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WHY LONDON IS THE
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DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

Visionary designer Hussein Chalayan lends his artistic prowess to the stage this season. Jo Caird provides an insight into fashion's polymath



IMAGES: MAIN: GRAVITY FATIGUE © MANUEL VASON; THIS PAGE: BUBBLE DRESS FROM HUSSEIN CHALAYAN'S SS2007 COLLECTION © YOSHIKAZU TSUNO/GETTY IMAGES; FROM TOP: TILDA SWINTON IN ABSENT PRESENCE; MODELS ON THE RUNWAY AT THE SHOW FOR HUSSEIN CHALAYAN'S SS1998 BETWEEN COLLECTION; MODELS ON THE RUNWAY AT THE SHOW FOR HUSSEIN CHALAYAN'S AW2007 AIRBORNE COLLECTION, ALL COURTESY OF HUSSEIN CHALAYAN

When Browns boutique bought up the entire graduate collection of fashion designer Hussein Chalayan in 1993 and put it in its window, limitless possibilities opened up before him. Chalayan, however, didn't leap to take advantage of the remarkable situation. "I wasn't really planning to do anything," he recalled in an interview many years later. It was Joel Bernstein, main buyer at the boutique at the time, that made the designer see sense. "I remember him saying to me 'if you don't do something now, with this interest, nothing will happen'. So I said 'OK, I'll take this opportunity to turn this into a business'."

DEFYING GRAVITY

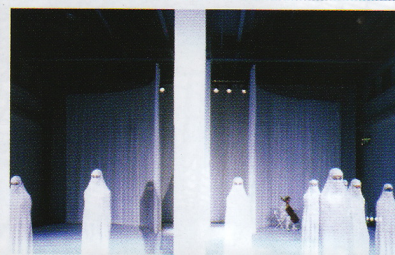
And what a business it became, turning Cypriot-born Chalayan into one of the UK's most sought-after and respected designers, but also enabling him to launch a parallel career as an artist, with work exhibited in museums and galleries all over the world. This autumn the innovator is adding yet another string to his bow with *Gravity Fatigue*, a new piece of contemporary dance theatre presented at Sadler's Wells.

Chalayan makes his contemporary dance debut as artistic director of the hotly tipped production, while choreographer Damien Jalet is responsible for translating the designer's ideas into movement. Chalayan has also designed the costumes for *Gravity Fatigue*, of course – garments with a dynamism all of their own. This isn't the first time he's designed for a dance production, most recently having created the costumes for Sasha Waltz's *Passion* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 2010, but it's the first time Chalayan has designed for a dance piece over which he has total creative control.

Sadler's Wells isn't new to him either, as anyone with a passing interest in fashion will know. It was here that the designer presented *Afterwords*, the autumn/winter 2000 womenswear collection that featured a coffee table transformed, as if by magic, into a dress. He's delighted to be able to return to the theatre to "showcase ideas which I have been collecting for many years", he says, "and to build narratives around and with the body in a much broader context than ever seen before in my work".

QUESTIONING IDENTITY

The show takes as its themes identity, displacement and invisibility – issues that the designer has explored several times before, both through his collections and in his other life as a contemporary artist. His spring/summer 1998 catwalk show, *Between*, for example, examined cultural identity



by presenting a parade of models wearing black chadors of varying length, the body of each new arrival increasingly exposed until only the face of the final model was hidden behind a veil. He returned to the topic in 2005 with *Absent Presence*, a short film for the Turkish Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale. Starring Tilda Swinton as a biologist extracting DNA from the clothing of immigrants in London, the short film interrogates how identity is scrutinised in today's paranoid society.

Gravity Fatigue will not be overly "dancey", Chalayan explained when the project was first announced back in the spring. Instead, he and Jalet will be sticking to a minimalist aesthetic that will be familiar to fans of his catwalk shows. That said, if the rest of the designer's oeuvre is anything to go by, the show is sure to be intensely dramatic. Consider his graduate collection, *The Tangent Flows*, composed of clothes buried and left to decay for several months, before being dug up and displayed. Or *Airborne*, autumn/winter 2007, where LED-embedded video dresses screened scenes from nature. If any designer was likely to make the leap into contemporary dance, it was Chalayan, whose work has always had a performance-art feel: one inspired by movement, narrative and surprise.

See *Gravity Fatigue* at Sadler's Wells from October 28-31. Rosebery Avenue, EC1R 4TN. 020 7863 8000. www.sadlerswells.com