

# THE CATWALK QUEENS

*Pieter Stewart and her daughter Myken have been in command at New Zealand Fashion Week since it began 13 years ago. But is their reign coming to an end?*

STORY MATT BLACK PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER

**M**y first encounter with New Zealand Fashion Week was in 2002, when I wrote a short play that was performed in four acts for Wellington label Starfish. It was in all likelihood a pretentious debut. I attended various shows over the years, and then had one of my own in the Fashion Festival — open to the public over a three-day weekend at the end of the week — in 2012 for my company Skull and Bones. The show was seven minutes long, and cost around \$2500 a minute to produce. We didn't sell a single thing. To be clear, I don't blame the festival for our lack of sales, or for the costs. I spent far more than was sensible, or even fashionable. But it did make me wonder, sitting amid the empty champagne bottles at the after-party: was it worth it? For all the effort, had it delivered?

As NZFW turns 13, that same question is being asked by much more important people than me, including designers, sponsors, the media, and to some extent even the organisers themselves. It appears the child of Dame Pieter Stewart and her daughter Myken, so successful and beautiful at 7, is now causing all kinds of consternation as she enters her teens. Among the complaints: the big names no longer show, the event doesn't attract important overseas buyers or media, it's expensive to enter, there's no naming-rights sponsor and it has become "overly commercialised".

And more: the Stewarts are said to be difficult to deal with, slow to embrace change and, in Myken's case, to have a "volcanic temper". It's worth taking all that with a grain of salt — plenty of people say these things, but almost no one will say them in public. But then, it wouldn't be fashion if it wasn't air kisses to the face — and knives to the back.

So, is it true? Has NZFW, once the darling of the industry, sponsors and even the government, lost its way? In an age when online stores are crushing the life out of high-street stores, and when social media can spread a brand message faster, further and more cost effectively than any mainstream media, is NZFW in danger of becoming — *quelle horreur* — irrelevant?

"The global financial crisis [GFC] has changed the world," says Pieter Stewart, referring to the economic calamities of 2008. We're sitting with Myken in the surprisingly humble NZFW offices — a place made up of small, glass-partitioned spaces and



MYKEN (LEFT) AND PIETER STEWART (WITH KURA) AT THE VIADUCT EVENTS CENTRE, VENUE FOR NZ FASHION WEEK 2013.





BACKSTAGE WORK ON JULIETTE HOGAN'S WINTER 2013 COLLECTION

OLIVIA HEMMUS

a couple of large tables. Kura, Myken's brown labrador, dreams underneath one. "What we became very aware of last year," Pieter says, "was just how difficult the retail climate is for designers in New Zealand. It collapsed in the UK and Europe some years ago."

"Well, I think the designers still support it," Myken interjects, firmly. Throughout the interview, mother and daughter are variously critical, supportive, amused and combative. They finish each other's sentences. They are clearly in it together, complete with currents of familial tension that feel strangely Shakespearean.

"Blood is thicker than water," World director Denise L'Estrange-Corbet, the only person prepared to be critical on record for this story, will tell me later.

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*No one is suggesting a replacement? "Yeah, no one's going to put their neck, and their wallet, on the line."*

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"All the new ones don't know any other way," Myken continues. "Like all the New Gens and anyone who's been around for the past five years, they don't know a life without Fashion Week. So they support it in the way they aspire to it... People want to be involved with the event because it's a great platform — 40,000 people come through the door. The support is there, but it's changed."

"I want to explain why things have changed," Pieter says, wrestling back the initiative. "You only have to walk up Oxford St, Paddington, where half the shops are gone. And that's the fashion capital of Australia. They're the ones who buy most of New Zealand's products. So for many of our designers, in

discussion with them last year, a lot of them are really just feeding their own retail [shops] now... So we've changed our event to suit that, so some can show straight to the consumer in season, or some can still show the forward season. So it has changed, but you have to adjust with it."

Fashion Week itself, focused on the trade, shows the forward season: this September, the clothes on the NZFW catwalk will be for next winter. Fashion Festival, for the public, shows in-season clothes — the summer stock going into shops now.

Myken: "I think if it wasn't there, you'd realise how much support there is. If there was no Fashion Week, there'd be nothing to support fashion in New Zealand, and then out of New Zealand."

So for all the complaints, no one is suggesting a replacement? "Yeah. No one's going to put their neck — and their wallet — on the line."

