

VOGUE

UK

ARTS & LIFESTYLE

“You And I Always End Up Somewhere In Dramatic Moments”: *Elvis* Director Baz Luhrmann In Conversation With His Friend And Collaborator Miuccia Prada

Baz Luhrmann and Miuccia Prada’s 30-year creative collaboration has also forged a great friendship. In this exclusive conversation, the pair reminisce on their careers and reflect on this unique time in history, questioning whether politics has a place in fashion. *Styled by Catherine Martin. Photographed by Hugh Stewart.*

BY VOGUE

29 May 2022



Styled by Catherine Martin, Photographed by Hugh Stewart

BAZ LUHRMANN: “When I met you, 30 years ago, a colleague of CM’s [costume designer Catherine Martin, Luhrmann’s wife], Kym Barrett, introduced us and I went to a show of yours in New York City and afterwards it was the opening weekend of *Romeo + Juliet* and you and your sister and [husband] Patrizio saw the movie. The first people in the world to see the movie! And I’m sitting there nervously and afterwards you and Patrizio said it was going to be number one, and I said, ‘You’re crazy!’ And I think Patrizio bet me a jeroboam of champagne and I said, ‘Absolutely not possible.’”

MIUCCIA PRADA: “But did he pay you the champagne? Because usually you have to ask him to pay when he loses a bet.”

BL: “Can I be honest with you? I think he still owes me a jeroboam of champagne.”

MP: “Exactly!” [Laughs.]



Costume designer Catherine Martin worked with Prada on the costumes for *Elvis*.

Styled by Catherine Martin, Photographed by Hugh Stewart

BL: “You know, it went number one, and it was the beginning of a great journey between us because we didn’t just talk about the movie, we talked about life and art. This is what I was thinking about for this conversation with you. When you think about our journey, we’ve always been similar in our life and creativity; this hunger for what’s in the world, what’s out there and how we can be part of it.”

MP: “Exactly.”

BL: “Since then, let’s think about all the costumes we’ve collaborated on, whether that’s for *Gatsby* or even the luggage in *Australia*, or the collaboration on *Elvis*. I think about all those conversations we’ve had about what’s going on in the world.”

MP: “It’s a great friendship... We are able to not see each other for one year and then it’s like we just left each other five minutes ago, which I think is

incredible. It's really special because we probably have the same interests. We are curious. We want to understand how the world is going. We love mystery. It's a very complex group of thoughts."

BL: "I've got pictures in my head of you and I having crazy, scattered conversations on a rooftop in Shanghai, getting lost in Moscow, going to the wrong place, and ending up at, let's say, a slightly salubrious nightclub..."

MP: [Laughs.] "Yes!"

BL: "But always the conversation goes from high to low, from political to... kind of trash."

MP: "That is really perfect; I would have loved to have said that. It's really that, from very high to very low. Because if you don't understand the very low, you understand nothing in life. Actually, it's more important to understand the low than the high."

BL: "You know, Miuccia, I think the one thing we're not that interested in is the middle. We're just not that interested in the middle! We accept it, but you know... I remember we had a great conversation, when we were doing this chat, years ago, for the Tate galleries. And it was a time when there was great upset in the world and we said there's a time when it's right to be trashy, when art should be trashy, when you should rip everything up. And then there are times when trash is just trash. You actually said that to me. And it's really interesting how we're always seeking out how to engage in the world at this moment, at this time. It's not trying to be relevant, it's just trying to be present in the world."



Prada also collaborated on Baz Lurhmann's movie adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*.

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MP: “Strangely enough, I don’t feel like trash is important today. I don’t know why, maybe we can understand together? Because it’s really true, you can’t understand the world if you don’t understand trash. But since two, three years, I feel that trash doesn’t bring me anything. Probably because it’s more of a fantasy: a super-high, super-low fantasy and I’m trying to understand it now exactly and be more realistic. More practical. More useful. I don’t know why, but I think it’s a moment where you can be somehow serious in your work. I feel it’s not the moment for fantasies though – of course, we’ll always have fantasy – but because it’s so difficult to understand what’s happening... the metaverse, NFTs, all that kind of world that is run in parallel. Is it good? Is it wrong? Also cancel culture, all the big, big problems that are around. You have to change the way you think or adapt. Is it wrong? Is it good to talk about politics? Because, for instance, I’ve always refused to talk about politics in my work because I always thought maybe fashion was too superficial and I didn’t want to be an opinionist. I always hated to throw out sentences on serious subjects because they require much more understanding and even if I have some, I always thought that I don’t have to use my job

because I would feel uncomfortable, because we're still a company that does luxury stuff for rich people. You, as a director, have much more freedom because you can talk about anything. Me? I feel uncomfortable if I start talking about the problems I really believe in while doing this job."

BL: "You know, Miuccia, you look at the list of the things you're talking about but in addition, even in our lifetimes, neither of us lived through the Great Wars. We live in a modern era, the 'American era', and we're going through a period where we have Covid, which reminded everyone that there's something bigger than all of us, and now we have conflict in Europe. What you're saying, which I feel, too, is that on every level, every reference point is spinning. That this is not a time for fantasy and trash, this is a time for putting something out there that's useful, practical. Like, who do you care about? What do you care about? Because it all might be gone tomorrow. I do feel that's in the air. And it's interesting, we only disagree on one thing, you and I. And we've had this discussion before. Which is that I disagree with your take that your fashion is not art."

