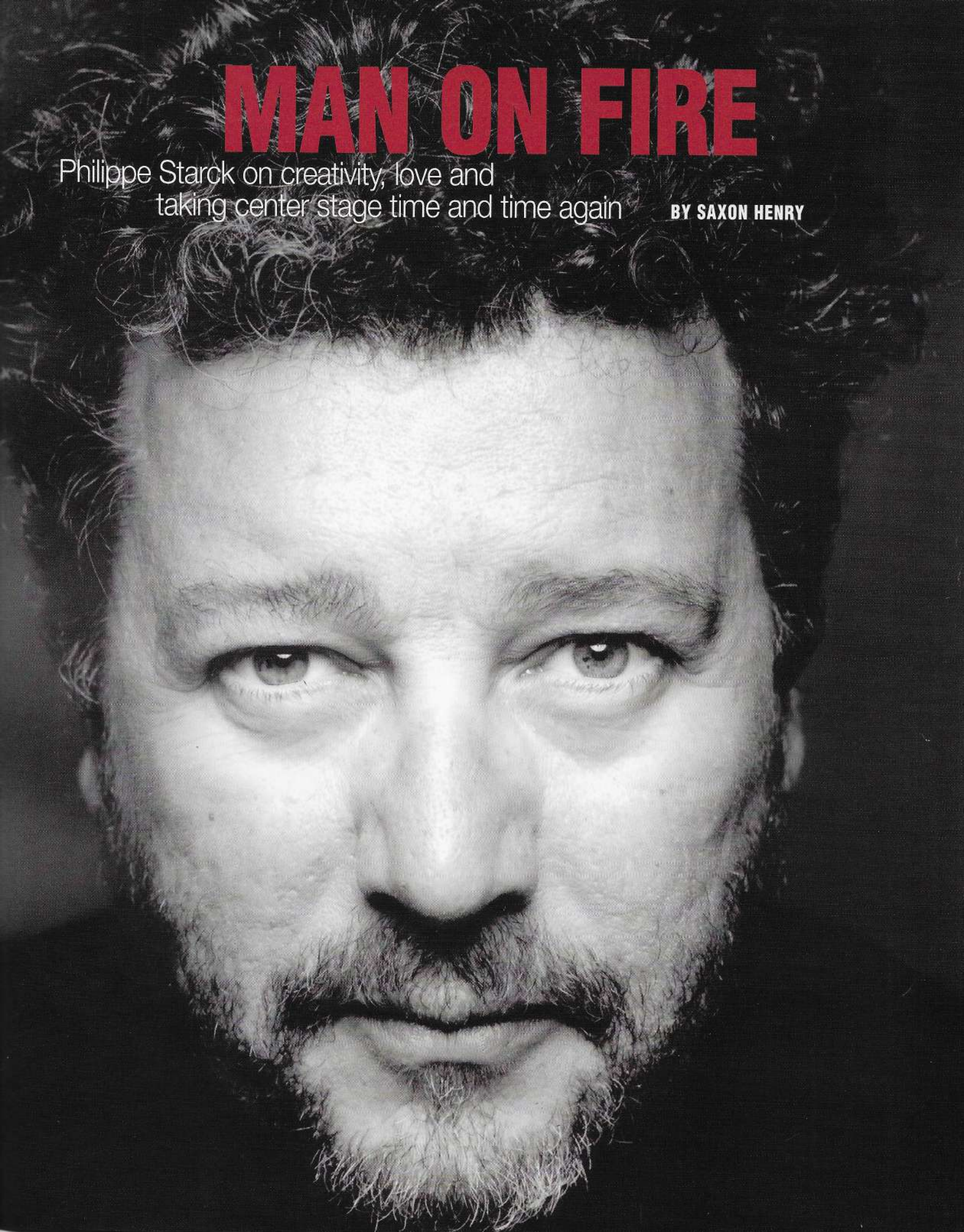


MAN ON FIRE

Philippe Starck on creativity, love and
taking center stage time and time again

BY SAXON HENRY



Forget the old marketing adage that if you make something you must please everyone. "I believe this rule has become bankrupt and has taken our souls with it," says über-designer Philippe Starck. When Starck riffs on this subject, everyone listens, as who is better at marketing than the French genius whose empire includes such a wide range of products that you could have Starck touch nearly every part of your day with his wares if you chose to do so (even your mouse, as he's just designed one for Microsoft).

Conceptually, Starck agrees with Macbeth in one sense and poo-poo's the Bard's dour king in another: "Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage," quavers Macbeth. Starck concedes that life is a stage, but insists there's nothing fretful about it. "What I am determined to do is to make a stage, where people can be sexier and more brilliant, a place where they can awake smarter," he remarks. "I transform people into actors. I ask them to feel how open life can be. When I design something, creativity and love are the only rules."

