“The plot was hatched naturally and at the very start of the season, I found myself needing exuberance, opulence, another volume and fun!. I was constantly drawn to the Eighties and Nineties, to a love of dressing up, to couture, to beauty, to audacity - to joy. I quickly realised that all roads seemed to lead to the work and world - of Mr. Christian Lacroix. So, after little deliberation, I thought why not just phone him, why not phone Christian and ask if he would be up for the challenge and enjoy working with me on a collection. I was so happy when he immediately said: yes.” Dries Van Noten, Antwerp, September 2019

Amongst fashion’s most potent forces is an ability to make people dream, to inject optimism, fantasy and wit into the world. From the very start of his career, Dries Van Noten has enriched with his expansive imagination and artful eye, evoking a sense of joy through experiential and inspirational shows and extraordinary clothes. His kindred spirit is found in the French couturier Mr. Christian Lacroix, who always used the medium of fashion to delight. As a child in Provence Christian found an escape in antique etchings and photographs, in the films of Luchino Visconti, in the bright colours of the Arlesienne and of bull-fighting, in the grandeur of antiquity so present in that part of the world, and in endlessly sketching women – pin ups - in dresses. Dries is equally sensitive to his environment – to that highly particular mix of Dutch protestant austerity and Burgundian opulence that
makes Belgium so uniquely layered. Like the garden he famously adores, his
clothes combine colour and shape, texture and proportion, with exuberant
and unexpected eclecticism.

In March this year, Dries Van Noten and Mr. Christian Lacroix sat down for a
meeting on the Champs Elysées. The location for their rendezvous was neutral
ground: halfway between Antwerp and Arles in Paris, the home of haute
couture, and an age-old stage for fashion in the purest sense of the word. Dries
took with him fabric swatches, reference imagery, embroidery samples. In
Christian’s opinion: “He didn’t need me”. Dries begged to differ. The creative
surge and sheer joy of working alongside this legendary couturier was worth
fighting for. The resultant collection is not a collaboration – rather a meeting
of minds, an expression of dual intention and respect, a romance if you will –
between Dries and Christian, and in turn between both of them and fashion.

As the show approached the happy fruits of Dries’ and Christian’s labours
gradually arrive to dance upon rails in the designer’s studios, overlooking the
docks in Antwerp. All the Lacroix signatures are in place, filtered through
Van Noten’s celebrated, cerebral and sensitive sensibility: waltzing polka dots,
broad stripes, animaux, ruffles, matador jackets, gigot sleeves, silks woven
with flowers scaled up and brighter than nature ever intended, pouf skirts,
duchesse satin and grosgrain - embroidered, printed and fluttering from
neck- and waistlines, collars and cuffs.

Dries explains that the acid floral jacquards on display are, in fact, more
muted than the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century designs that
inspired them. The patina of the precious originals is deceptive but before
age faded their intense colouration they were anything but shy; the purple,
for example, the designer says, has been taken down a little, subduing the
violence of its effect. “I was also thinking of Lady Honoria Lyndon [Marisa
Berenson’s character in Kubrick’s masterpiece, Barry Lyndon],” Dries says.
“Normally, we would have maybe one or two Lyon jacquards in a collection.
This time we have more special pieces than ever before.” The garments in question were woven on looms that stretch back to the period in which that film was set and clearly reference Berenson’s spectacular wardrobe.

The vocabulary of Dries Van Noten is fused with that of Mr. Christian Lacroix throughout: said jacquards have been scanned and appear as prints across cotton and organza; lightweight polyesters, made out of recycled plastic bottles and coated papers rustle alongside precious French silks; billowing trains grace nothing more haute than a parka, albeit gold. Basic white singlets are decorated with a single overblown embroidered sleeve here, jeans with an appliquéd feather or feather print on one leg there. If Mr. Christian Lacroix was among the most feted couturiers of the latter part of the twentieth century, known and revered for the extravagance of his designs, Dries Van Noten sublimates daywear and is, above all, a ready-to-wear designer, justifiably acclaimed as one of the world’s most masterful. Theirs, then, is a heavenly match.

