

## **Industry Insight: extended**

**Peter Robinson, head of press and events at The White Company, extended interview.**

*Peter's interview appears in abridged form in Chapter 2, page 78 and Chapter 3, page 98.*

### **What different kind of shows have you been involved in and experienced during your career?**

My first job was at a company that is now called 'Lee Publicity', which was a PR company that mainly specialised in high street and catalogue PR. This was obviously about 24 years ago. So I started there, that was my first job and it was very much the low price point level of the market. Strangely enough one of our clients was New Look who I came to work for later. One of our clients was The British Show Corporation, which was a large organisation that represented Dolcis, Emilio Lucca, Shoe Express – a lot of the high street shoe brands. There are very few left now because stand-alone shoe stores don't exist, shoes tend to be part of larger ranges. We also had Freemans Catalogue, and Freemans Catalogue was incredibly important, incredibly powerful, probably before the birth of the Next Directory, so it was a lot of high street accounts and I stayed there working on all of those accounts. After that I went to work at Kim Blake PR.

### **Tell me about working with Kim Blake**

Kim Blake had worked at the designer end of the market for a long time and through her involvement with Graduate Fashion Week, which she had taken on as PR, she had been introduced to British Home Stores (BHS) who were looking for someone to do their consumer PR. So Kim asked me to come on board as account director on BHS, having the knowledge and the contacts in the weekly market as it was then, the daily papers, which were less concerned with designer level fashion, so that is how I came to work with Kim Blake. Through working with Kim Blake, I worked on all of the other accounts as well. I did London Fashion Week, Paris Fashion Week, so that was interesting work, for me it was a sea-change. I worked on shows such as Mitchiko Koschino, Robert Cary-Williams. I worked on Cristophe la Mer, sometimes these were our PR clients and we did their shows, sometimes we were brought on board just to do the shows, and the seating plans, which is the most political thing of all.

### **Can you tell me about the seating for shows?**

You work with the international PRs from all of the international titles. Seating is very much graded with editors and fashion directors front and second row depending on title. And you would have some important freelancers who would need to be seated. Moving backwards you would eventually get to 'back of' depending upon how large the show is and how large your venue is, which would dictate how many junior stylists, how many junior assistants, etc. you could admit to each show.

We did a Boudica show once in a car park I remember, which was obviously quite large. We only had very limited seating so the majority of people had to stand. Boudica were a very interesting couple of designers who everyone was looking at at that time. We had a car park in East London, I think it was just off Fashion Street. The international press came to that. Kim managed the door and I was inside doing the seating. Suzi Menkes was there and all of the big editors and directors from around the world. The other side of things that you have to work out is where you will sit the buyers, because if you have the buyers from every store all over the world and people flying in from Japan, the States, etc. it is important that they have good seats in order to see the collections.

### **And how do you balance the buyers and the press?**

It is usually one side buyers and one side press. Obviously there will be more press. There will be the domestic press. The large department stores around the world will only send a certain number of people to the shows. I found out a lot more about that when I moved to Harvey Nichols.

... so that was my first foray into catwalks; when I worked with Kim. Very exciting, a real eye-opener.

### **And in those days there wasn't social media, was there, so communication was totally different?**

This was a very different way of working, this was a time when you would get press requests by fax. So you would get faxes from all over the world for press items, you would actually ring people, it was far more about picking up the phone and speaking to people, getting the low-down on stories, finding out what you could send.

### **And is that how it happens nowadays? Is it still happening by phone?**

A little bit, but to be honest the majority of communication today is by email. You reach out to people by email, the dreaded email – and it is dreaded. But because you can do so much more and so much quicker, and because you everyone is doing twice the amount of work they were doing 15 years ago, because you receive between 400 and 800 emails a day, and probably send 200, so you have got your internal contacts and your external contacts. And all of the emails that you send, sometimes it is 3 to 5 seconds and it is gone. It is a lot quicker and I suppose the sad thing about it is that you do lose a lot of the niceties. But fashion departments are a lot smaller than they were. Everything has picked up a faster pace, so everything has changed in the PR world from how I first knew it. Most companies had two to three computers, you would take it in turns to check emails because you were still receiving things by fax and speaking to people on the phone. Totally different. The world has changed greatly.