**N**ZFW started out as an idea that turned into a working party that turned into an advisory board including World, Sabatini and Zambesi, among many others.

Pieter: "Neville Findlay [of Zambesi] said I think it's time we had our own fashion week. We talked about that a fair bit, and I said, 'OK, I'll see if I can manage to pull something together.' It took me almost two years before I got it off the ground. We had it all planned and the designers were all organised and excited and then 9/11 happened, and our show was going to be in October.

"People cancelled. Their companies wouldn't let them fly. All we had was a pile of Australians coming, and I thought, 'Well, this is a disaster.' But it was probably really good just having the Australian contingent here because we weren't grown up enough — or good enough, really — to have the scrutiny you get from the internationals."

The event attracted three years of sponsorship from L'Oréal, and by the mid-2000s, with Air New Zealand as naming-rights sponsor, it was attracting both international media and buyers.

The economy was ebullient and the champagne ran like a pale yellow river through the curtained halls of Halsey St's Shed 1.

"Suddenly we had all this energy around local fashion," says Paul Blomfield, chair of Fashion Industry New Zealand, whose history with NZFW stretches right back to the beginning. "It actually turned the New Zealand consumer around. It was like, 'Wow, I'm going to buy that New Zealand designer because look how fantastic it is.' NZFW changed the entire mindset of the New Zealand consumer."

Then came the GFC and a worldwide collapse in demand for expensive designer clothing.

No one disputes that the 2013 environment is radically different from 2001, or even 2009, and not just economically. The question is, has the event responded to the new market dynamics? The Stewarts say it has, and point to the format of this year's event, with its Fashion Week/Fashion Weekend split. But NZFW is still billed as a trade event — the showpiece of our fashion industry — so does it bring the buyers and media in the way it used to?

Blomfield doubts the question is even relevant. "It's just such a changed world. It has a different role to play. The seats at the shows are not full of buyers — the seats at the shows are for the bloggers and writers and other people."

Pieter Stewart says the nature of buying has changed. "In looking at where the sales are for many of the designers now, they have very strong online stores. So we're setting up what we're calling a pop-up portal. The stills from each designer show — the trade show, I'm talking about — will go straight into the pop-up portal on our site.

"We'll be advertising it, we'll be getting it out to all our databases and through people like Ateed [Auckland Tourism, Events and Economic Development] as well as to business and international databases so that buyers worldwide can look at each designer's show. There'll be a direct link from that show to the designer's site. What we're trying to do is facilitate that designer's online store through the huge numbers that come to our website, that would perhaps never find theirs."

And the numbers, if accurate, are pretty good. NZFW's "Facts and Figures" statement claims that in 2012, the site had 10,000 unique views during the event, 2.5 million unique Facebook views from May to September, and 66,000 unique Facebook views during the week itself. Its blog, NZ Fashion Files, had 40,000 unique visits over eight weeks, 15,000 of those during the event.

Not everyone is convinced. Karen Walker has a long record of not showing at Fashion Week, and these days the absences also include Kate Sylvester, Workshop and Helen Cherry, Ingrid Starnes, World, Juliette Hogan and Kathryn Wilson. Many of them now take part in the "Marr Factory": five nights of in-season shows, immediately before Fashion Week, organised by fashion entrepreneurs Stephen and Lucy Marr at Golden Dawn in Ponsonby.

**D**enise L'Estrange-Corbet of World was on the original advisory board back in 2000. She agreed to talk face to face, but then couldn't and eventually we "talked" by email. "The interview will take a bit of time," she wrote. "I don't suppose there is a fee?" I'm not sure if she is serious. Eventually her response to my questions arrives, with strict caveats: "My comments are not to be taken out of context," and, "nothing is added or taken away from my text... without my authorisation."

"Francis [Hooper, co-founder of World and her then partner] and I were on the first small board... We had many meetings with Pieter and others on the board to nut out what would be the best way to launch a fashion week in NZ, and what designers really needed. It was agreed that the event had to be of the highest calibre, and for a while this is what was being achieved, as international media and buyers were attending. Once the FW was established, the board disbanded, and in retrospect, it would have been more beneficial to keep it to ensure NZFW stayed that way."

L'Estrange-Corbet is critical of the process by which



FROM KATE SYLVESTER'S WOLF WINTER 2007 COLLECTION

NZFW

designers can show, pointing out that in overseas events such as "London, Sydney, Singapore, Melbourne, Hong Kong", a designer's work has to go before a board, who decide "whether or not you are up to it".