If the meeting of two such minds is surprising on the one hand – the received notion is that the fashion designer is driven by ego and as such is unlikely ever to want to share the spotlight - Dries Van Noten and Mr. Christian Lacroix demonstrate a modesty and mutual admiration, just two of many attributes they share. Both have designed costume for ballet, opera and theatre. Their work is indebted to and draws upon fine art. Dries and Christian love collage, tensions, apparent contrasts – disparate historical and cultural references effortlessly combined in a single look or even garment. They favour colour and apparently jarring but paradoxically harmonious colour juxtapositions, are maestros of mixing print to the point where, in lesser hands, it might disturb the eye and consistently walk that fine line between good and bad taste.

“I love Dries’ clothes,” says Christian, “but also, and without knowing him, you can read a lot in the ambience around them, in the set, in everything around the collection. It’s part of his mind, it’s part of his sensibility and
what he’s trying to bring to people.” Everything from the location to the soundtrack has always been part of a richly coherent narrative for Dries. On this occasion, for those lucky enough to have ever received a note from Mr. Christian Lacroix, a sign of things to come was surely the invitation, scripted in his own fair and appropriately flamboyant hand. Dries chose the Opéra Bastille as location, meanwhile, because the opera is home to Christian’s work today just as it has been for thirty years. “It was important that this was the habitat of Christian,” he says. “On the other hand, it’s a space that nobody knows and it’s concrete, not a traditional opera. I love the fact that people think they’re going to the opera but in fact it’s more of a bunker. Also, to show such an opulent collection we needed a place that was very spare - pared down.”

Ultimately, opulence prevails. “Knowing that Christian was there, the fact that we could have the help of Christian to make this collection was so inspiring for us,” Dries says. “It gave us the creative freedom to think: okay let’s have big shapes, let’s have big colours, big prints. A little bigger, a little brighter? Why not? Why not?”

SF  What are your hopes for this collection?

DVN  The idea is to bring fun ideas, nothing too serious, things that I think perhaps we have lost a little in fashion. We have lost maybe the joy of dressing up, of playing with fashion, combining many different things. That to me was very important, it was important to bring that back. That’s why, when I started to work on the collection, haute couture in the Eighties and Nineties was an important reference. And then of course, inevitably, we arrived at Christian. I wanted to do something joyful, full of skills, full of materials, full of emotion.

CLX  I’m not here to tell my story. I admire Dries and was sometimes jealous
of him because he has a kind of modernity. I was very excited when I was invited and am very happy to now be closer to him, to have seen how he works. I am not an admirer of many people but I wear Dries a lot. And each time we have met he has amazed me. As a Latin I am fascinated by creativity in the north. I don’t know Belgium very well but there is an elegance that is restrained but discreetly generous. He has that.

SF It would be incorrect to call this collection an homage.

DVN It’s not that. It is a collection for now and I really wanted to make a perfect blend of our two worlds. Christian was much more than a living mood board. He was really there. Because of course this collection is a little bit out of our comfort zone. It’s an evolution of what we normally do. We joked sometimes, sitting around a table and when Christian wasn’t there, we’d say: Christian, talk to us, how would you do it?

CLX I was very happy when Dries said ‘it is not an homage: you are still alive’. I don’t want to be back in fashion but I always thought that Dries’ company was different from the others, because of the freedom, because of the distinctions. Very, very often I noticed that we have the same colours, the same love of print, of mixing, so it was interesting.

SF Given you are both designers of stature with a strong and particular point of view, have there been challenging moments?

DVN Not really. In every collection you have to find a balance. I’m not designing haute couture, it’s pret-a-porter, so you have to consider that. Okay you can dream and make only dresses with thousands of metres of fabric and ribbon - we did a few of those. Then Christian comes in and says: why don’t you add a drawstring in the back because the back is now a little bit flat compared to the front, so... Things like that happened quite often. We are so conditioned, fashion has become
so focused on business, and with Christian it was really easy to forget that and just look at the fun of fashion and make beautiful clothes. Ultimately, though, the collection has to reflect reality, people have to be able to wear it now, people have to be able to wear it in the street. That was maybe the most challenging part, not to lose myself in the fun but not to forget the fun, the joy.

CLX For me the most challenging moment was arriving with the team, a team who were used to working together, and I was like an alien, arriving like a new baby in the family with my bad taste, my southern catholic bad taste in a very elegant, northern European company. I was afraid of that because I didn’t know them. What do they think? At the very beginning I didn’t dare to be myself, I was very, very shy, I didn’t say one word. Step by step though I saw we had the same process and I became part of that team. I was not expecting something so familiar as a way of being, or a way of working. I was also reassured by their choices, by the French silks, which might have been my own choice, and the idea of the ribbon - printed onto basics from sweat- and T-shirts to jeans - was genius and something I never got. I love that this was not just capturing me in details, it’s the spirit of what I did.