MP: [Laughs.]

BL: "We argue about it and I just don't believe it. You may not see it, but I see you expressing the world... you're under different pressures than I am. You have to get out an expression four or five plus times a year. So much! I don't know how you do it, I could not do it. But when you were doing your 'banana look', I remember we talked about that. Remember the crazy banana dresses? That was a time when actually people needed a bit of – for want of a better word – humour and silliness and joy and irony. We needed that! But I see when you are making your work, even right now, it doesn't mean it's not sensual or it's not smart, but you're always either subconsciously or consciously trying to reflect the world around you."

MP: "Yes, for sure I do. And I'm completely into that, but I don't want to declare it. One of my sons told me you should take positions, you should talk, otherwise you can't sustain your ideas, and actually that is the problem of the famous intelligentsia, or the leftist intelligentsia, that because they don't want to go into the arena of superficiality and so on, they shut up."

BL: “Only the loudest get heard.”

MP: “The loudest, exactly.”

BL: “In the movies, the reason I wanted to do the film of Elvis is because it’s not about Elvis Presley, it’s about America in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, and more importantly, it’s about a man called Colonel Tom Parker [Elvis’s manager, played by Tom Hanks] who was never a colonel, never a Tom, and never a Parker. He was a carnival barker and snake-oil salesman who was selling Elvis. Now together, Elvis absorbs all sorts of influences he grew up with: country and western, rhythm and blues, and most importantly, gospel. Gospel music is life.”

MP: “I read that, and thought that was very, very interesting.”

BL: “So Elvis grows up in one of the white-designated houses in a Black community. Colonel Tom Parker is a fraud and he doesn’t care about music, but he sees Elvis’s effect on an audience and goes, ‘That is the greatest carnival act I’ve ever seen.’ Now together, the salesman and the artist do great, but they become so big that at a certain point, the salesman, the ‘put your name on every single thing but don’t create anything new’ starts to become dominant. And to me, that’s the metaphor that happens in the ‘American era’. America has brought us so many moments of amazing creative synthesis, so many amazing, brand-new, rich and extraordinary ideas. But as in the movie, Elvis becomes subsumed by the salesman. What I’m trying to say is, I wouldn’t say the film is political, per se... ”

MP: “Of course it is.”

BL: “It’s a reflection of now, and I think you do the same with your own work. You’re conscious of it, but you bury it. You’re not printing it on a T-shirt as a slogan.”

MP: “That’s the point. There are so many questions I ask myself.”

BL: “I don’t want to judge others, but I’d say both you and I are at a point in our journey where I see a lot of people around me have stopped asking

questions. If you stop asking yourself questions, then you sort of stop living in my view. You're not still searching."

MP: "Also, I have a problem, because now the world is really out there, huge, different races, different communities, different religions, different cultures. I am in this frenetic search of knowing and finding ways of navigating what is happening all around because it's so big. And so, for instance, I asked the team at the Fondazione [Prada's Milan art foundation] to have the intellectual debate on the phone every week and I read here and there and am desperately trying to understand and to learn, which is kind of impossible. Then what do you do? Go on trying [to synthesise] this kind of research? Or do you concentrate on what you know? Once artist Ryan Trecartin mentioned that a true invention would be to have a pill that could make you learn at speed all that is happening in real time."

BL: "Well, you know how you and I really love history..."

MP: "Very much."

BL: "What I see are these incredible moments where the tectonic plates of history start smashing, and very rarely does the world go into a freefall where nobody knows anything. Nobody could really travel, we couldn't get out there in the world and plug in, and usually there's a reset period. But I believe for you and me, that we will come out the other end of this, and it will be our job to then decode the whole thing."

MP: "I totally agree. I think we are living in one of the most relevant periods with the biggest revolution: social media, the internet, the biggest inventions. More than the wheel! And who knows what's coming now? Sometimes it looks good, sometimes it looks awful... we have a war in Europe. We are in the middle of something we don't know. In that sense, of course, we feel uncertain and questioning, trying to look, trying to understand. And after Covid, for me, people are divided into the ones who understood something and the ones who didn't. But it's so clear sometimes when I speak with people, intellectuals and artists, there are some who are into the present and some who are lost in the past. There's a big division."

BL: “You know, Miuccia, we haven’t talked for a while because I’ve been in Australia during Covid, but I can’t believe how identical our view is: some people have surfed the change, have actually flowered and become energised, and some have retreated back, like almost shrunk back, and I think that is a mark of human nature. Let me tell you something, I appreciate the fact that you’re prepared to have this open conversation with me and say, ‘I don’t know, I’ve got questions, there are things I don’t understand’... there are others who go, ‘I know exactly what’s going on,’ and you know they don’t. You can’t make sense of it, you’re not meant to. But wanting to drives us forward. I’m energised. As chaotic and terrifying as it is one minute, to quote that famous quote: ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.’ But I feel more energetic about this movie and the journey I’ve been on, than I have in a very long time.”

