

THE VERY SEXY

ERROL ARENDZ



In fashionspeak 'sexy' means current (as in 'Seoul is sexy right now', meaning the sweatshops there deliver cheap goods on time). Sexy means commercially desirable. Sexy means hot. Errol Arendz is sexy.

THERE IS NOBODY Errol Arendz would rather be: prince of local made-to-order modes, darling of the social-page set. He started as a stripling who made a white dress for Barbara Barnard (now Silva) and he's grown into our closest approximation of a couturier. With his sister Gloria (colleague, alter ego and muse in one), Errol has created a personal mythology that all but overshadows the clothes he designs.

'I love being myself. I feel so rich inside,' he says. His life is fashion, and fashion is drama: pull-on persona, dressing up, stepping in and out of roles, making magic at the whim of imagination. He's the unwisely passionate Titania, fiery Oberon and capricious Puck all in one - (I love to tease: it's like tickling).

Today, he is Oberon. His almond eyes are flat and taut with ennui, his mouth in full flower - when Errol purses his lips, they actually seem to grow fuller. Fingertips to temples, he pauses a moment and then the hands flash out to indicate 'all this - the glitz and the glamour, the madness.'

Towards the end of last year, wisdom came to the dark sprite in his pristine

palace of couture. Minimalism is the ultimate luxury, says the space and alluring whiteness of his Cape Town studio and for some time he has appeared in simple dark clothes, a little in love, perhaps, with the gloomy edicts of Yamamoto and co. Now for 1990 he has shaken the sequins from his workbasket and found inspiration by journeying East on the spice route, along with masters St Laurent, Armani, Gaultier et al.

Never one for half measures, the inner Errol has also enjoyed spiritual transformation. 'Might as well just plunge in and try it,' has been a course of action frequently encouraged by Errol's 'guides' (as he refers to the inner voices others might call instincts.)

After the particularly exhausting Grand Rotunda Ball (Errol dressed a dozen or so of the belles), his guides (or was it that gorgeous visitor from Europe?) suggested the hitherto unthinkable: an escape to the bush. ('Errol in the bush?' squawked those who thought they know him well.) Shrewd and sensible in many things but not in love, Errol plunged into a remote corner of Botswana and revelled in the whole fantasy -

Landrovers, electric storms, tents, and animals. Errol sketches in a word-picture of the Garden of Eden. It was a primal (ie, profoundly sexy) experience. The thrill of contact! On one game drive they happened upon elephant and Errol knew the lover's suicidal urge to leap from the open vehicle and rush towards them.

As we talk in his cliff-side eyrie overlooking the Atlantic, he sits on the carpet in loose jeans and a model agency's T-shirt. His hunky house guest is upstairs sipping peppermint tea and reading the Old Testament. Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* pulsates through the huge airy spaces of the room. Music, he says, is now his wellspring of inspiration: jazz for 'sensual, sexy, live, rhythmic clothes'; classical music for his opulent gimmick-free creations.

His values, he says, have changed completely. The enormous ambition that once drove that little suburban boy to get out there and show the world has burnt itself out. Reaching the top loses its meaning when you get there and realise there is no top.

And I know when I bump into someone ■

By Catherine Knox





ERROL FRENZ

Errol's pinboard with past and present pin-ups mixed with luscious fabric swatches

OK 240	OK 241	OK 242	OK 243	OK 244
OK 245	OK 246	OK 247	OK 248	OK 249
OK 250	OK 251	OK 252	OK 253	OK 254
OK 255	OK 256	OK 257	OK 258	OK 259
OK 260	OK 261	OK 262	OK 263	OK 264
OK 265	OK 266	OK 267	OK 268	OK 269
OK 270	OK 271	OK 272	OK 273	OK 274
OK 275	OK 276	OK 277	OK 278	OK 279
OK 280	OK 281	OK 282	OK 283	OK 284
OK 285	OK 286	OK 287	OK 288	OK 289
OK 290	OK 291	OK 292	OK 293	OK 294
OK 295	OK 296	OK 297	OK 298	OK 299
OK 300	OK 301	OK 302	OK 303	OK 304

How an Errol Arendz dress is made - meticulously

I was at school with, that something has happened to the sissy in the back row. I have been exposed to the extremes of it all and it didn't make me happy. Now I recharge myself by returning to the simple things, the precious special things it's so easy to rush past. Inner peace is my goal now. My psychic skills are developing and I have learnt to live for the hour. Aha! That's our Errol - high-voltage darling of the club scene, on the job by seven in the morning even if his lights only went out at 4am.

