

# Backstage, it's down to bare essentials

For a fashion writer the atmosphere at fashion shows is weirdly unerotic — which is a surprise, given that the rooms backstage are full of beautiful unclad men and women

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I see naked people. This is not because I have the uncanny powers of Haley Joel Osment or because I own X-Ray Specs. It is because looking at naked people is part of my job. Twice a year for a month or so I find myself spending a great deal of time backstage at fashion shows. And few other settings come to mind in which observing or standing alongside or quizzing people who are wearing next to nothing is an occupational ... well, hazard is not the word.

That these people happen to be among the world's most beautiful does little to diminish the surreal dimension of the circumstances. Consider what it is like to take notes as Gisele Bündchen holds forth while dressed in nothing but a G-string and you will get the idea. Picture interviewing Chad White — a model from whose torso statues could be cast — as a makeup artist strokes bronzing gel on his thighs, and the odd dimensions of the task become clear.

What is strangest, perhaps, about this particular form of employment — for which there is no comprehensive job description — is that being around rooms filled with unclad women and men is anything but stimulating. At least this is true for people in the fashion business, who are either puritanically decorous about nudity or so involved with clothes that often they can barely see the naked limbs for all the glorious weeds. And it is true for me.

It is not as though one is unaware that wandering backstage at a Victoria's Secret fashion show is a died-and-gone-to-heaven dream for some people, or anyway, most *Maxim* readers. And it was plenty exciting when once, in a backstage scum, Helena Christensen brushed against me with her breast. Still it must be said that, as in pro-sports locker rooms and on pornographic-movie sets, after a while you stop being shocked.

"It's all context," said Tim Blanks, a contributing editor for *Style.com* and *Men.Style.com*, who over two decades of backstage reporting has watched generations of models stripping down to their skivvies. "When you see some doll walking down the catwalk in some sheer thing or nearly naked, it's fashion," Blanks remarked in Paris earlier this month. "If you saw that same girl pole dancing in a club, it would be hot."

It is certainly true that the atmosphere at most fashion shows is weirdly unerotic. It may seem strange to say so, but even in a season like the one just ended — during which designers offered sheer blouses, peekaboo skirts, dropped crotches and bared breasts — sensuality seemed far from central. The parts that were revealed seemed no sexier than the parts that remained covered. Nakedness was less provocation than another design tool.

And backstage at the shows the atmosphere is always so frenetic and focused, the deadlines so tight, the volume of tasks to complete so improbable within the time allowed that Eros is the last thing on anybody's mind.

"We're here for the clothes, and so there's nothing erotic about it," the model Raquel Zimmerman said before the Chloe show in Paris. "If you think about it, in Europe everyone goes topless on the beach and it's not a big deal," she added, noting that the naked pictures that surfaced from Carla Bruni's modeling days did not exactly hinder her transition to first lady of France.

Things weren't always so relaxed, of course. Anyone who remembers *Unzipped*, Douglas Keeve's 1995 documentary about Isaac Mizrahi, will recall the lobbying required to persuade people like Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford to change clothes in front of a fashion show audience,

while silhouetted behind a theatrical scrim. Nowadays, they would be lucky not to be asked to appear stark naked, as one model was in the designer Hussein Chalayan's spring 2007 show.

"What I hope for backstage is that everybody that's there at that moment is serious and professional, and there for the clothes and not to be disrespectful and take a picture of a naked girl," Zimmerman said.

This seemed a lot to ask for, given that the backstage area at Chloe, a tent set up in the Tuileries, was a typically elongated rectangle lined on two sides with tables and mirrors and chairs and stools and as crowded as a clown car.



There were makeup teams and hairdressing teams and manicurists and pedicurists. There were house photographers assigned to capture the atmosphere, fashion photographers assigned to capture the clothes for *Vogue*, beauty photographers who sell their images to the wire services. There were public relations people wearing earpieces and black suits. There were the security men known informally as *les cravates rouges* for their red ties.

There were modeling agents and bookers and boyfriends and hangers-on and minders. There were the models themselves, of course, and it is probably worth pointing out that every person in that room had some kind of camera.

Undoubtedly this is why so many pictures of unclad models turn up on the Internet and also FTV, the French fashion channel whose video feeds the Indian government banned this year for what it called "unsuitable" content.

"It's completely inappropriate" to capture pictures of models while they are changing in or out of their clothes, said Robert Fairer, who has photographed fashion backstage for *Vogue* for over a decade. But it happens. "Backstage areas are not hermetically sealed," Fairer said.

They are imperfectly secured by the red ties in France and the house bouncers in Milan and the black suits hired to police the Bryant Park tents. They are also policed in an informal way by those in the business, who tend to be vigilant when it comes to the models, especially "the girls."

"And they are girls," said Brana Wolf, the fashion editor of *Harper's Bazaar* and a seasoned stylist who has been known to chew out photographers caught snapping topless shots at shows she styles. "I go after them if I catch them taking pictures they shouldn't," said Wolf, referring particularly to photographs of the teenage Lolitas currently much in favor — girls like Karlie Kloss, a St. Louis native who is one of the

big success stories of the season, and who recently turned 16.

"It is an issue," Kloss said, as she waited before a show in Paris for her turn with hair and makeup. "People respect that you want and need some privacy," she added, or most do, anyway.

"One time, I was with Vlada," Kloss said, referring to the Russian model Vlada Roslyakova, and "a photographer took a picture of her topless and then left." Roslyakova leapt from her chair, chased the woman into the street and tussled with her until she deleted the shot.

Still, it's going to happen, Kloss added; even in these early days in the business, she said: "I'm numb to the nudity. It's just part of the job."

As Kloss said that, as if on cue, the Polish model Magdalena Frackowiak wandered into view in a G-string and with her arms modestly wrapped around her bare torso. "I was raised as a small kid in the theater," explained Frackowiak, who just turned 24. "So, for me, doing modeling is a little bit like being in a play. And being backstage is like every backstage, where you're changing costumes and you have to be nude and so what?"

What is the point of being prudish, as the model Chad White once told me before a Duckie Brown show. At the time, White was barefoot and wearing a postage stamp bikini. When asked whether it wasn't embarrassing to parade nearly buck naked in front of so many strangers, he laughed. "You should see what they put me in on the runway at Dolce & Gabbana," White said. "Compared to that, right now I'm wearing a lot."



Top left and right: Models on the catwalk for the Marlies Dekkers lingerie Spring Summer 2009 ready-to-wear collection presented during Paris Fashion Week.

Center: A model wears shoes by Chinese fashion designer Frankie Xie during the presentation of his Spring Summer 2009 ready-to-wear collection for Jefe during Paris Fashion Week. Above: Models present creations by Maison Martin Margiela as part of its Spring Summer 2009 ready-to-wear collection for Paris Fashion Week.

PHOTOS: EPA