



Designer Grace Wales Bonner poses for a photograph before the catwalk show for fashion brand Wales Bonner on the second day of the Autumn/Winter 2020 London Fashion Week Men's, in London on Jan 5, 2020. — AFP photos



London designer Wales Bonner making waves

At just 29, Grace Wales Bonner is one of London's most promising designers, exploring black male identity through her eponymous menswear brand with looks that have caught the eye of celebrities such as Meghan Markle. Wales Bonner, the daughter of a Jamaican father and English mother, unveiled her 2020 autumn/winter collection on Sunday at "London Fashion Week Men's", with a clear nod to her Caribbean roots.

"My grandfather came to London in the fifties so it is about the second generation who grew up in London" in the 1970s, she told AFP. "I was really interested in the youth community and how people embrace British traditions but also how they perform their identities or connections to the Caribbean. It is also looking to the multiculturalism in Britain at that time."

Dubbed Lovers Rock, from the name of a style of romantic reggae born in the British capital and popular in the 1970s and 1980s, her collection was partly inspired by the photographer John Goto. Goto captured the British African-Caribbean community of Lewisham, in southeast London, in 1977. Wales Bonner also dug into her own personal history. "It feels like an inevitable collection for me to do, it is like coming home in a way," said the designer, who grew up in south London.

Her cuts recall Savile Row, the prestigious road of bespoke tailors synonymous with English style since the 1960s. Caribbean symbols such as gold buttons on a



serge reefer jacket are displayed with pride. The cross-cultural look can also be seen in hats made from Scottish wool from the Shetland islands but in Jamaican colors. "It is a mix of very traditional, recognizable British fabrics but also trying to disrupt them a little bit," said Wales Bonner.

She also reinterprets the works of Frank Bowling, the British abstract painter who was born in Guyana. A retrospective of his work was displayed at the Tate Modern art gallery last year. His colorful Swan I and II paintings are printed on silk shirts, the bird symbolising the irrepressible desire for freedom. Sunday's catwalk show, backed by an impressive sound system, resembled a family or street party with the public, including young and older members of the African-Caribbean community, sitting at round tables sipping hibiscus tea.

Early success

Wales Bonner had only just left the Central Saint Martins fashion design college in 2014 when her graduate collection "Afrique" won the L'Oréal Professionnel Talent Awards. Her first autumn/winter collection in 2015, "Ebonics", was critically acclaimed. The same year, she received the best young talent for menswear at the British Fashion Awards, following up 12 months later with the LVMH young designer prize, for a collection evoking the 1930 coronation of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie. The endorsement by some of the biggest names in the industry, including Karl Lagerfeld, Marc Jacobs and Nicolas Ghesquière, was the spur she needed to develop her own brand.

'More visibility'

Another welcome piece of publicity came last May when the wife of Prince Harry, Meghan Markle, chose one of Wales Bonner's creations in photographs introducing the couple's new son, Archie. "There's definitely been more visibility, more awareness around the brand, it's been very positive. It was a gracious thing for her to do," Wales Bonner said. "I think it is quite amazing how she uses her platform to support other people, other women as well. She has been very clever and seems to be very generous and sincere in her intentions."

Wales Bonner, who cites Coco Chanel and British designer Phoebe Philo as role models, is passionate about the issues of identity and representation, delving into art, literature, music and black history for ideas. "It (fashion) feels like the most direct and easiest way for me to communicate and to express myself," she said. "I am always looking at this very refined, beautiful, vision of masculinity." — AFP



How to make it in Bollywood, or die trying

It took a minute for Malhaar Rathod, then an aspiring teenage actress, to realize what the 65-year-old Indian film producer was asking her to do - and to make the decision to walk away. "He claimed he had a part for me and then asked me to lift my top. I got so scared, I didn't know what to do at first," Rathod, now an up-and-coming television star, told AFP in Mumbai. Her experience with what is euphemistically known as Bollywood's "casting couch" culture underlines the challenges facing anyone seeking to break into India's massive, insiders-only film industry, where the #MeToo movement has secured few wins.

After #MeToo triggered the downfall of top Hollywood powerbrokers like Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey, many women in Bollywood spoke up about their experience of sexual harassment, breaking a long-established culture of silence. The Indian industry has largely looked the other way however and many of the alleged perpetrators have been able to revive their careers after lying low for a few months.

Movie-mad India is the world's largest producer of films, with around 1,800 releases a year in multiple languages, easily dwarfing Hollywood's output - but forging a career in the nepotistic industry can be a challenge. Unlike the children of celebrities who are groomed for stardom and tailor-made debuts, outsiders have to fend off lecherous men and contend with a gruelling routine of auditions and rejections.

'Dream come true'

"It's very difficult to crack Bollywood if

you don't have connections. No-one is going to offer you a launch, you have to do small parts and work your way up," actor Paras Tthukral told AFP. "I have done all kinds of jobs to survive. Worked in a call center, in corporate gifting, marketing, you name it," Tthukral, who moved to Mumbai in 2008 and has since appeared in two TV shows and a couple of films, added. "An alternative career would have been easier for sure... but being an actor is a dream come true."

Rathod is one of the lucky ones. After her early brush with the casting couch, she is now a familiar face to Indian viewers, appearing in advertisements for global skincare brands including Garnier and Dove. The sole breadwinner for a family of five including two younger sisters, she has managed to make inroads into television with a part in the hit show "Hostages" on India's Disney-owned streaming platform Hotstar.

The 25-year-old is hoping to see that success translate to the silver screen, following in the footsteps of film stars such as Preity Zinta and Deepika Padukone who began their Bollywood career with advertisements. But she is keenly aware that it could all disappear in a flash. "Waiting to hear back about roles has given me sleepless nights," she said, adding that she has recently turned to prayer and meditation in a bid to calm her mind. "You can't have too many expectations, otherwise you will be perpetually disappointed."

For every success story, there are tens of thousands of aspiring actors who fail to make it into the big leagues. Even so, more

and more people are joining their ranks, lining up for auditions in Mumbai's northern suburbs where Bollywood's major studios are based.

Thrill of acting

Casting director Girish Hule told AFP the number of actors vying for roles in the adverts he handles has more than doubled since 2014. "I have even come across doctors and engineers who quit stable jobs because they wanted to act," he said. "Years go by waiting for the big break. People go back home or take up other jobs in the industry, working as stylists or assistant directors or in casting. In some cases, people spend five years, appearing at around 500 auditions and never get an acting job."

The glitz and glamour notwithstanding, finding success in Bollywood comes with plenty of challenges - from battling sexual harassment to spending months out of work. "In the beginning, I was too scared to even tell my mom when someone misbehaved, because I thought my family would stop me from pursuing acting," Rathod said. "I am so glad #MeToo happened here - before that, it was just going on and no-one was talking about it," she said, referring to sexual harassment in the industry.

For Tthukral, who is well-versed in the ups and downs of the business, the risks are secondary to the thrill of acting, which he compares to a drug. "My parents don't understand how I live - they just want me to settle down and run their business. Part of me wants that too, it would be an easier life," said the 34-year-old, who moved back to his hometown of New Delhi this summer. But then he added, "I will return when I have made some money. I will be somebody. I don't know when the break will come but it will come." — AFP



In this photo taken on Dec 10, 2019, aspiring actress Malhaar Rathod trains during a kickboxing session at a gym in Mumbai. — AFP photos



Rathod is seen at a studio in Mumbai.