



GUIDING FORCES

The designers Raf Simons and Miuccia Prada, who broke the news of their creative partnership in February of 2020. Portraits by Amit Isreali.



Speaking the same language

When Raf Simons joined Miuccia Prada at her iconic label, the fashion world talked nonstop about this most unexpected of collaborations. A year on, the designers tell Afua Hirsch what powers their conversations—while a new crop of acting stars wear the fruits of their creative dialogue. Photographed by Rafael Pavarotti.



BALANCING ACT

Actor Wunmi Mosaku wears Prada long johns and gloves. Flowers from S2 Events.

Fashion Editor: Edward Enninful.



POINTS OF INTEREST

What is Emma Corrin most looking forward to this fall? "Pretending I'm going back to school and buying myself bouquets of sharpened pencils," jokes the 25-year-old actor, who turned heads last year playing Princess Diana on *The Crown*. Prada coat, skirt, and bag.

HOLDING PATTERN

Between her scene-stealing performances in *Lovecraft Country*, Marvel's *Loki*, and the thriller *His House*—which earned her a lead-actress nomination at the 2021 BAFTAs—Mosaku has had a banner 12 months.

Next up: The drama *Call Jane*, with Elizabeth Banks and Sigourney Weaver. Prada cardigans, headband, and stole.



BIG TIME

This year marked the official arrival of 26-year-old Jessie Mei Li, who starred as Alina Starkov on the Netflix series *Shadow and Bone* and appears alongside Anya Taylor-Joy in Edgar Wright's *Last Night in Soho*. Prada faux-fur coat.



MIUCCIA PRADA DOES NOT like collaborations. “I’ve been asked to do a collaboration since ages!” she exclaims in heavily accented English. “They always seemed to be just about selling more—about clichés, banality, and not about ideas. I was never interested.”

She is sitting in her Milan office alongside her new counterpart, Prada co-creative director Raf Simons, as I count contradictions. Even without the presence of Simons here in the nerve center of Prada HQ, it is clear to any devotee that what’s happened to the label is most definitely a collaboration: Since February 2020, when the partnership was first announced—prompting great surprise and intrigue—the fingerprints of both designers have been stamped all over the Prada collections, as plain to see as the omnipresent triangular logo.

The pair have so far produced two women’s collections. Spring 2021 (launched via a COVID-era live-streamed show last September) was a tightly curated series of minimalist silhouettes, structured skirts, and playful fabrics. Among the wearable monochrome prints and clutched anoraks, the collection delivered a new Prada classic: a glamorous A-line skirt with an airline-seat-belt waist—which somehow managed to be both Miuccia Prada, Ph.D., and sculptural showstopper Simons—irresistibly paired with irreverent punctured turtle-necks.

In February, the house revealed a fall 2021 collection—seen here on some of the new generation of screen actors—that offered an endless dialogue between looks that veered between psychedelic color and optimistic sensuality, between defensive armor and purple, patterned platform boots. The set, a multi-textural ode to touch, was a reminder of Mrs. Prada’s collaborations with Dutch architect and theorist Rem Koolhaas.

How exactly the two designers jointly create these collections, though—something I try to glean from Mrs. Prada, 73, and Simons, 53—remains gloriously elusive. “We start with dialogue,” says Simons. “We talk about last season, we talk about ideas and feelings, and out of that we start small things to grow. But everything starts with dialogue.”

“That’s what makes a good designer,” adds Mrs. Prada. “First you have to have good thoughts, and then you have to be able to translate them. When I do not have a precise idea already, I always ask myself, ‘What really interests me?’ Maybe it’s a place, maybe it’s a color, maybe it’s an emotion. And then I attach to that fabric, and I try to understand why I am attracted to something. In a practical way, you start with an aesthetic. The process lasts months.”

“The collaborative part,” Simons adds, “is easy, easy, easy. It’s very easy. The nature of how we design is not so disconnected from each other. There are designers who go sit at a desk and start to sketch and everything. We are both so not like that!”

“I hoped he would be able to, because I’m not able,” Mrs. Prada says, laughing.

A woman whose every appearance is deconstructed as a style inspiration, she does not disappoint in person. Her shoulder-length blonde hair is pinned in a gentle side-parted wave, revealing gemstone earrings (carnelian, perhaps, which stimulates creativity) intricately set in gold. She wears a brown checked trouser suit over an untucked pink shirt—so far, so demure—but then come her shoes: a furry pair of gleaming, pearl-encrusted Miu Miu slides.

“I love the look,” says Simons, who is dressed in slim black trousers, minimalist utilitarian ankle boots, and his trademark oversized jumper, a blue collar peeping through. The admiration is both real and reciprocated.

There is, frankly, no precedent for two designers each so successful in their own right—with the Raf Simons label now a quarter of a century strong and Prada showing no signs of decreasing in either influence or sales—joining forces. The decision came about, as they recount it, after a long period of mutual appreciation.