She says, "In the beginning of NZFW, this was done. It had a panel that decided who was up to showing, and it worked and ensured the week was represented by designers that were able to represent the best New Zealand has to offer. After a few years, the management changed, and slowly, but inevitably, the wheels began to fall off, one by one..."

Blomfield, echoing some others, disagrees with this. "I felt it was a truly powerful, international-quality event that Pieter was putting on," he says. "I think that what's always driven her is that she wants it to be of international quality, and she doesn't want to cheapen it into a little show, because what good does that do the industry?"

L'Estrange-Corbet says the event's lack of a naming-rights sponsor after Air New Zealand pulled out is a major issue. "Ateed, which gets its funding from the Auckland City Council... has given NZFW \$500,000 over two years... which is a huge amount, and I would be asking where and how this money is spent." (The actual amount is \$450,000 over two years, at \$225,000 a year.)

She goes on: "The 'stars' brought out have included a hat designer from the UK, a woman who worked on *Sex and the City*, and some lady whose name I cannot even remember who wore a black lace mantilla the whole time, and of course, there is [US publicist] Brian Long. Now I have nothing against the guy, he is a sweet person, but he has been out between five and seven times, and I think the following questions need to be asked of NZFW:

"How many NZ designers have been introduced to media and buyers through Brian and other internationals brought out? How much media [have] Brian and other internationals garnered for NZ brands? How have they directly introduced NZ designers to international buyers either in department stores or boutiques? And how many designers have actually





PAUL BLOMFIELD, CHAIR OF FASHION INDUSTRY NEW ZEALAND: "FASHION WEEK CHANGED THE ENTIRE MINDSET OF THE NEW ZEALAND CONSUMER."

received orders as a direct result? What have you brought, in monetary terms, to NZ designers?"

Grant Fell, editor of *Black* magazine, is bemused by this criticism of the international media attendees. "I think she is forgetting three of the world's biggest bloggers in BryanBoy, Gary Pepper Girl, and Rumi Neely (twice), Tim Blanks, Hilary Alexander... oh, and the lady she can't remember is Diane Pernet, an extremely respected French critic and writer. The stylist who worked on *Sex and the City* was Rebecca Weinberg, the first assistant to Patricia Field throughout *Sex and the City*, quite an important girl really... Patricia is a top-10 stylist of all time."

L'Estrange-Corbet wants to know: "Is Brian Long attending this year, and what does he actually do for a living?"

Fell says: "I think it was Brian Long who brought [Weinberg] out."

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*"There is no more-reported event in New Zealand. The pile of clippings, the online coverage, the amount of tweets and retweets..."*

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The demand that NZFW produce international sales figures exasperates Myken Stewart. "We can't tell you who buys," she says, hands in the air, "because the designers don't tell us! You've got to look at it and say, 'Well, we're doing autumn/winter here; that's not going to be for another six months at least until they'll be opening their wallets over on the other side of the world.'"

"Fashion Week has only ever been part of the marketing," says Pieter. "It's not like a shop where you go and say, 'OK, I'll buy 10 of that now.' It's intangible. We have tried to lock those figures down but designers basically won't give them to us. It's a part of their marketing forum."

This does not satisfy L'Estrange-Corbet: "There has to be absolute transparency. I would expect to be shown how many orders designers have received as a direct result of the show, and this amount has to way exceed, I mean by times five, the amount of all the money NZFW receives from each designer and sponsor... NZFW is a privately owned business that is receiving ratepayer dollars and [therefore] the organisation has an obligation to let ratepayers know how much their event is actually putting back into the economy."

While the Stewarts say they cannot quantify the sales income to designers from NZFW, Ateed believes it knows the value of its ratepayer investment. According to Rachael Carroll, Ateed's general manager, destination and marketing, the return is \$1.15 million a year — a multiple of 5.1, or just over the return demanded by L'Estrange-Corbet.

Carroll is an Australian with a broad accent. "I've been here for six years and apparently I sound like a New Zealander when I go home," she says.

"Doubt it," I tell her.

She takes a reflective sip on her coffee. "So why do we put that money into NZFW? We attract events on four pillars. One is new money into the economy, and NZFW brings in about \$1.15 million into the economy, so that's quite a good return on the investment we make. Another pillar is around visitor nights. It's a lesser performer on visitor nights, but it still attracts a few thousand..."