### **What happened after working with Kim?**

I went to Marks and Spencer where I joined the team looking after womenswear PR. M&S was quite a large PR team, which was split even within clothing into: womenswear, lingerie, menswear, children's, food and home. It was quite a big team and a corporate organisation, very structured and very different to how I had

worked before, and again very interesting for me to move to. M&S was the biggest high street retailer, not just in terms of size and wealth but in terms of interest as well. If you look back to ten years ago, Topshop was still growing, and so was Zara, and Mango, and New Look didn't have many stores in London.

M&S was in a very dominant position then. That is somewhere where I experienced the fashion show in a different context. One year we did a fashion show as part of our press day, which was quite interesting, so we had a static exhibition at the Old Post Office just outside Victoria, and it was set up with men's, women's, kid's, elements of home and lingerie, and we did quite a big-production fashion show. I think we had 30 to 35 models, each with three to four looks each. It was completely styled and the purpose was to introduce M&S in a different way, it was quite unusual then for high street retailers to do fashion shows, it was beautifully produced, we had catwalk show producers, a stylist, we had a good level of model within the show and it was beautifully lit. People could use that as a tool to call in outfits directly from the show. The Look Book that we gave away at the press day actually featured some of the same outfits as well, so that people could recognise outfits from the show.

#### **Did you give out a line sheet at the show?**

There was a release and line sheet on each of the chairs, so it was very easy, it was almost the way that salon shows work. It looked very beautiful and was quite applauded within the press and I think that was a sea-change. It was not the first high street fashion show, but it was unusual at that point, so at that moment everyone watched M&S and thought this is something that we could do. And then it became more commonplace. That would have been about 12 years ago roughly.

I stayed at M&S for five years, working on womenswear on PR, shows, shoots, collaborations, etc. We just did that one show. What is also very interesting about it is that M&S is a very big organisation with a lot of big stores. As well as inviting the London-based press to that show, we invited signature press from all of the major cities from around the UK, also from some of the international cities; we had Belfast and Dublin. People from the stores didn't come along; it was really just for press.

When I left M&S I went to be Group PR Manager for Harvey Nichols. I looked after the stores internationally. I think the group had seven stores when I was there. We had five in the UK and it built throughout. I was one of the team who worked on the launch of the store in Istanbul. While I was there, my catwalk experience was quite different because it was attending shows. I did all of the four main cities; London, Paris, New York and Milan, and the menswear shows as well. I was there with the buyer and as PR it was very important that I engaged with the brands. We would see the shows, and go to the showrooms afterwards. Quite often I would accompany the buyers on the actual buying appointments or the look-sees to revisit what we had seen on the catwalk. What you realise about the shows at that point is how much of an edit they are, of how large the whole collection is. They are very much the stylist's point of view of what the collection is.

### **To tell the story of the brand for that moment in time?**

Yes, it is key in terms of publicity, because of the column inches that you can get internationally, as we know now, if you have a celebrity in a show or one of the top models. At the moment, if Cara Delavigne is in a show you are almost guaranteed to have pages in the international press. Or someone who is interesting, such as a model who hasn't been in shows for a long time, who comes back and creates a lot of buzz within the industry. So that kind of catwalk show is mainly a PR tool, but it helps the buyers to work out what their edit will be, what is the notion that designer is trying to deliver and how will it sit within their stores for their customers?

### **But if the collection is edited on the catwalk, is that a problem for buyers?**

Well, I think what you do is, you understand what the point of view is, and you couldn't have the entire collection, it would be too long. What you realise when you do the buying appointments afterwards, is how much isn't on the catwalk that is perhaps quite classic. Every label will do a white shirt, a t-shirt of some sort, a piece of denim ... those pieces don't need to be shown on the catwalk; people know they exist, unless they help to dress a particular look.

If you look at how certain stores buy, at for instance Marc Jacobs, you would see pieces that haven't been on the catwalk but you would know that they would be there, but they are important because they are the bits that will sell more than the more outrageous, colourful, expensive pieces that are on the catwalk. As I say, the pieces that you get you the PR etc. So that was the Harvey Nichols days, and when I left Harvey Nichols I went to head up the PR at New Look.

