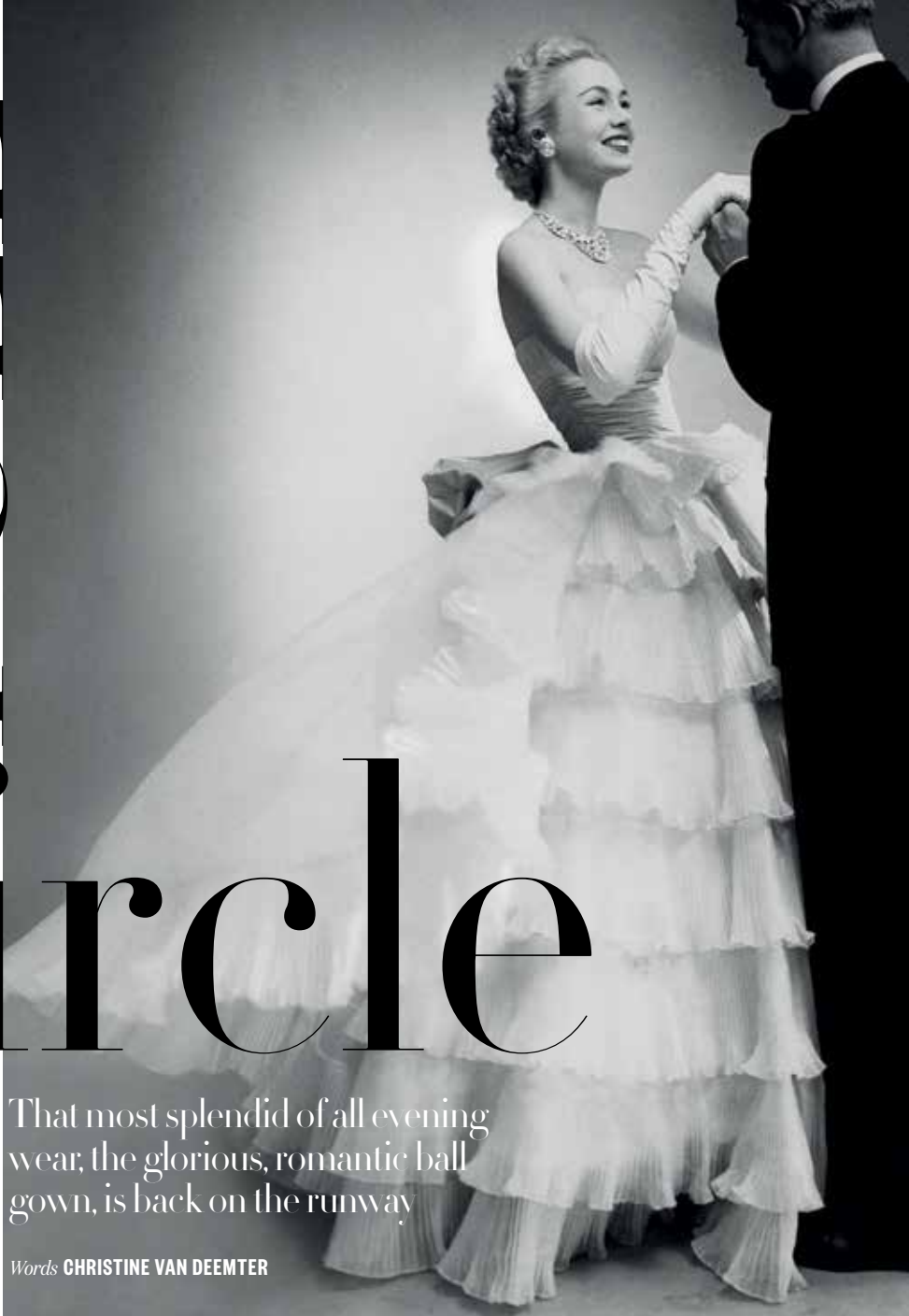


Circle

That most splendid of all evening wear, the glorious, romantic ball gown, is back on the runway

Words CHRISTINE VAN DEEMTER



Think of a princess, real or fictitious. What is she wearing? From a young Princess Elizabeth in an exquisitely regal confection of pearls and light blue tulle, to Cinderella dancing with her handsome prince, the ultimate fairy tale gown has always been a full-skirted, tight-bodied, sleeveless affair.