SF Dries, you are very much a ready-to-wear designer, Christian, you were always more at ease with haute couture. How has that played out?

DVN I think couture is relevant in the way that it feeds fashion, keeps tradition and skills alive. It’s theoretical fashion, pure creativity, far away from reality and that’s a good thing. I am still an independent soul, not completely independent any more, but my soul and vision are still free and Christian really made me feel that. He has pushed our creativity in a way that is really exciting. I considered using pattern cutters from Paris because this collection is more couture than anything I have done before - but Christian said your pattern cutters are fantastic, so we used
our own team and I hope achieved the right balance between pret-a-porter and couture.

CLX I love him because I always failed with ready-to-wear. I didn’t know how to find the balance between theatre and couture because people were expecting something beyond. I am jealous of Dries because he succeeded in that, and because what he does still often looks like couture.

SF What, in fashion, is too much?

CLX My motto when I was a teenager was that too much is never enough.

DVN For me ‘too much’ is not something I arrive at quickly. I prefer to put more and more layers which afterwards you can dissect, peel away, like an onion. If you’re working with a jacquard, okay, you can still have an embroidery, you can still put some rings on it, some jewels, maybe a little feather here or there. That is something Christian is a master of. And maybe in our trying to be very contemporary and modern and fashionable, we lost sight of that a little bit. And now, with the help of Christian, I am very happy to find that again and to be pushed even more - not excessively, because excess may be negative, but enough to find the right dose.

CLX It’s true. Excess is easy. Mixing and matching is what Dries knows how to do. I truly admire the way he mixes and matches fabric and print. Even if you have four different prints on one girl, once she arrives, it’s coherent, it’s not disturbing, it’s a kind of alchemy. I remember once the philosopher Francois Dagognet came to one of my shows and he said your coherence is coming from your incoherence. I was so proud.

SF When is it not enough?
Dries Van Noten

DNV When it’s too evident, that’s too easy really. For me there has to be contrast, a tension, all those things that at first glimpse are intriguing but you don’t know if they’re nice or ugly. Is the balance between beauty and ugliness right? Something purely beautiful is boring for me. And that is something really central, especially in this collection. Christian clearly loves women, you feel that. You want to give women the tools to enjoy, to be beautiful, to sparkle. There is fun but it’s never ridiculous, it’s just on the edge.

CLX Intriguing doesn’t mean disturbing and I think the border when it’s enough or not enough, we feel it, we can’t tell why. I don’t remember whether it was Baudelaire, but a poet said the real artist, the real designer, the real painter was the one who knows when to stop. I never knew when to stop. Now it’s much more subtle and the essence of contemporary fashion, comes from this very subtle way of using beauty, strangeness, ugliness, just a little twist, but not shocking. Shocking was very fashionable in the Eighties. Everyone wanted to be shocking so it was no longer possible to shock.

SF What would you hope a young fashion designer starting out would take from the collection and the fact that you are working together?

DNV Everything today is so branded, so focused, so edited that it was nice for me to see whether one designer could work with another on a collection. It’s so different to how people look at a house now, to a brand, to an ego, and that for me was not important this time. For me, instead of doing an homage I had the opportunity to actually work with Christian. And wow, that has been fantastic.

CLX I think it’s wonderful but I am a tourist. It might have been even more relevant if I was still in the fashion business. If the house of Lacroix existed, the coming together of two houses, that would be utopia.
Why not? You have more and more people working together now, associations in music, graphics, art. All the students in the Eighties wanted to be a star. But now...? Perhaps that’s too long a conversation.

SF  How would you both sum up this experience?

DVN  Respect and friendship. Okay, I knew the person and the grand Mr. Christian Lacroix but I didn’t know Christian personally and that for me has been very enriching. The joy of creating, the joy of putting things together, pushing things in a different way, seeing them from a different angle. It all happened in a very natural way and we appreciated each other’s creativity. It was a very open thing.

CLX  For me: chemistry, alchemy, joy, a very focussed process, a true pleasure. I feel that Dries and I have a lot in common. He is a very special person.