“I like only a very small number of brands, and Prada is one of the few that I would wear,” says Simons, who earlier in his career notoriously felt awkward about wearing his own label, choosing a diet of Prada and Helmut Lang instead. Then, in 2005, Mrs. Prada and her husband, Prada Group CEO Patrizio Bertelli, appointed Simons to be creative director at Jil Sander.

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ELEGANT VARIATION

"Hopefully I'll find myself in some interesting and unexpected places and situations," Li says of her burgeoning career. "I like not knowing what's coming my way." Prada coat and turtleneck.

RAZZLE-DAZZLE

In 2022, Corrin—who has been one to watch on the red carpet—will play opposite Harry Styles in Michael Grandage's *My Policeman* before becoming Lady Chatterley for a big-screen D. H. Lawrence adaptation. Prada coat, turtleneck, pants, and gloves.



“I think we’re both really interested in trying to understand the world and how it’s evolving,” Simons says, “and how that reflects on how people look at fashion and at clothes. It’s changing a lot”

“That’s something to never forget,” Simons says. “My brand was so much seen as the avant-garde of menswear, and Jil Sander was so different. They saw something that nobody else had seen—or would dare to risk.” Each continued to follow the other’s work—until they met up after a 2015 Miu Miu show in Tokyo and had what both describe as “an open conversation.”

“Very open,” Mrs. Prada emphasizes. “We thought, What can we do? We toyed with switching roles—I heading up Raf Simons, he at Prada,” she says, laughing again.

“It was very daring, this collaboration,” says Koolhaas over Zoom. “It fits completely with Prada’s interest in experimentation, and it’s still surprising: There is not yet a feeling of routine—or anything like it—so it feels charged with potential.”

It also explores the increasingly relevant question of what collaborations mean in fashion today. In this once-unimaginable era in which not only Prada and Raf Simons are joining forces, but also Balenciaga and Gucci (albeit described as not so much a collaboration but a one-off “hack”), it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that there has been a profound shift away from the idea of the auteur as a kind of singular, dictatorial creative genius and toward a more communal approach to both design and brands in general. (Simons now embraces his co-creative director role at Prada while continuing to lead his own label, while Mrs Prada maintains her own sphere of sole influence in Miu Miu, where Simons plays no part.)

Linda Loppa, who taught Simons during the 25 years when she headed up the fashion department at Antwerp’s prestigious Royal Academy of Fine Arts, regards her former student’s venture with Prada as almost inevitable.

“I’m not really surprised that it’s Raf Simons and Prada who are doing this,” Loppa tells me, “because these two persons are not really the stars we expect they should be as fashion designers. They are outsiders—they kept their personality, and they have a common feeling about how to behave in this complex society. We are in a moment of really important change, and we have to reflect that in the way we work.”

Simons’s career has been punctuated by sublime riffs on radical youth culture—his 2001 Riot Riot Riot collection was famously inspired by the post-Soviet generation of young Eastern Europeans, and his 2011 Jil Sander Techno Couture collection, which featured Busta Rhymes on the soundtrack and models radiating an acid-color palette, was hailed as a transformative moment for the brand.

The questions—if not the answers—raised by the cultural and political moment have driven both Simons and Mrs. Prada throughout their careers—and one can’t help but feel that it’s their common interest in squaring contradictions that animates both their friendship and their work together. They seem to take particular pleasure in digging into their dislikes, their fears and their discomforts—whether that’s about linen, which both profess to hate, or something more abstract. “First you hate something, then you investigate why you hate something,” Mrs. Prada says. “That is exciting—and for creative people, to be excited is the only way.”

What excites both designers right now is the drift toward capitalist and populist politics. “People are becoming so incredibly conservative,” Mrs. Prada says. “I want to do a show about that because that is the truth.” Neither she nor Simons will say more, but as I probe whether their spring 2022 collection will be about satirizing right-wing movements, they exchange knowing looks with each other.

“I think we’re both really interested in trying to understand the world and how it’s evolving,” Simons says, “and how that reflects on how people look at fashion and at clothes. It’s changing a lot, and it’s a generational thing.”

Mrs. Prada, who has spent her storied career confounding both expectations and notions of luxury, echoes those thoughts. “Through my job, I show my ideas,” she says. “So I take my job very seriously.”

And—after more than five decades at Prada—the notion of not doing that job isn’t something she’s entertaining.

“Why is it,” she asks, emphatically, “that we ever have to stop working? I’m doing what I want.” □

FIT AND FINISH

Simone Ashley may be best known for playing Olivia in Netflix's *Sex Education*, but soon she'll be donning bustle, bonnet, and gloves as the new lead in *Bridgerton*. Prada coat, polo, turtleneck, bag, gloves, and boots. All clothing and accessories at prada.com.

In this story: hair, Eugene Souleiman; makeup, Ammy Drammeh. Details, see In This Issue.