, recommendation letters, at least one year's experience under their design belts and \$25,000 in start-up cash. In return, they get not only guidance and encouragement but also promotion through fashion shows and related events. "I have a true passion because I believe what we're doing is really making a difference in helping others realize their dreams and aspirations," Langdon says.

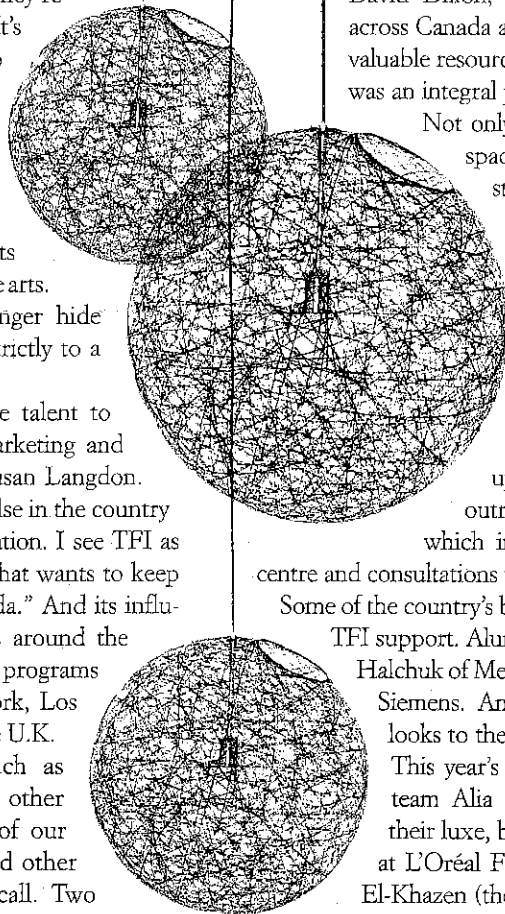
And her work doesn't stop there: as executive director, Langdon is primary fundraiser, which sometimes includes working her own connections within the fashion industry (she was a designer before TFI) for donations of cash, equipment, in-kind services and supplier discounts for designers.

A former resident and current mentor at TFI, David Dixon, whose eponymous label is sold across Canada and the U.S., says the program is a valuable resource for the design community. "TFI was an integral part in the upstart of my business.

Not only did it allow me to have the raw space and facilities of a working design studio at a reasonable fee but it provided me with an environment that was shared by other designers in the same position [and allowed us] to keep a competitive edge," he says. Designers in the resident program pay as little as \$285 a month for a small studio and can stay in-house for up to three years; members of TFI's outreach program pay \$130 a year, which includes access to TFI's resource centre and consultations with industry members.

Some of the country's best designers have benefited from TFI support. Alumni include Joeffer Caoc, Jennifer Halchuk of Mercy, Arthur Mendonça and Crystal Siemens. And the current crop of designers looks to the successful alumni for inspiration. This year's talent includes brother-and-sister team Alia and Jamil Juma, who presented their luxe, beautifully draped Juma collection at L'Oréal Fashion Week. Then there's Nada El-Khazen (the designer behind the label Nada) who uses sensual fabrics to cut a provocative profile and create chic style statements. Also new to the mix is Michelle Turpin, who makes graceful feminine looks under the label Karamea, and Hannah Melville of Wonderlust brings to the table playfully patterned, whimsical designs.

Constantly shifting cycles: that is the essence of design, and TFI ensures there's always a new Canadian team at the forefront. "It's as though the success of one generation of alumni impresses the next one," says Langdon. After all, in fashion, the future is what matters most. ■



(Left to right) On model: Linen dress, \$595, Arthur Mendonça. Shoes, Burberry. On Nada: Silk georgette dress, \$725, and patent-leather belt, \$65, Nada. On mannequin: Silk dress, \$425, David Dixon. On mannequin: Polyester/spandex jersey dress, \$407, Desperately Different by Katya Revenko. On Katya: Polyester/viscose-blend overall, \$390, and polyester/spandex tank top, \$112, Desperately Different by Katya Revenko. On model: Rayon/silk velvet dress, \$320, Mercy. Shoes, Stuart Weitzman. On Jennifer: Wool jersey dress, \$340, Mercy. For where-to-buy, see StyleSource.com. Models' hair and makeup, Marilisa, Marc Anthony Hair Care, Plutino Group. Props and furniture, Klaus by Neinkämper.

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