### **Was it strange to be on the other side when you left Harvey Nichols?**

Well it was very different. When I was at Harvey Nichols it was very different from being behind the scenes with the headset on. Obviously there is no stress involved, and it is very much about absorbing what is going on. When you heard what people would say, what their initial reactions were that is not necessarily what they wrote in the reports, etc. You do get an initial buzz of what people think, from the people sitting around you, people you may know, members of press, etc. That was always interesting.

### **Why do people continue to travel the world to go to shows? The show has changed very little ... new methods of communication ... why live catwalk rather than something like film?**

I think often a lot of it is about the atmosphere: the grandeur, the spectacle, some of the big shows where they produce amazing set builds that are like film sets ... when you think they have built all that and that they last for 12 to 15 minutes sometimes ... but that can never be captured in social media. It is never the same feeling, and I think that is why often if there is an amazing collection, there are still standing ovations at fashion shows, there are still times when people get excited, there are still times when the front row will get up and applaud, and that is because they have seen sometime that will update or change fashion for a while. They know that is what is going to happen and I don't think you can ever replicate that through film

and social media. That is why those arbiters sit in the front row, and when they do that, you know that that is a moment.

### **And the talk that goes on at the shows?**

It is always interesting to see that in social media, favourite pieces, things that they thought were too much the same or unoriginal. I have experienced shows where people have said “that show will be the death of that label” and it never has been and it would be inappropriate for me to say which labels. That can happen with big labels where you thought “we are not sure that worked,” etc. But I wonder whether people go away and on contemplation they realise more what it was about, because you take a little bit away with you. Perhaps sometimes it was too much to take in, too forward thinking? Too outrageous. It is what you feel and what you absorb that you don’t get live-streamed. You don’t get the detail and you don’t get the finish. Or the constant flow that you do when you watch a fashion show. Also watching what other people are reacting to around the room, which is very interesting. While some people are photographing, blogging ... there are still people who do sketch or take notes in the front row. A lot of the old guard will be there on their laptops. A lot of the old guard will still be writing. And they really do capture everything, and they probably keep their notebooks forever. One day they will be of interest to someone.

So, going back to the difference of absorbing shows, sitting in the audience, in a lot of respects it is a beautiful experience, you are incredibly well looked after. I have done everything from sitting in the front row to sitting at the back. Depending upon what the PRs thought about where I was working at that time and how important that was. Obviously it is incredibly busy in that you do go from show to show to show.

### **How do you absorb all of the information?**

You do have to take notes to a degree. Take away things that you are given. When you leave and you have seen so many shows a day? You break it down but you do need those aide memoirs because it is a lot of information to take in. The first show might be 9am or 10am and sometimes the last show is 9pm and it is running an hour, an hour and a half late, you have all of that information to take in. You have travelled all around the city, got caught in traffic, you have probably had nothing to eat, and it is the same for days and days.

### **So all of those shows, what do you remember today? What is the most amazing show that you saw?**

In Paris I saw a couple of McQueen collections that really were outstanding. I think Paris has always been ‘the shows’ and it always is a ‘show’, and New York is always very slick and well produced. Milan is always very monied. London is always very experimental, but I always feel with London that people spend the money on shows that they would spend elsewhere. Apart perhaps from Burberry, which have done some great shows recently. I think London gets away with more, it is a bit more tongue in cheek, rather than spend a fortune on shows, it is quite paired down.

### **Did you do any shows in Harvey Nichols?**

Yes, we did in the regional stores; we did one in Edinburgh, which was to excite the local press, the local good customers from the locality to create some buzz. That was a total mix of invitees as well. And that one was in a car park as well, we always seem to be in car parks. Car parks sort of work. Edinburgh was for the public and the press, and then after Harvey Nichols I came to New Look.