He receives a weekly average of three requests to stage fashion shows and he has just turned down 17 social invitations for the next three weeks. Wearing an Errol Arendz is no longer enough for the socially ambitious. Errol must be there in person. A hostess or bride is much more likely to make it into the social pages if she is photographed with the designer.

Errol would be crazy not to be a party to this desirable state of affairs. He and Gloria are fêted socially because they are such superb guests. They're always dressed to stun and can be counted on to get a party going. Errol, Puck-like, charms even the stodgiest of company with dramatised accounts of highly risqué incidents starring himself, while Gloria plays foil with the sure-footedness of a Broadway star.

Next day Errol is angry Oberon again. 'Angry' is a favourite way to describe himself.

'I was very angry,' he says, 'when they told me in London that I'd never make it here. So I came back determined to show them.' (A new romance in Cape Town added extra impetus to his homeward journey.)

He was very angry when he made an anti-fashion statement for a video introducing his segment of the Cape Town Mayoress's fashion show. 'I thought: What's all this crap? We don't have our own lines. The inspiration comes from Europe, the masters do it all.' In the video Errol was unadorned, clad in yoga black, ascetic and wearied by 'the madness, the rushing, the searching, the labels - in short, the epitome of *ennui à la mode*'.

'It's only clothes. We're not curing cancer, we're not putting people into space,' says Karl Lagerfeld. 'This is just dressmaking after all, not the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel...' As is his wont, the man who put Chanel back on the map is playing devil's advocate. Every facet of his lifestyle and modus operandi confirm that, above a certain level, it is entirely appropriate to take fashion seriously. Lagerfeld's distinctly Gothic intellectual and aesthetic predilections (quite as much as his heretical utterances) place him firmly in the galaxy of fashion's philosophers because beyond all the appetitive flim-flam of marketing, deep down under the hype, there is a profound significance to fashion far beyond the meaning of clothes.

FASHION IS USED loosely but apparently quite satisfactorily to refer to a complex of behaviour patterns and creative notions, a ruthless social class structure and a

COSMOPOLITAN'S FASHION DIRECTORY, MARCH 1990



Below: Metres and metres of marvellous custom-made Arendz luxe





A measure of every couturier's success is his ability to handle the ladies

labyrinthine industry. 'Fashion' is not given precise meaning by its users or practitioners, yet fashion continues to function as a useful word. The language of fashion is idiosyncratic, elliptical and either hyperbolic to the point of hysteria or staggeringly simplistic. Perhaps deliberately, it sends out a set of inexplicable signals.

Like Lagerfeld and the doyens of design, Errol's life is as much a part of fashion as the clothes he makes. He is not a directional or trend-setting designer. He is a couturier, distinct from a fashionable dressmaker because he is profoundly in tune with a sociological phenomenon loosely known as 'lifestyle'. Is he merely a symptom or is he actually part of the disease? Fashion wouldn't bother to separate the two, because in its changing world what isn't true today might be true tomorrow.

Perhaps this is why Errol, with slightly tetchy indulgence, lets most of the stories about himself pass. One journal claimed Errol craved a Rolls of his own. In fact, during the interview, Errol had used a quote from Oleg Cassini to illustrate the problems of making money out of couture: 'If your clients come in the subway (to buy your ready-to-wear) you will be able to afford to go home in the Rolls.' The Porsche parked outside Errol's pad makes eloquent comment on that one. When a powerful fashion chain tried to manacle Errol with an all-encompassing licencing deal that included everything except a reasonable royalty, one of the big boys said: 'Sign and you'll be driving a Porsche in two years.' Canny Errol turned the deal down and was driving a Porsche anyway, six months later.

His passion for fashion is equalled only by love of planes and flying: 'The speed, the form of the metal, the balletic movements of aircraft! The fact that they whisk you to exotic and glamorous places.' For Christmas and birthdays the young Errol wanted only model aircraft or balsawood construction kits which he'd assemble painstakingly.

Now he's reached that rarified altitude occupied by private jets. Invited to a party in George recently, he and Gloria took off in a chartered Cessna and the pilot who'd heard about Errol's predilection offered to let him hold the stick once they were airborne. Only Gloria knew how late her brother had partied the night before, and Errol took the controls to the agitated jangling of costume jewellery aft.

The precise role Gloria plays in Errol's life is another fertile area for speculation. She is his muse and inspiration, say some. She is his creation, his Coppelia, say others. The real relationship no doubt accommodates all the theories but at base it is more of a sound business conspiracy. Gloria – a swan with agate eyes – is an exquisite showpiece for the Arendz fantasy, although 'we don't have time to dress Gloria every day,' says Errol. 'But she is

very clever and she knows the people and labels and she gets it together with things that don't originate in our studio.' Gloria is also a shrewd businesswoman and every scrap as hardworking and motivated as her brother. Their pooled potential is greater than the sum of what each could achieve as an individual.