Miami-based furnishings designer James Stuart Duncan, whose hip lines of furniture and carpets are filled with Starck-like frivolity, describes Starck's brilliance this way: "His genius lies in his ability to simultaneously produce objects of great beauty while refusing to treat them seriously. In this, he is a most un-French, French designer."

Starck himself maintains that this impish side has an advantage. "I believe that the poetry of Surrealism is something that everyone can understand — young and old, cultured and uncultured," he explains. "A child may look at one of my public spaces as fun, a woman may see it as poetic, a man may see it as emotional. For me, the Surrealism is a symbol that each individual can interpret on his or her own and glean from it what they wish to take away."

The designer's own Surrealism begins with pen and paper. "I am a very mental person," he says. "First of all, I dream. I elaborate all aspects of the projects in my head. When I take my pencil, it is to draw the exact final item. I've been using the same pencil and paper for 30 years."

He's also been clear about his audience for a long time. "When I make a building, I create a strong secret sign for my tribe and the building becomes a cave for them," he remarks. "You must bring joy, honesty, tenderness, vision, humor and romanticism to each project — these are emotions that my tribe appreciates."

Starck is emphatic that he never makes architecture; he makes scenarios. "Architects often think only about concrete and steel, and they are surprised when no one wants to live in their buildings," he declares. "I don't care about architecture; I care about a building that has beauty."



Above: Starck's flair for drama is evident in the LAN restaurant in Beijing, a 6,000-square-meter space that dazzles the senses.



Above: Starck takes a bite out of the Big Apple with his Yoo residential development Downtown by Philippe Starck. In the gold room, all that glitters is, well, exactly what you'd expect: gold.
 Right: The designer teamed up with Puma to create a line of sexy underwear dubbed Starck Naked Body — although he himself refuses to wear any, from his own line or anybody else's.



John Hitchcox, Starck's partner (along with Jade Jagger) in Yoo, a company dedicated to design-oriented development, met Starck at the Delano in Miami Beach about seven years ago and knew they'd make perfect workmates. "I wanted to work with someone who is consumer-oriented and who understands what people want in their spaces," he says. "When I walked into the Delano, I knew that Philippe really understood what humans need, and that was 25,000 apartments ago!"

The Related Group brought Starck, and Yoo, to town for the ICON South Beach and ICON Brickell. Starck claims that choosing to work with CEO Jorge Perez was a given. "If you want to dance tango, you must have an Argentine partner, and Jorge Perez is the perfect partner," Starck quips. "He cares about the quality of life for the people who will live in each place."

As I discovered during a jocular one-on-one interview, Starck's energy is frenetic, and those who do business with him say he works at warp speed. "He can get more done in eight hours than most people get done in three months," claims Perez without hyperbole. Hitchcox adds, "I guess compared to the normal design planning session at many of the firms I've seen, we'd be considered wildly creative!"

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It's no wonder, as Starck always has drama on his mind. "I set a stage as if I'm creating a movie set," he remarks. That may be the reason his projects are so popular, as who doesn't want to walk around on a glamorous film stage or feel as if they are enshrined in a chic Parisian setting? Ambra Medda, director of Design Miami, who has just returned from Paris, says his influence there is palpable. "I think his work will remain in history because of his marketing genius and his design talent," she says. "But not just in France, internationally as well."

Duncan, with wife and business partner Miriam, has an apartment in Paris. He describes Starck's French presence as a paradoxical one. "For the French, his designs evoke the same feelings of love/hate that American culture does more generally," he explains. "And yet he has had a tremendous impact there."

Among his proliferating products, Starck's listing of furniture designs in the *Sourcebook of Modern Furniture* (W.W. Norton) outnumber designs by even heavyweights like Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen, Tobia Scarpa and Frank Lloyd Wright. Though he claims not to wear any, he even has underwear that bears his moniker. "No, I don't wear underwear: a French guy must always be ready!" he states. "You've heard the term 'Starck Naked,' right?"

So what's the jockey-less genius Starck up to these days? "I'm currently working on approximately 200 projects — from artistic director of Virgin Galactic and the creation of a chain of hotels in the U.S. to a port in Spain and a new French motorbike for Voxane." Believe it or not, the designer would completely change jobs if he weren't so far along in his career. "I would have loved to be a scientist or a composer," he says. As far as influences, the influential designer claims, "No master, no god!" □



Above: Starck's Privé chair, which he designed for Cassina, is chically fun.