

Fashion designer Zaldy on adaptability



April 20, 2017 - Zaldy is a fashion designer based in New York City. Since launching his own namesake clothing line in 2002, Zaldy has designed both stagewear and one-of-a-kind looks for Michael Jackson, Lady Gaga, Britney Spears, Cirque du Soleil, and others. He served as the head designer for Gwen Stefani's L.A.M.B. collection and in 2016 was nominated for an Emmy in Costume Design for his work on *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2373 words.

Tags: [Fashion](#), [Design](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

You're someone who juggles a variety of projects—designing your own collections, creating costumes for Cirque du Soleil, making pieces for red carpet events... How do you organize your creative life, and how do you keep a distinction between commissioned projects and your own personal creative work?

For the majority of my career I have approached my work as a free spirit and just let the opportunities guide me through whichever direction happened to present itself. There have been certain times where I've tried to force a direction and sometimes it works, but I find that I'm the most successful when I just let things happen, which is sometimes a hard thing to do. If there's an opportunity, even if at first it sounds like, "I don't know if I want to do that"—I'll often go with it. For example, this is my third show with Cirque Du Soleil and I remember when I got the call to do my first one and I was like, "Hmmm, I don't know." At that point I had only seen one Cirque Du Soleil show and, while I did think it was amazing, I had other visions in my mind of what it was. Initially I didn't know if I wanted to get involved, but ultimately it sounded like an interesting challenge to design costumes for this production that are functional but also still beautiful.

The first show I did with Cirque was with this director Jamie King, who does all the Madonna shows and concerts. So I was like, "Oh, yeah, cool. I'd like to work with him." Then I came to realize how amazing it is to work for this company. I've never seen an atelier space where there's like 400 people running around working. I've done three shows with them now and it's made me really happy. I've learned a lot.



ZALDY, Fall/Winter 2016

It must present an interesting challenge—designing something that you can perform in, as opposed to designing something that only has to move down a red carpet.

I think at the root of everything that I design is comfort and wearability. I really think about that. And an innate timelessness. It's always there when I'm designing, and whether it's a stage costume or a red carpet look or it's for fashion, my approach is coming from the idea that the work instills desirability in the audience. It's just like on my new show with Cirque I have all these costumes and everyone that sees them is like, "Oh my god I want that gray outfit. Oh my god I want those shoes." No matter what I'm designing for, that's what I want the audience response to be: *I want this*. Whether it really fits into their lifestyle or not, they somehow still want it.

You've also done runway shows for your own collection on-and-off over the years.

I step in and out of doing my own collection depending on what the circumstances are, or how I'm feeling. There have been moments where I've had a backer, and then suddenly the backing doesn't come through... and then you opt out. There have also been times when I'm like, "Oh, I'm so inspired that I want to just do it by myself" and I do

that. The trouble is that it's expensive to put stuff out there, at least on the level that I want to do.

It's interesting—people still borrow things, even if it's like from four years ago. They borrow it for editorial shoots or for whatever. Again, it's like this timeless thing that I want to build into my work. I'm not into the fast fashion of it all, I'm into longevity.

This is an interesting time for those of us who work in this world. The perception of what a designer does has changed with *Project Runway*, with social media, with all of that stuff that promotes the imagined glamour of being a designer. I don't think you'll meet anybody in fashion school that's like, "Oh, I want to be a pattern maker." Or, "I want to be a master tailor." Nobody thinks like that now. Everybody wants to be the star, and the reality is that not everyone is really equipped to take that position on. Kids see that someone like Kylie Jenner is suddenly saying, "Oh, I'm going to design a collection," and of course it sells out, because it's based on something else. It's based on existing fame. But that's it. Everyone thinks it's somehow easy to do this—I'll just design my own collection—and it's not. It's complicated. It costs a lot of money and there are complicated politics and it's really involved. And it's really not that glamorous.



GENTLE MONSTER Spring 2017 NYFW

You design a lot of one-of-a-kind pieces for celebrities. How does that work differ from designing for a collection?

I love doing one of a kind pieces because you know what this outfit is for, who is going to wear it, what they're

going to wear it with, and how they're going to pose. You get to consider it in the same way the way that I would consider working with, say, an acrobat. You're still asking many of the same questions: *How does it move? How is somebody going to sit down in it? What's it going to look like when they get up? Are they going to get into a car?* I like knowing these things. It's always terrifying to just send stuff out into the world, but it's also exciting when you see somebody walking down the street and you have no idea who they are and they're wearing one of your pieces. You're like, "Oh my god." It's shocking and exciting.

How important is it in your line of work to be a good communicator?

Communication is key. Communication is everything. You have to communicate with the client and then you've got to communicate those ideas with your team. Very rarely are you working alone, so you've got to make sure everyone is on the same wavelength so that the work flows really easily.

Not only that, but I like to work with people that can also have a point of view based on their skill sets. I like working with a master pattern maker or a master seamstress, where they can be like, "Mmmmm, this would be better if we did it this way." I love that kind of collaboration. I've had some instances where when I work with a new team of people and they're used to being told *exactly* what to do. When you give them a little bit of freedom to help you interpret the project, they don't know what to do.