IN SPITE OF the popular mythology, Errol's wasn't a rags-to-riches story like, say, Bruce Oldfield's. The Princess of Wales' buddy was dumped by his mother as a baby, brought up in the tough environment of a Dr Barnardo home and picked up his *savour faire* on the way. Errol comes from a close-knit middle-class family and the two problems he had to contend with were growing up in apartheid South Africa and overprotectiveness on his parent's part. He was never one of the gang at school and his outsider status hardened his resolve to do well and show them all. His best friend was not Gloria, but his younger sister. ('Gloria was such a little madam then, always so perfect in behaviour and grooming!')

Pa was a successful building contractor by day and emerged after dark as a 'dapper and flamboyant' sax player in a jazz band. Ma was an extremely sophisticated, elegant woman, always immaculately groomed. The kids would never miss an opportunity to cluster around Ma's dainty dressing table while she gussied up for a night out. The perfumes and powders, the sequins and frills of her ballgowns, the lipsticks and twinkling earrings and necklaces, the ritual of preparation, cast a spell that has held Errol and Gloria in thrall ever since. Errol recalls a sequence, airbrushed by memory, which features him standing on the front steps with his two sisters and their nanny watching their parents drive off for an evening of music and romance. Today he stitches a little of that magic into each one of his Cinderella-gowns. And Gloria still wears some of her mother's frocks – especially the beaded ones now that the feel of the '50s is back.

As an added bonus, says Errol, there was a chapel 200 metres down the road. At the first peal of wedding bells he'd race off to the chapel – 'I just couldn't wait to see that bride. I just wanted to touch and grab the dresses.' On at least one occasion he was caught peeping under a crinoline – trying to discover the secret suspension of the dress, not the wearer.

After school Errol was sent to a design school in Johannesburg for a year. The protective family circle encircled him even there. To avoid the group areas problem, his parents had him stay in a hotel the whole year. He was back home for two months before jetting off to seek his fortune in Europe.

Back home, he started making exquisite beaded dresses for clients acquired by

word of mouth. A special lady, Vicky Keeler, decided to give him a leg up, and put on a show in her Constantia home. Errol whipped up 30 dresses in 30 days on a domestic sewing machine. The show was a triumph that set the grapevine abuzz. Errol's name was on everyone's lips – Adèle Searl's, Sydney Baker's, Ralph Krall's, Jane Raphaely's *Fair Lady* invited him to dress Barbara Barnard for a special shoot. The picture of her in Errol's white dress on the staircase at the Maharani Hotel in Durban is now part of South African fashion history. And Errol was in the best kind of trouble: how ever was he to cope with the rush of orders?

The rush has never abated and Errol has coped, a broad streak of sound, suburban common sense anchoring him through a stormy love-life and the dizzying blandishments of fame and fortune. A measure of every couturier's success is his ability to handle the ladies, for he is part-fashionable dressmaker. The job is to make the client feel good, translate her own fantasies into clothes that will make her look good and beam out the desired message to the world. With established working relationships (Adèle Searl, Karen Barnard, you name them, they're Errol's) a dialogue is set up. New ones are more difficult. Brides are a special challenge: 'they come in full of stored energy built over months of planning what to wear. I can often tell immediately what is going to be right but we have to go through the motions of searching for a solution before we arrive back at the point where I started.'

Errol describes consultations in the same terms a psychoanalyst might use. His tactics are similar, too. Within minutes of meeting Jani Allen, he was delving into her secrets instead of her interviewing him – they're still close friends. When Fleet Street's people-eating columnist Jean Rook visited South Africa, I took her up to the Arendz studio, and Errol had her eating out of his hand before the tea tray arrived.

Encounters like these are walkovers compared to the bloodsports of sartorial competition. A typical scenario: for the same event, Mrs X and Mrs Y separately and confidentially express desires for taffeta with cabbage roses. Dresses for special dos must be kept *absolutely* secret and there is *absolutely* no way one designer can give two ladies the same thing and live to tell the tale. Neither can Errol hint to Y that X has already ordered taffeta and roses or sure as hell she'll tell the entire beau monde he can't be relied on not to blab. So he has to cajole and chivy Mrs Y in another direction. The truth will out at the ball anyway.

Sometimes Errol has to get 'very angry' to restore a sense of proportion. It all matters so terribly much! Dresses to die for, as they say.