Ah, the ball gown. That most ethereal, fantastical of dresses; the one that features in every princess daydream, with or without Prince Charming. As long as you had the dress, you could wear the tiara. A fantasy dress designed for fantasy events – formal dances, romantic weddings, glamorous (yet antiquated) debutante balls – the ball gown is never not over-the-top. Reams of extravagant fabric – silk, taffeta – in billowing, floor-length skirts are accompanied by opera gloves and décolletage-grazing jewels. Even the cover-ups are not everyday: stoles, capes, and cloaks take the place of coats, shawls, and jackets. And so it has always been, since its earliest iterations, centuries ago. It is even said

that when the French proletariat stormed the Tuileries in 1792, they headed straight for Marie-Antoinette's wardrobe, ripping her ostentatious gowns (she ordered 300 a year, never wearing something twice) to shreds. But not before the women tried them on first... The allure of the top tier of dressing codes proving too much for even the noble *révolutionnaires* to resist.

That allure is being revisited on the SS18 runways, perhaps as an antidote to 2017 being filled with global uncertainty and negativity. Dolce & Gabbana sent an exuberant tangerine creation down the runway, festooned with floral prints, a peek-a-boo underskirt, and pink ribbon belt. At Oscar de la Renta, Fernando Garcia and Laura Kim showed delicate wafts of tulle in ombré oranges and royal blues, while Delpozo showcased its craftsmanship with prints and sequins.

But it was at Off-White that the traditional fairy tale gown was turned on its head: in Virgil Abloh's homage to the late Diana, Princess of Wales, full skirts were replaced with hoop skirts, while

frothy tulle harbored chunky zips. A state ball this ain't, and the footwear of choice? Sneakers. The patron saint of updating what could be a staid silhouette is former *Vogue* Arabia cover star Rihanna, who recently paired a lavish off-shoulder Molly Goddard number and its cascading tiers of turquoise tulle with white tennis shoes, a watch, and sunglasses.

This is a far cry from the ball gowns of old, when layers of petticoats and, in the 18th and 19th century, the bustle, shaped the skirts and crafted the silhouette. Of course, the point of a ball gown is to dance in it, the swirling and swishing fabrics creating a visual spectacle as you 1-2-3 to Strauss and Tchaikovsky. Balls date back to the Middle Ages, when the upper echelons of society would host events where men and women could mingle and scope out potential marriage partners. Having the most spectacular ball gown guaranteed all eyes were on you, and could help you secure the best match. An elaborate ball gown has the added benefit of allowing a woman to physically occupy more space, and create a halo of seclusion – and hence exclusivity – around her. The most extravagant gowns could cost as much as a house and take months to painstakingly hand-sew, bead, and embroider.

Weddings and the red carpet are probably the closest mere mortals can get to aristocratic balls. When a bride or a celebrity steps out in a full gown – among a sea of column, mermaid, or revealing dresses – there is a collective intake of breath. From actual royalty to Hollywood royalty, wearing a ball gown puts you in the spotlight, not unlike Cinderella at the ball. Think Gwyneth Paltrow accepting her 1999 best actress Academy Award in a soft pink taffeta gown by Ralph Lauren, Princess Stéphanie of Luxembourg in custom Elie Saab for her wedding day, or Daphne Guinness in an avant garde Alexander McQueen creation at the 2011 Met Ball. "As cliché as it sounds," says Lebanese style influencer Karen Wazen Bakhazi, "getting dressed up in a dreamy gown makes me feel like a princess. I think it's important for every woman to experience it at least once."

Wearing a ball gown on the red carpet harks back to the 1940s and 1950s, the heyday of the style, when Grace Kelly – who went from being Hollywood royalty to actual royalty – and a string of debutantes kept the fantasy alive in a post-second world war world hungry for beauty, elegance, and romance. *The Crown* is reintroducing a new generation to the breathtaking gowns of that era by way of Queen Elizabeth's (played by Claire Foy) elegant Norman Hartnell-designed formal wardrobe.

For Arab designers, today's ball gowns are every inch



the fantasy. From Elie Saab to Zuhair Murad and Ashi Studio, the silhouette is still created with meticulous detail. It's a design that's close to Lebanese-American designer Rami Kadi's heart, precisely because it recalls the elegance of the Grace Kelly era. "Any fashion designer would love to achieve this femininity and romance with and for an elegant woman," he says. "With rich fabrics

“A fantasy dress for fantasy events, THE BALL GOWN is never not OVER-THE-TOP”

and volume, it's better to always choose more settled colors. I usually prefer strapless dresses or very thin straps, small sleeves or off-the-shoulder, with a wide neckline to showcase jewelry and to balance the volume and length of the bottom of the dress. For fabric, I prefer to go with something that gives structure and not weight, such as brocade, mikade, tulle, and organza.”

The ball gown might be a vestige of days gone by, but this most decadent of designs will always be one of creativity and fantasy. □



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