I really like collaboration, so I always try to make that happen, but it's shocking to some people. They're literally used to being part of a machine and beholden to one person to make all their decisions for them. I'm not into that at all. You all need to have a certain feeling that's shared for the success of the piece. It shouldn't be an impersonal project for any one person along the line, everyone should feel that they have some stake in it.



Costumes designed for Michael Jackson's THIS IS IT Arena Tour

When you design something—whether it's your own thing or a piece for someone else—how do you start?

There's always the initial research that goes into every project, which is normally image based—going through

through books and magazines, visiting the Met library, watching films, all that kind of stuff—and then making quick drawings with pencil and paper. Somehow this year, for this Cirque project, I really did feel ill-fitted in the beginning. Normally I'm just thinking of a fashion thing, where there's no real movement except for walking, and I normally just do my sketches in pencil—graphite and white.

For these Cirque designs, it's based around texture and colors and I felt like I needed to find a new way to translate my ideas. I started to do drawings with colored pencils and it was a disaster, so then I decided to try doing some computer photo collage/montage things, which I've never done before in my life. All of the sudden it starts to click, and now it's become my preferred way of working. If I have a client, say Lady Gaga, now I'll use a photo of her and her body and I'll build the outfit right on top of her in the computer. It's been something amazing for me, and it's amazing for clients because you can be like, "This is exactly what this is going to look like on you."

It's wonderful when something forces you to push you outside of your comfort zone. I love those challenges. It's also amazing to discover that, after years of doing things a certain way, you can still learn something new. Your process can still change. Now I have a whole new way of expressing my thoughts.

Designing things for some of these people must involve a certain specific skill set—not only must you be able to communicate, you've got to be able to read a room, know when to push back, and how to deal with complicated egos.

If you've made it into a room with this person, you've been chosen to become a part of something based on your work, so there should not be any kind of nerves about what you're doing there. You do have to read the room though. Does this person love to just talk about what they want or are they also open to collaboration? I love to hear what people want because knowing those parameters is very helpful with the design process. Sometimes people will just say, "Do whatever you want!" and I love those projects, but even then you often end up going back and saying, "I would love a little bit more information, please."

The key is to just not be star struck, which I am not. And I've never cared, really, who's next to me or who I'm talking to, with maybe the exception of Michael Jackson. He was not just a celebrity. He was an icon and a cultural phenomenon. I kept it really cool when I first met him, but inside I'd be like, "Oh my God that's fucking Michael Jackson and he's moon walking for me, just me." You might be dying on the inside, but it has to stay on the inside.



When you're juggling all of these projects, what do you do when you get stuck?

You just have to remember that you're a creator and not a machine. You just have to know when you've got to step aside and either move onto something else or just stop until the moment feels right again.

If I feel like I need to think about something a little deeper and push the delivery date back a little further, it's because it's really necessary. I don't take that lightly. Being able to do that comes with being a trusted person, it's not like you're slacking off or being irresponsible. In fact, you're being very responsible, you're being honest. It's like "I'm not a machine, this is going to take another second." Hopefully you work with people that understand that it is part of the creative process and sometimes it's not worth forcing, and the value will come out later.

You've been working in this industry for a long time. How has your definition of what it means to succeed or fail changed over the years?

In the early days when I was starting, success looked like being a fashion czar, not unlike a Ralph Lauren. That was my idea of what success was, that kind of straight path. Throughout my career I've been led down multiple paths, which has turned out to be very interesting. I'm glad that my career has gone in different directions and opened up my mind to things I would have probably steered away from when I was younger. You learn how to be adaptable, you learn how your own aesthetic can be made to work in different ways and for different purposes. I came from '90s night life culture, which was really about music and art and fashion and performance art. I always want to stay connected to those things, but you only learn things when you are challenged.



Costume for Michael Jackson themed show by Cirque du Soleil, MJ ONE

Recommended by Zaldy:

Road trips! There are so many incredible places to see in America—Monument Valley, Bryce Canyon, White Sands New Mexico, Zion, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Joshua Tree, Valley of Fire, Big Sur—and the best are the places you find along the way that you just can't plan in advance. Spontaneous wandering with the right company and Lana Del Rey singing in the background is the best.

Michael Heizer's "[Double Negative](#)" sculpture in the Moapa Valley of Nevada. It's a 1500 ft long, 50 ft deep, 30 ft wide trench that spans over two mesas. I love that an art project of this scale was commissioned with the condition that there be no conservation. Almost 50 years after its completion this place feels like you're visiting an ancient civilization where you wonder how and why they did this.

Cherry Blossom Festival in Japan. It may be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and experienced to be walking under canopies of Cherry blossom trees drinking Cherry blossom wine.

[Art monographs by Richard Lindner](#). I randomly discovered his work at a used book store in the 90's and its always been inspirational to me. It's fun to see how he has influenced others in the arts.

[My Dear Bomb](#) by Yohji Yamamoto. I love this personal insight into the mind of Yohji Yamamoto. His life

experiences, how he thinks and problem solves...so fascinating.

Name

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Vocation

Designer

Fact

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