"The third pillar is around exposure and brand. Obviously we

want to create a really vibrant and creative city and [NZFW] is a really good brand fit for us. There's a perception that Wellington is the creative capital. They've positioned that phenomenally well, but a lot of people know the reality of the situation is quite different. So having this within our portfolio is important. Our fourth pillar is around what we call livability, and making Auckland a great place to live."

How is the \$1.15 million return on investment assessed?

"How well did we actually go against those pillars?" Carroll says. "A couple of those pillars are really easy to measure, the nights, GDP... they're tangible and you've got a dollar number next to them. Brand and livability are a lot harder. But we need to make sure we don't get too focused just on GDP and visitor-night targets and continue to think about it as a holistic portfolio across those four pillars."

"And I think a really important point to make is about portfolio balance. Speaking freely, if we are looking at just GDP and visitor nights, sporting events tick the box to a greater extent. But what we don't want is a portfolio of just one type of event. We want a diversity of offers, we want different experiences to be provided here in Auckland, and I think Fashion Week is really important because it does pick up that sort of creative sector."

"Chickenshit — just small money," is what Blomfield calls Ateed's investment in Fashion Week. "The fact is there is no more-reported event in New Zealand. The pile of clippings they get from sources both local and international, the amount of online coverage and content mentions internationally, the amount of tweets and retweets... I would say there is nothing in New Zealand that gets more media interest, and in that very important social media interest area."

Not even an All Black test?

Blomfield produces a wry laugh. "I think cities have to invest in things that will attract businesses and people to the region. To me it's a no brainer, it's what Ateed is there for. If they're not going to support an event which rivals an All Black test for coverage, if they're not going to support an event that powerful and with that much interest from the New Zealand population,



KATE SYLVESTER WITH PART OF HER ART GROUPE WINTER 2008 COLLECTION

NZFW



ZAMBESI'S NEVILLE FINDLAY



JANE USSHER

with that much interest from onshore and offshore media, what would they support?"

So why does Fashion Week attract so much more media attention than, say, the Arts Festival?

"Because fashion's glamorous!" Myken shouts, almost jumping out of her chair.

"Fashion is glamorous," Pieter agrees. "And people are pointing cameras at pretty things. And it has an incredible energy of its own."

"It's Fashion Week," Myken finishes. "Let's go get our hair done and our nails done, buy a new outfit, and lose 10 kilos because we want to drink so much booze all week."

**I**f NZFW really contributes so much to the wider economy, does it deserve greater government recognition, or even funding?

"New Zealand Trade and Enterprise picked up the fashion file and chucked it in the biggest waste-paper bin they had," says Neville Findlay. Together with wife Liz, he's been running Zambesi for 35 years.

"They did something way back when they sent four of us to London, but honestly, I think they've done a very poor job in supporting the fashion industry, or the clothing industry. They're really just conspicuous by their absence. They have made some pretty weak overtures in the past, but they need you to jump through so many hoops and there's so much reporting and time involved in getting any kind of positive feedback from them or any support that we just gave it away."

Blomfield goes further. "My personal opinion is that this government has absolutely no vision whatsoever for businesses that don't fit into the agricultural or science sectors. And it's a pity, really. Trade New Zealand [the forerunner to NZTE] partially funded a group of designers to go across to Australia Fashion Week and years later, everyone's still talking about it. The industry was transformed by the efforts of that first group of designers."

"I think NZTE should be pretty cautious of having a vision



ZAMBESI, WINTER 2006

NZFW

for an industry," says Peter Fenton, NZTE's general manager, customers, politely pouring cold water over that suggestion. "Our role is to support businesses that want to grow internationally."

When I tell him what Findlay said, he replies: "That was consistent with what our approach was in those days. We were more of an economic development agency. These days we work closely with some of the largest exporting fashion and apparel companies. So the Icebreakers, the Pumpkin Patches, Rodd & Gunn, they're all valuable customers of NZTE. [We have] moved away from a top-down sector approach to working alongside and more intensively with individual businesses."

Blomfield is not convinced. "You'd think it would be a no brainer for them to just say, 'Hey, we're not going to support the industry so let's just help out the Fashion Week and we'll be helping out 50 companies or whatever.' But that's not the NZTE strategy, which is very much about supporting that one designer."

Fenton is resolute. "What our insight is, is that over time events and trade shows are relatively less valuable than getting alongside businesses and helping them actually grow their markets. I can confirm we haven't had an application or an expression of interest from NZFW."

