

CIRQUE FASHION

MODELS SIMONE DE KOCK AND
JONATHAN GUY OF ICE GENETICS

Q & A • *NORWEGIAN*
• *RAIN*

Photographs by DERYCK VAN STEENDEREN.

HAIR AND MAKE-UP SAMANTHA ELLENBERGER



ABOVE
T-MICHAEL AND ALEXANDER HELLE

NORWEGIAN RAIN *was born in the downpours of Bergen, Norway – a city with the dubious honour of being the rainiest in Europe. Founded by the unusual combination of young business graduate, ALEXANDER HELLE, and established bespoke tailor, T-MICHAEL, the brand is a melting-pot for creative expression with one goal at the forefront of it all – to conquer the rain.*

Q: Tell us a little bit about the beginnings of Norwegian Rain – how do a business graduate and a bespoke tailor end up meeting and starting a line of raincoats?

A: **T-Michael:** Alex walked into my store and enquired if I was interested in teaming up with him to make raincoats. I turned him down.

Alex: For obvious reasons! Michael turned me down in a very gentlemanly manner – I did not blame him. A business graduate with no experience wanting to create raincoats – keeping in mind all the bad connotations that word brings, based on what’s already on the market. Think plastic, bad or no breathability, poor patternmaking or patternmaking made for everything but a sharp, tailored appearance. I knew that it had to be Michael, and not only because of his 17 years of experience in fine tailoring. Walk into his shop in Bergen and you would understand the extra fascination – it’s an artistic experience.

T-Michael: To cut it short, Alex came back a couple of times. I appreciated his dedication and his determination, so I sat down with him and elaborated on what I stood for and explained that, should we decide to make this happen, it would need to be an extension of my existing universe. Alex wanted the same!



“ We decided to seek out the best creatives. ”

Q: What is *Dugnad*, and how does it affect the way you approach design and manufacture?

A: *Dugnad* is an ancient Norwegian term for people who voluntarily gather to join forces to make something that benefits an individual or a community – like when a barn or fence needed to be built.

In our situation it is the common goal of conquering the rain. We are here. It will definitely rain. We don't want it to dictate how we live.

Q: Your creative team has quite a diverse set of skills, from business, to tailoring, graphic design and photography. How do these skills tie together to form Norwegian Rain?

A: **T-Michael:** Right from the get-go, Alex and I decided to seek out the best creatives in Bergen to work with. We believe you don't have to do everything yourself. From our business cards to our website, from the hand-tags to the look book, it has to have Norwegian Rain's universe embossed all over it. You should get what we are about even before you see the collections. Years on, we believe that was an important decision – it elevates everything we do!



Q: Take us through the creation journey of your collections.

A: **Alex:** Form follows function. Our collections grow every season – we introduce new pieces and keep certain pieces that then become staples. We have core group of coats that slowly evolves. The new pieces that come on board each season are a reaction to the totality.

After discussing the direction of new pieces – usually during our travelling – Michael works on the concept, sketching and pattern-making the first sample in canvas in his studio in Bergen. Together, we fine tune the details to make sure they are functional without compromising on our strict stylistic preferences: keeping the function visually hidden.

“
We fine tune the details... keeping the function visually hidden.”

Q: Despite being largely inspired by the local climate in Bergen, Norwegian Rain has Japanese influences as well – what is it that drew you to the Japanese style in particular?

A: **Alex:** Their respect for objects. *Kintsugi* – how old, broken things are enhanced by repairing them with gold. They cherish this new state of the object: it's become unique, with a history – a soulful object. Back here, we usually just throw it away.

They also have a way of balancing contrasts – harmony between the quality of old, traditional techniques and progressive, innovative technology that pushes things forward. Norwegian Rain is all about this balance between contrasts: tailoring and hi tech, Michael and myself, tradition and innovation, classic and avant garde.

T-Michael: What's not to like about the Japanese approach to perfecting the art of manufacturing by hand? The transference of the artisan's soul into the product – it's a great influence!

Q: Are there other stylistic influences in your collections? For example, T-Michael was born in Ghana – have his African roots influenced him in any way?

A: **T-Michael:** My background plays a major role in what I do. My Ghanaian heritage gives me the added advantage of being vibrant in my thoughts. My years in London juxtapose my vibrancy and add a cosmopolitan edge, whilst my years in Scandinavia bring in the functional, no-fuss approach to design and life in general.

My work is as African as my DNA. It's all in there!

Q: How long did it take you to go from the business idea phase to putting out your first collection?

A: Almost 3 years!

Q: Was there a particular occasion, moment, or accolade that made you feel that Norwegian Rain was truly a success?

A: **Alex:** When I saw the fascination in the eyes of Edition by Tomorrowland – a high-end, Japanese store that visited our room in the basement of WHITE in Milan, where we presented our debut collection. They bought it, and I thought, “We actually managed to create what we envisioned three years earlier, and someone from the other side of the globe shares our enthusiasm!”

T-Michael: The success of Norwegian Rain lies in the way we adapt and interpret one of the most important – yet annoying – elements we have: rain. Or the way we keep it out. Just by walking down the street at home or abroad and seeing the coats in use hammers that home. That moment is linear and ongoing.