MP: “It’s very true, I’ve found I am very energetic because I have to rely on myself and try to understand what’s right and what’s wrong. What’s right to do. Any position, talking about gender, race, religion and any other political and social issue, it’s complex. So you just have to navigate – surf, as you said – and try to get the meaning of what is right and what is wrong for these times.”



The friends and collaborators reminisced on their work together for Australian *Vogue*.

Styled by Catherine Martin, Photographed by Hugh Stewart

BL: “Miuccia, you said something to me maybe 25 years ago when I first met you: ‘I don’t mind making mistakes as long as they’re my own.’ Which is to say, in the end, you’ve got to listen to everybody, but you must listen to yourself. And more so now. Like, right now I’m here in this giant house today on my own because I got Covid. And I’m relying on myself more than I ever have and I feel good about it. I’m working on the film and I’m having to get pieces of paper and cut out stuff and make a collage or use the phone, but it’s okay because I’ve realised I’m all right on my own. I don’t mean I don’t need everyone. I do need everyone, but sometimes when you are so much spread in collaboration and so much giving, you lose yourself. I think I

found myself more in this last period. And by the way, this is just my opinion, but seeing you on the screen here, you look great! You look energetic and really young, so I think maybe it's good you're dealing with yourself. You've got that energy about you."

MP: [Laughs.] "I hope so. No, no, actually, I have a lot of energy. At the same time, I am the age that I am, so I have to think also about a substitute for me. You're much younger, so it's a different problem, but I also have this other problem. Should I stop? Should I go on?"

BL: "I'm not that much younger than you. I think about it, too. Should I stop making these once-every-five-year shows?"

MP: "No, no, you're too young."

BL: "No, but Miuccia, the movies I make, I think about them like couture frocks. Very rarified. After this movie, I'm committed to helping other younger people make more things. I'm not saying I won't make other movies. Because I try and stop – you'll probably try and stop and you won't be able to. You'll go, 'This is it. I can't do it,' and then you'll get drawn back in. But I do want to help others, the new generation, because I feel like I have something to offer, not in terms of telling them what to do, but helping facilitate them getting new things done. Because people did that for me when I was young. So that, I think, is something I really will attend to once I get this work finished."

MP: "You can do both. You have to do both."

BL: "You too! You too! We haven't talked about all the collaborations on the movies. The funny thing is the collaborations are just the cream on top. It's a natural thing. We're always watching your journey, you're always watching ours."

MP: "Sometimes we do more, sometimes we do less, sometimes we do nothing. Catherine is the greatest costume designer, but I always feel part of

it. Even if I have nothing to do with it, I feel part of it all the same!”
[Laughs.]



“You and I always end up somewhere in dramatic moments,” Lurhmann tells Mrs Prada.

Styled by Catherine Martin, Photographed by Hugh Stewart

BL: “Orson Welles once said: ‘I know what it’s like to be young, but you don’t know what it’s like to be old.’ And that’s why I’ve loved having CM’s parents around the table with our children. Because I think no matter who you are or what your background is, you can’t buy life experience. It doesn’t matter how smart you are. You can’t buy the experience of having lived for a very long time. I think the dialectic between those who have lived and those who will carry on and invent the new, that dialectic has to be alive and that’s our responsibility.”

MP: “I so totally agree with you. And I just remembered another moment that for me was very important. When we opened the store in Manhattan on Broadway in December 2011, just a few months after 9/11. And that at some point, we went dancing.”

BL: “I tell you what’s beautiful about that story. You and I always end up somewhere in dramatic moments. And 9/11 happened and you were opening

the store and there was a feeling that New York would never be the same again. And you refused to back away. Two months later, can you imagine? And it was quite close to Downtown.”

MP: “And I remember they said, ‘Is it right, is it wrong?’ It was a risk and actually, that was a risk I took by instinct. But then so many people came, the mayor came, the New Yorkers appreciated it.”

BL: “I remember two months later you said, ‘I’m going to take the risk because we have to show that life can go on.’ And they shut down the street for the Mick Jagger concert. Later, you and I and a couple of others, we went dancing at a tiny nightclub across the road at the Submercer.”

MP: “I remember going down!”

BL: “Under the Mercer hotel, under the wine racks... and it was a great thing, because out of tragedy, it was the beginning of reminding people that life must go on no matter what. You have to, you know? And it was a risk.”

MP: “Life goes on, even if you don’t want it to. Life goes on.”

BL: “It’s hard to predict, is it the right thing? The wrong thing? But even in the darkest times, even during war, at a certain point, people want to get together and dance and live and love. We’ve had some great journeys, great adventures, great experiences. And I know we’re just getting going. I’m ready for whatever. Whatever happens, tomorrow happens. But I’m very present, more than I have been in a very long time.”

MP: “I’m very happy for you.”

BL: “Now I’ve got to go and finish the movie. I haven’t finished the movie yet!”

MP: [Laughs.]

BL: “It’s the truth. I’m not lying.”

This article was originally published by [Vogue Australia](#)