That was a very different sort of company, a huge job. Well, I think my M&S head was back on. Very different from M&S but similar size. It was a big operation. We did a number of fashion shows that were internal fashion shows for the store managers, area managers. We did one at Old Billingsgate Market, next to the *Express* building. It was interesting because of the number of stores there were, and we did invite the national press, we needed somewhere big. There were about 1,000 people in the audience. We had each of the store managers, each of the area managers, all of the directors, other people of note within the business, franchise partners and it was another big show. Forty models. Big production. Quite a long show. But other things as well as the catwalk show. There were addresses from the directors about what was going on. And the show was very much used as the finale to get everybody on board with regard to what you were doing, get everyone involved in the buzz with regard to what you would be selling in the stores. A point of view of how it could be put together and it was very much how a trend could be perceived. That was very much about engaging the staff and giving them information that they would use with customers in the stores.

### **Was it successful in motivating everybody? People love fashion shows don't they?**

I think so, despite the trials and tribulations, I think what is interesting is that the show is the quickest way to deliver a lot of messages to a vast audience. I think you can do it by email, you can do it pictorially, etc., but I think sometimes when you have that amount of people to deliver a message to, it is almost like cost-saving because by the time you have shot, printed, despatched, found the right words ... it is a way of ensuring that everyone is on the same page, everyone is there ... it is not like delivering a book of the season that can be left on a table of the staff room. And also what you have to think is that for a lot of people who perhaps have not been to a fashion show, it is the most exciting, engaging, amazing thing that they have seen in a fashion environment, and they do go away totally enthused and totally bowled over because they see the best of the best.

### **Did New Look continue to do regular shows?**

I left just over a year ago and they hadn't done one for a while. I think it is one of those things that you do every now and again, and it is a good livener. If you don't do it all of the time, you get such a buzz because you get the feeling that you are going to something elite and that is what people buy into. There is something about it, it is the most engaging way of talking to people. People always say to you "what shows did you go to?" It is a bit like a rite of passage, to be invited to something.

### **So Jigsaw, at Jigsaw you did an internal show?**

We always have, and it is the norm to do a seasonal show, which encapsulates what the vibe is behind men's, women's, kid's, etc., for head office staff and for the store managers. There are 65 stores. This time around we took it to a totally different level in that it would usually be at the head office in Kew where we have a beautiful head office. But because we have a new flagship building opening in the West End, we decided to do it in the shell of that building so, as well as delivering the fashion show, it was delivering it in the theatre that would be our flagship store, and because we were very, very proud of what was to come in the future, and also of the collection, we invited some external partners that we work with within the industry. It was an internal/external sort of fashion 'fix' as it were.

It was very beautifully styled, and styled by our in-house team that style the e-commerce site. So it was very on-brand for us and it delivered all of the outfits in the way that we will probably sell them online to a degree, although obviously with a little more pizzazz and with more accessories, etc. You can do that on a catwalk, whereas when you are selling from a site, obviously you have to keep it fairly clean to a degree. Catwalk can be very editorial, it can be fun, you see everything through the movement and you are never obscuring anything, whereas in a picture you can obscure something very easily.

### **You are managing the personality of a brand through a show.**

The shows are put on by the e-commerce team, the PR team but a lot of people from the design through to the Product Director through to the Retail Director because it is delivering to her staff and stores. But all of the outfits are styled up in advance, you run through and get them signed off, down to what the shoes will be, how they run together. Do you run in sections? Do you intersperse with menswear? Or do you put menswear afterwards? How does it all work to deliver an overall picture?

### **Do you have internal production meetings to decide all of that?**

It would be the stylist for the show talking about what the outfits will be, the head of Visual Merchandising who is responsible for what the room looks like, what the catwalk looks like, obviously we have meetings about doing a show in what will be a shop, but is still a building site. We decided that rather than make it look like a show, we used the fact that it was a building site, we had tape to mark out the catwalk on the floor, and we had bench seating, there is a staircase in the middle of store with square wrought iron banisters, so we had the models walk around in quite a large square, so it gave everyone who was seated and people who were standing plenty of time to look at the outfits. How many dressers, who is calling the models, each model had two to three or three to four models. What is the music like? Change of pace: slow to fast, fast to slow ... how are you doing that? All of those elements are discussed between the different heads of departments. Then you get the models signed off, these are the models we are thinking of using ... Hair and make-up: we would book professional hair and make-up artists, worked out by how many models we would have. We had to build backstage with hair and make-up tables and lights and enough power sockets. We had to have enough room for ten rails and enough room for guys and girls to get changed. It is a day of one rehearsal about mid-day, one dress rehearsal and then it was time for the show. All done in one day. And you

can make it work. All of those little things to think about: what will they eat? Don't let them escape, they will never come back...

