Maison Alaïa: Pieter Mulier debuts with panache and punch

By Godfrey Deeny - 5 July 2021

Azzedine Alaïa was never, ever going to be an easy act to follow, but with an elite audience perched on wooden folding chairs on the street outside the house’s historic headquarters willing him on – Pieter Mulier unveiled a striking and sculptural debut collection, winning himself a well-deserved standing ovation.

Mulier was highly respectful of the brand’s DNA throughout, without however following it to slavishly. He played with multiple Alaïa references – stretch crepe; perforated leather; sculpted cocktails; Amazonia leggings or Venetian blind columns but gave them all his own twist.
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His body-con stretched cocktails finished with matching skull caps were all pretty sensational; while his stretch wool flamenco dresses finished below the knee with feathers were brilliant.

Alaïa never designed for a shrinking violet or hot-house flower, and neither does Mulier. Like Azzedine, Mulier’s cast marched like empowered heroines. From the quartet of beauties who smoldered down the street in body-caressing semi-sheer columns; to the artfully constructed waistcoats that finished in cowls, Grace-Jones style; to the racy denim jumpsuit with shawl collar; to the great screen-goddess feathered coats.

Moreover, Mulier also mingled in some great accessories – from the giant rawhide leather totes with woven leather trim; or cool half-moon shoulder bags.

Though known as a great friend of supermodels like Yasmin Le Bon, Linda Evangelista or Naomi Campbell, who opened Alaïa’s final show, in fact the majority of Azzedine’s casts in later years were obscure locals, or women of character he admired.
Mulier, by contrast, used a pricey, top-notch crew – from Mica Argañaraz and Rianne Von Rompaey to Liya Kebede and Natasha Poly. Clearly the house’s owner, luxury conglomerate Richemont, and Alaïa’s composed and elegant CEO Myriam Serrano, have the budget to back Mulier’s vision.

Somewhat eccentrically, the cast entered the runway by walking along a chained-off sidewalk for the first 50 yards, before turning onto the 100-meter long catwalk on rue de Moussy, in the heart of the Marais.

Another flaw was the irritating lighting, which meant most of the audience saw the models back-lit; not exactly wise in our Instagram era. Curiously, French fashion’s best lighting director, Thierry Dreyfus, was sitting front-row, though as a fan, not as show producer. His skills were missed.

But these are small quibbles about a consummately skillful display by Mulier. The show marked the Belgian-born designer’s historic debut as a fully fledged creative director. In a notable career he had been the right-hand man of Raf Simons in Milan, Paris and New York – at Jil Sander, Christian Dior and Calvin Klein, respectively.
Not everything he did quite jelled – like the aubergine-hued ruffled crepe mini cocktail that was too twee; as were the stretch biker shorts worn with metallic tops, or the studded heeled clogs.

Yet the unsaid question, before any model appeared, was: could Mulier cut it as a number one? On this evidence, he should have a very successful career at the house, while fully respecting the founder's oeuvre.

Pre-show, Mulier left a letter on each guest's seat extolling Azzedine: “for your peerless adulation of the feminine figure. You were sculptor, a genius of the hand. Your fashion had a heart and a rare intelligence – a combination of precision, modernity and poetry.”

Asked how he felt after his debut, Mulier responded: “Happy and relieved. And very glad that everyone saw the letter. I wanted to underline the basis of the respect I have for this unique house and unique designer.”

At the finale, Mulier garnered a huge burst of applause from a front row that included many old friends of the house – from architectural great Jean Nouvel, to LVMH’s Sidney Toledano to Valentino’s Pier Paolo Piccioli.
“Magnifique! I think Azzedine would have enjoyed this collection very much. And I did too, as I know that with Pieter designing Alaïa the house's future is bright,” enthused Christoph Von Weyhe, Alaïa’s long-time partner.

Von Weyhe revealed to FashionNetwork.com that Mulier had invited him to visit and check out the progress of the collection, though he demurred. “I told Peter I wanted to see the full statement. And, I’m glad I waited,” Von Weyhe winked.