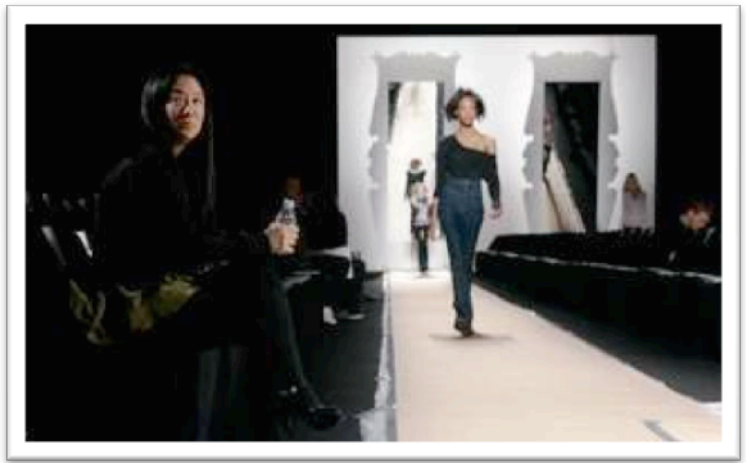


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Fashion Week threatened by economy

Designers who include Betsey Johnson and Vera Wang are opting out of pricey runway shows this year and eyeing cheaper alternatives. By Adrienne Pasquarelli



Designers are still weighing whether or not they want to participate in Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Bryant Park, more than a week after the original deadline for their tent requests. Many designers have already opted out of big runway shows.

Buffeted by the heavy costs associated with a runway show and slowing apparel sales, New York designers are struggling to find the best way to present their fall collections come February. The official start of Fashion Week is February 13.

Several big-name clothiers, including Betsey Johnson, Vera Wang and Carmen Marc Valvo, have pulled out of plans to show their lines at Bryant Park. Some smaller fashion houses, including Abaeté and Joanna Mastroianni are also considering stepping outside of the coveted tents.

For Ms. Mastroianni and Abaeté's founder, Laura Poretzky, such a move would mark a departure from eight seasons of showing at Bryant Park. Designers are also looking into several alternatives to staging elaborate and often ostentatious runway shows. One alternative is renting space at a gallery or events venue and allowing visitors to come and go throughout the day. To accommodate such plans, IMG is trying to create a fourth venue designed specifically for presentations in or near Bryant Park. But the organization has yet to make any final decisions.

"Talent's talent," said Steven Kolb, executive director of the Council of Fashion Designers of America. "If someone has talent and has a product to sell, it doesn't matter if they're showing on a runway or in a studio."

One of the primary reasons to avoid a runway show this season is the hefty

cost. A full-scale production, complete with lighting, models, stylists and music, carries a price-tag between \$100,000 and \$750,000—or more. Also, attendance at Fashion Week is expected to be down since many buyers, such as big department stores have problems of their own as sales plummet.

Some design houses, like Carmen Marc Valvo, noticed a decrease of up to 25% in media and buyers at the September shows. California-based Rock and Republic, which traditionally holds a runway show in New York as well as an event in Paris, has decided to forego showing in New York altogether in order to focus on Paris. Most of the brand's buyers and distributors are located outside of the U.S., and chief executive Michael Ball does not expect them to fly in to New York.

Presentations, which can be done with mannequins instead of models, could save fashion houses quite a bundle. Event site Metropolitan Pavilion has experienced an increase in demand for Fashion Week space in February, compared with September. This is the first time the venue will be open for February shows, something which a trade show conflict had prevented in previous years. Shelly Taggar, Metropolitan Pavilion's director of sales and creative services, attributes the uptick to cost-conscious designers. Rental of her venue's main spaces ranges from \$6,000 to \$10,000. She says that designers can produce an entire show for only \$15,000 at her space.

"Obviously this year, people don't have half a million dollars to produce a fashion show," said Ms. Taggar. "After the New Year, people will pick up their phone and see what they can do."

In February, Abaeté may show off-site, thus saving about 40% of production costs, according to Ms. Poretzky.

A presentation can also allow buyers to get closer to apparel pieces and truly examine the designs. Ms. Poretzky is hoping the new format will help to highlight one piece in her new collection, a coat with a removable vest underneath. She's trying to figure out the best way to showcase the product.

"This downturn will force people to be creative," said Susan Scafidi, professor of intellectual property and fashion law at Fordham University School of Law. She explained that designers can use the economic downturn to improve the way in which their clothes are presented, moving away from the "media circus" Fashion Week has become.

Such a strategy is uppermost on Ms. Mastroianni's mind. Rather than produce a runway show in the tents, the designer is looking into an off-site presentation in order to better showcase her collection.

Ms. Mastroianni, whose clothing is worn by Sharon Stone and Michelle Pfeiffer, hopes to be able to mingle with buyers, merchants and editors during a two-hour presentation. Saving by downgrading to a less costly venue will also help Ms. Mastroianni bring down the costs of her clothing.

"It's about the garments, not who's sitting front row," she said.