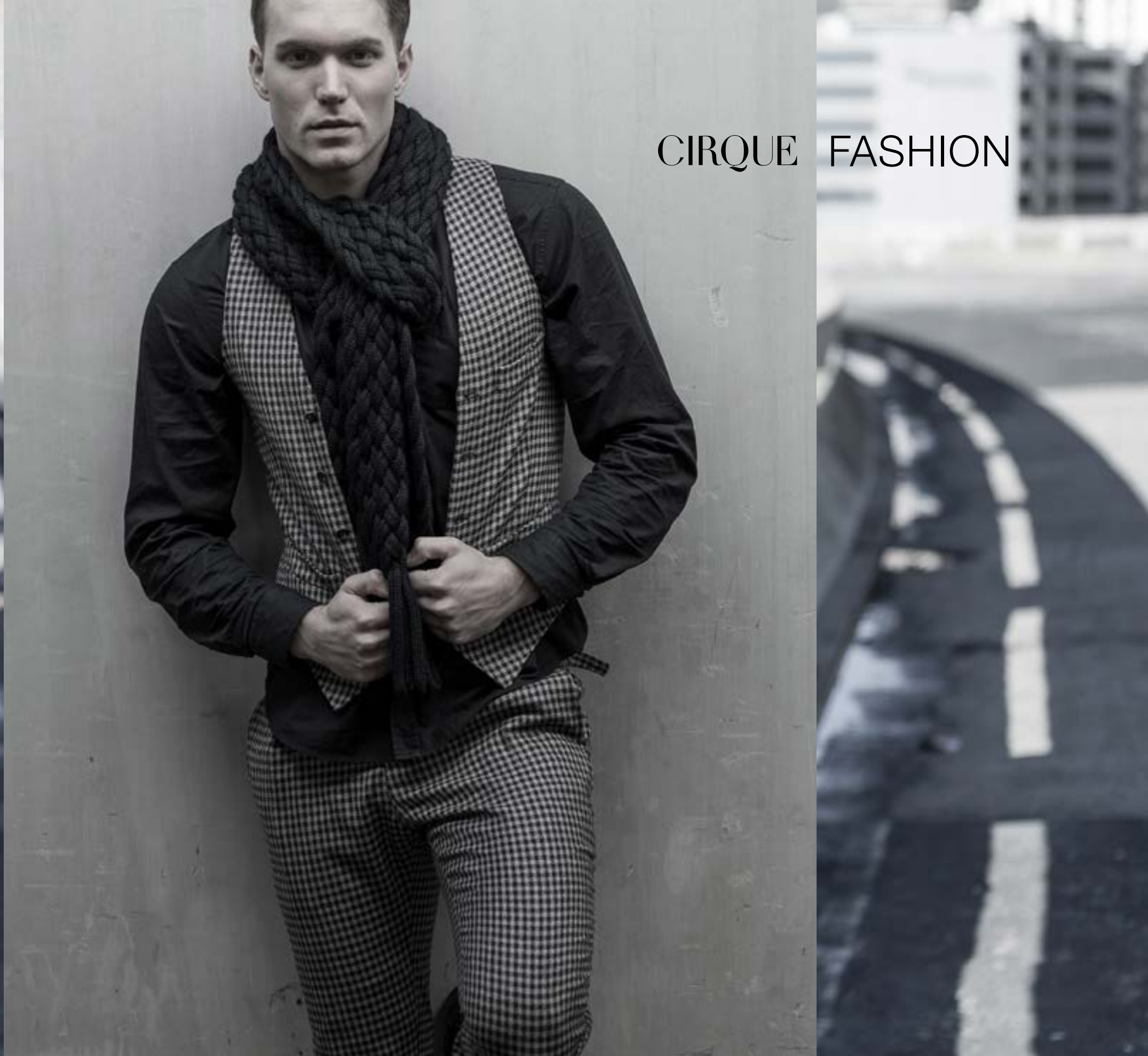
Q: You recently visited Cape Town for the Mercedes-Benz Bokeh Fashion Film Festival. How did you become involved in the fashion film scene?

A: **T-Michael:** Images and situations appearing in my head; colours and quirky objects placed where you least expect them – that’s how I got inspired to play with films. I wanted a different platform to channel my creativity through. I wanted to expand my canvas.

I chose to work with shoes, bags and film, in addition to my tailoring line. These seemingly diverse endeavours are much more similar than one would think. They are all about a narrative – mine. Film was a way to merge shoes, bags and fashion into one piece. I teamed up with a friend of mine, Finn-Erik Rognan, a film director and the rest is history, as they say. I started out eight years ago, and I’m just about to shoot my fourth and fifth films as we speak.



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Q: What were your impressions of the South African creative scene, compared to that of Europe?

A: **T-Michael:** I think the most significant thing was the balance between work and play – I’m all about that. So it was really refreshing seeing this in play, out on the large scale.

South Africa is on the outskirts of what is perceived as the ‘centre of fashion’, just like Bergen where we reside and work from. Creativity has no boundaries, so just as surely as we’ve reached South Africa with our work, so can South Africa reach the rest of the world with their take on design and creativity.

Q: Are we going to see more of Norwegian Rain in South Africa in the near future?

A: **T-Michael:** We were seduced by Cape Town, so South Africa is on our radar! Watch this space!

Q: What’s next?

A: **Alex:** We are working on creating a flagship in London, together with the creative scene in Bergen. It will be a new platform to play out our universe in one of the most pulsating cities in the world – London. Ambitious? Yes. Doable? YES! **■**