I'm given a list of NZTE and the Ministry of Economic Development's involvement with NZFW and the fashion industry from 2001 to 2009. It's two pages long and details funding initiatives of \$1.42 million, including \$821,111 to NZFW from the major event fund between 2001 and 2006.

"Many of these initiatives are not something that NZFW can access," Pieter emails me. "Funding has been very much appreciated over the years, and I have not sought funding since [2006] as an event which is essentially the platform for designers. There is no NZTE funding model that fits."

**N**eville Findlay doesn't buy the argument that the big names no longer show at NZFW because of the event itself. "Every year we get involved. People like Karen Walker have moved into a more international stance and good

FROM JULIETTE HOGAN'S DON'T LOOK BACK WINTER 2013 COLLECTION



OLIVIA HEMUS

on her. We've always taken the attitude that it's great exposure for the brand. You can utilise Fashion Week in many different ways. It's just a vehicle for people to drive whichever way they see fit."

Karen Walker? *Metro* asked her why she doesn't show, and she told us: "For us, the benefit of NZFW has always been on the ground, in the local environment. It's the one time of the year when everyone's talking about fashion and it brings people into the stores and gets them excited about dressing up."

"Pieter's done a great job highlighting the industry in this market and reframing it as an important industry. She's also, over the years, hosted for NZFW some very top-notch fashion media. In addition, she's created a platform that has given new designers especially a great opportunity to be noticed."

"For the last 22 seasons we've been showing internationally, in London initially and, for the last 14 seasons, in New York. There's no need to do more than one industry show a season and so NZFW isn't necessary for us in terms of a show platform."

Blomfield doesn't rate the criticism that there aren't sales to be made at NZFW. "I did the PR for the Auckland Home Show, and people would come stamping up to me and say, 'I didn't get any decent sales — this show is rubbish.' And I'd say, 'Well, 50,000 people walked past you, so whose fault is that?' The designer... has to take some responsibility."

In addition to the event, L'Estrange-Corbet has some criticisms for the organisers too. "World opened NZFW a couple of years ago... We were then sent the DVD from NZFW and the camera angle was poised in the same spot on the front row, and one of the NZFW management, sat there, right in front of the camera, texting the whole time during the show..."

"At another on-site show, a stylist told me she was sitting opposite the same NZFW person and was appalled to see her take a banana out of her bag and proceed to eat it, in the front row, during a designer's show!! Not discreetly, but in full view!!"

It's hard to imagine this was the first appearance of a fruit in the front row at NZFW. But she continues: "If you act like you are running a high-school fashion show, then that is how you

are going to be perceived. That would never happen overseas, never, ever, ever."

Pieter Stewart's response is restrained: "As the sole director of the company, and therefore no doubt the management team — I don't believe I have ever texted through a fashion show, and certainly not eaten a banana. So I would love to see the footage."

**T**he Stewarts are talking up 2013. International media will include Fashion One, whose website claims it broadcasts into 120 countries and has reached an audience of 100 million. Despite not having a naming-rights sponsor, NZFW has some important backers, including MediaWorks, Westpac, Sofitel and BMW. Telecom is also involved, building a mobile app called the App-Cessory. And the cost of entry for designers has been reduced by 40 per cent from last year.

No matter what happens, it will never be easy running Fashion Week. Designers are not renowned for having stable personalities or an ability to retain perspective under pressure.

"Sometimes you get to the end of the week and you're fucked, basically, like body, head, everything," Myken says. "And then you just get, 'I've lost a show! My backdrop was broken!' There's no, 'Here's a bunch of flowers, or here's a bottle of wine, that was amazing for me. I was on the *Breakfast* show or so and so came to my shop or so and so wore my dress and it's been in every single picture.' It's like they think they did that. But we've provided this little platform to do it from. You feel like jumping off a cliff after the end of Fashion Week."

Yes, they get stressed too. Myken again: "Why? Because we're committed, because we started it and it's amazing. We know how great it is for the country and for designers, and I know that we feel emotionally attached to it. But how long does that continue to last, you know?"

NEW ZEALAND FASHION WEEK AND THE FASHION FESTIVAL: SEPTEMBER 2-8, NZFASHIONWEEK.CO.NZ

DISCLOSURE: NZTE IS A CLIENT OF MATT BLACK'S COMPANY SKULL AND BONES.