

Lessons from the Stylish: Kinvara Balfour, creative director

A prim-meets-punk sensibility and a flair for picking future looks keeps Kinvara Balfour's finger firmly on the fashion pulse

BY ANNA TYZACK | 01 FEBRUARY 2014



Kinvara Balfour: "If I have an inkling about silver sneakers they'll be on shelves six months later"
Photo: CLARA MOLDEN

Kinvara Balfour can't help gawping at the waitress's diminutive skirt as she swishes in to Morton's Club in Mayfair. "Do you think that's part of the contract?" she whispers, collapsing into a chair.

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It's hardly surprising that Balfour, who is a niece of the Duke of Norfolk, is an over-the-knee kind of girl. Her first job was with Norman Hartnell, who dressed the Queen and the late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. She later worked for Tomasz Starzewski, who made power suits for Margaret Thatcher and the Princess of Wales. "If I'm doing something special I'll chat through what I'm wearing with my 93-year-old granny to see if she approves," she tells me.

But Balfour, a freelance creative director, isn't really as square as she's making out. She wouldn't be seen dead in a pashmina or a pair of penny loafers; it's sneakers or stilettos all the way. A former fashion editor at this paper and *Tatler* ("it was just like *The Devil Wears Prada* ") and founder of the UK edition of fashion and lifestyle website DailyCandy.com, she is good mates with many of the hippest designers, including Peter Pilotto and Mary Katrantzou, whose dress she chose to wear in our shoot.

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"I can't do maths or medicine but I do have a sense of what's out there," explains the 38-year-old. "If I have an inkling about silver sneakers they'll be on the shelves six months later. I'm having a real thing for flares at the moment." When news broke of Alexander McQueen's death, she nipped in to his store in Los Angeles for a memento and came out with a dress from his reptile collection that just happens to be the one the V&A has chosen to display. "I'm never going to part with it," she says.

Generally her uniform is trainers - she owns three identical pairs of Jimmy Choo Tokyo sneakers (right) in case one gets ruined - and the tightest skinny jeans, either from Rag&Bone (her ex-boyfriend Marcus Wainwright is one of its founders), or Frame, which is owned by Erik Torstensson, Net-A-Porter founder Natalie Massenet's boyfriend. "It's all about the placement of the pockets on the bum. If they're too high up they look completely wrong," she says. Over her jeans she slings a leather jacket, one of the 10 hanging in her wardrobe. "A guy wouldn't understand but they're all completely different," she insists.

Balfour grew up surrounded by fashion. Her aunt Carina Frost [wife of the late David] was a supermodel of her day, working for Biba and Ossie Clark, and her mother, Tessa, is effortlessly glamorous - and a demon on the sewing machine. "She once made a pencil skirt that we all loved so much that she ended up making it 17 times over for me and my two sisters, and all our relations. There's a photograph of us all wearing it." Meanwhile, she still counts her grandmother, who lives 10 doors down from her in Earl's Court, as one of the chicest women she knows. "She's used Clarins skincare all her life and Fenwick and Peter Jones are her stores," she says. "She'll wear a tweed trouser with a bit of a heel and a silk scarf and pearls and look incredible."

Maybe you can have too much elegance, though, as by the time Balfour was 15, she'd entered a punk phase and the grungy Kensington Market in West London was her spiritual home. "My sweet nanny marched me up and down the King's Road from the age of six, so the punk movement became a part of my life," she says. "There used to be 20 or 30 proper punks outside the Chelsea registry office every day. I miss them."

That summer - a shock to the system for a budding punk - she did three weeks' work experience at Norman Hartnell, which inspired her to go into fashion. "There was a vendeuse called Nina who was about 97 and stood in front of the mirror spraying Elnett in her hair all day but her address book was filled with every queen and princess in the world," she says.

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Her dreams of designing for royalty were met the following year when she entered a competition advertised at her boarding school, St Mary's Ascot. "It was sponsored by Lloyds and I had to sketch an outfit for the Queen to wear to the bank," Balfour explains. Her design, which comprised a dress made of banknotes, a cat burglar mask and a handbag in the shape of a gun, earned her a place in the final, judged by Vivienne Westwood.

"I went up to London with my mother and two friends from school and was amazed to see my design being worn by a model on the catwalk," she says. "I ended up winning the whole thing and went on *Blue Peter* and *This Morning*."

As a result, Westwood invited her to work for her over the summer holidays when she was at Newcastle University. "I was her fit model for a while, and I sewed hundreds of labels on to glittery socks." She still counts Westwood as one of the most talented designers she's ever met. "She'd take a simple square of calico, pin it on a dummy and with four tucks she'd make a skirt or top. It's like origami." When Balfour married Count Riccardo Lanza in 2009 (they divorced in 2011), Westwood designed her dress.

By her mid-twenties Balfour was installed back in the old guard of fashion as head of couture for Tomasz Starzewski. She delivered garments to Princess Diana, at Kensington Palace - including the spotty dress with gold buttons that she wore to meet Nelson Mandela - as well as taking trunk shows to New York. "I was over at Betsy Bloomingdale's for tea all the time, and I'd be sitting with Nan Kempner [the New York socialite] in her tights - gosh she was thin - discussing her art collection," she says. "The American grande dames understand couture so much better than the English."

But now Balfour is about to educate us. She is working on her first documentary, a "respectful and authentic" look at the world of haute couture designers in the run up to fashion week, produced by the makers of *Ugly Betty* and the American version of *The Office*. "It's not all about Karl Lagerfeld on stage surrounded by models. Fashion is such hard work; Mary Katrantzou used to sleep under bubble wrap in her studio," she says.

Balfour insists she doesn't spend much money on clothes herself, although she concedes her Burberry leather jacket probably cost more than most people would have to spend. She re-creates looks by designers such as Céline and Balenciaga with pieces from the high street and internet, although she's given up on Topshop. "Acrylic midriff tops just don't do it for me any more, but I do love Zara and Asos," she says. To prove her point, she pulls a £10.99 floral dress from Asos out of her bag. "It's for a public speaking do; I couldn't face wearing another black number."

It's this type of formal daywear, so ably produced by Hartnell and Starzewski, that Balfour struggles to find. "I'm urgently looking for the perfect day dress that isn't a cocktail dress or a wraparound - as much as I love Diane von Fürstenberg," she says. "Everything I see is printed or has weird zips down the side."

When I hear what occasion it is for, I understand the dilemma. She's off to interview the doyenne of fashion herself, American *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour. Would it be too cheeky to wear Prada? "I think it's best I stick to Burberry," she says.

Watch Kinvara's *Fashion in Conversation* at the Apple Store series, on *iTunes*

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