**Do any of the photographs from that show go out or is it purely internal?**

Purely internal. Once it goes outside, that's PR and the cost tends to be prohibitive. So the stuff that goes externally tends to be from shoots.

**Are you involved in those?**

Yes. I think we had fifteen girls and four guys for the last show, but to do the buy-out for fifteen girls ... nobody would be able to ... it would be incredibly expensive and that is why it is purely for internal messaging.

**Trunk shows. Have you ever done one?**

No.

**Social media. How has it changed things?**

It is a difficult one because we are all so used to it. There are obvious differences; the immediacy of everything getting out there, there is almost no exclusivity. Previously after a show, they would release things in a timely fashion, once they had spoken to you and checked what everyone else was doing. You could almost carve up stories and see what people wanted to do, whereas it is more now that everyone is just in and doing it. And to be honest, print journalists are exactly the same, because obviously you have got the bloggers sitting there who will blog and it will go out internationally, but you will have the print media.

When I look through Instagram and all of the online, there will be people saying 'love these shoes' about this show or 'this is the finale' or 'we have just arrived and look at the staging at ...' Everyone now has to achieve something. And they will do that and have to create something for the print version, so it is a 360, they will have to have something on tweeting live, Instagramming, something they will be writing up for the blog on their magazine site, something for the print version of their magazine. It is multi-faceted. It is the same information, but you have to split it in different ways. I think what you have to do is like four stories, and you have to think what is your originality? With your Twitter it is small, Instagram is just pictorial, the blog nobody reads more than two paragraphs really, and the print version will still be the longest if someone does a large *précis* of what has been seen at a fashion show, whether it be in a newspaper or in a magazine.

I think it has changed things, but I think it has probably made the press quicker. Before they would have time to ponder things, but now they have to get something out or it is old news. And they almost have to deliver something that same day as the people who are only doing blogs. That will drive someone to buy the print version, which might come out three months later. Anything that is online is about the experience or about getting people to experience across the 360 platforms.

The print vehicle is still incredibly important and probably the one that brings in the most money. Because everything else is free. I think it is different, with print media,



you hang onto things, you might rip something out or hang onto a magazine, or collect it, keep it forever. What is interesting is that the biggest growth market in print is the bi-annual because people want things that they can keep, things that are beautiful. I think print media can give you that, but I don't think online can. Online can give you information but you don't get the experience, you don't get the glamour, you don't feel that level of excitement in the same way. It is great to see what everyone is doing but you never revisit a tweet ... you can't, how far away would it be by that time, but if there is something that is in print ... I have magazines from 25 years ago, 30 years ago and I still collect some magazines now. I think that is what is very different and I don't think social will ever be able to deliver that, but people absorb information in so many different ways now, and it is important not to be dismissive. I think some people are very dismissive of social media and some people are very dismissive of print, and actually you cannot be dismissive of any because they are complimentary, they have to be. I think that is how things have changed. You do see people in the industry who are very old guard. Even if it is not them, their teams have got to get something out immediately because of the competition that is there.

### **So you can't afford to have a down day?**

No, you can't. Before you could go to a show, afterwards look at your notes, etc., whereas now you have to get a comment out about it. Going back to the expense of fashion shows, and the number of people who are sent, I think less people are sent to fashion shows now. You still have thousands of people there, but fewer per company. All of the London journalists go to the London shows but very few of the London journalists will go to New York, a large number will go to Paris because it is fairly cheap to Eurostar, slightly less will go to Milan. That has really changed the way things are. Before, whole fashion teams would go. That is also because of social media. People can get what they need from what their friends and colleagues have sent to them. A lot of journalists I speak to will say "I am doing Milan, so and so is doing Paris, so I will be in the office when things come through, then so and so will do New York, we will all do London, our home city." People work in a different way now. There is a lot more sharing between people in departments whereas before you would have people who worked very separately. You can't afford to be like that now because of the travel. It is expensive, and there are smaller teams. Publishing houses don't necessarily want that to be the way you work and it doesn't need to be anymore; the landscape is different.