

an Australian in Paris

After 10 years on the catwalks of Paris and the must-have lists of celebrities, Collette Dinnigan's designs are well known, but this hot-ticket Aussie is less willing to reveal her private side, writes **David Leser**.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAVIN O'NEILL STYLING BY JANE DE TELIGA

Collette Dinnigan, wearing one of her own designs, on the balcony of the Hotel de Crillon, overlooking the Place de la Concorde, in Paris.

THERE ARE NOT MANY shark stories in Paris. Stories of bloody revolution and torrid romance, absolutely. Stories of intellectual genius and artistic triumph, to be sure. Yet stories of white pointers, *real* white pointers, that rear their vicious heads out of dark southern oceans, well, you'd have to go a long way in this city of smoke-cured cafes, golden boulevards and architectural wonders to find a story that matches Collette Dinnigan's Great White Pointer tale.

And she tells it, reluctantly at first, in her suite at the Hotel de Crillon, surely one of the most regal hotels in the world, one that looks out on the Place de la Concorde, where King Louis XVI was not only married but guillotined, and where Napoleon was honoured in his death.

"So much happens at sea," she says with considerable understatement, sipping from a glass of Chateau de Chamirey red, "and I was just swimming off the yacht and we were very far south, and the water was very, very cold and my father didn't think ... he didn't realise. He thought sharks lived in warm water. He didn't realise the great white pointers went down south to breed, that they liked the cold waters, and from memory we were becalmed ... and we were swimming and I guess making a lot of noise in the water and my brother [Seamus] was pulled up [in the harness] first and then I was pulled up, and as I was being pulled up, the shark actually came up. There was no fin, just the jaws coming straight up from underneath the water. I didn't see it because I was being pulled out. >>>



I remember seeing it leave, just a movement and a shadow.”

It was a long time ago, that brush with death, and Collette was merely a child travelling the world aboard a yacht that her Irish sea-dog father, Des Dinnigan, had built himself. (The family was to be at sea for two years.) Yet it says something about daughter Dinnigan that seems appropriate to point out now, in this historic 10th year of her Paris showings.

Why? Because although I can't guarantee this for certain, I'd wager my entire spring/summer wardrobe that Collette Dinnigan is the only fashion designer in Paris to ever have been cheek

“She'd become relentlessly, wildly ... successful, a celebrity in her own right.”

by jowl to the jaws of a shark. (Imagine Valentino, who presented on the catwalk immediately before Collette, ever being within a distressed ribbon of a white pointer!)

Collette is now almost a permanent fixture on the international fashion scene. She is the only Australian to have been honoured by the Fédération Française de la Couture du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers at des Créateurs de Mode, Paris's ruling body of fashion, for not just one year, but 10. And she is one of the few independent designers not to have been eaten alive (excuse this murderous play on words) by one of the larger conglomerates such as Gucci or Dior.

So there's a lot to celebrate here. At the very least, survival and, at the very most, the kind of staggering success that no other fashion designer from Australia has ever come close to.

Consider this trajectory. In 1990, she started her own label as a result of a burgeoning demand for the sexy little French lace knickers she was suddenly making for close friends from her house in Paddington, in Sydney. (She says it has nothing to do with being laid up in bed with torn tendons in her leg as has been widely reported in the past.) She'd grown up in New Zealand's Bay of Islands and Bay of Plenty regions. She'd studied fashion and textiles at Wellington's Polytechnic. She'd then fled the straitjacket of New Zealand (as it was in the '70s and '80s) to work in the costume department of the ABC, but she'd never formally studied design, nor perhaps more importantly, the business of fashion. On both counts, she was somehow tapping into the spring waters of her own intuition, as well as the sensibilities passed onto her by her artistic, bohemian parents.

Desmond Dinnigan, after all, built

yachts, replete with their own stainless steel fittings and cleats, and pots and pans that looked like pewter. He constructed the family home by a river in the North Island's Kaimai Range, made of old recycled timber floorboards and railway sleepers. His wife, Sheila, Collette's mother, who died in 1996, made her own pasta and grew chilli bushes, and painted curtains embossed with beautiful African women. And so, from a young age, Collette could see the creative spirit at play.

“I was always working with fabrics,” she says, “and I can remember making these wrap-around skirts, probably from about 12 or 13. I'd make something

different to wear every night, but it would just be quick. I'd get the material and cut it up. I would just do it by eye or by instinct.”

By 1992, she'd opened her first store in Paddington and was selling to prestigious department stores around the world – icons of style and taste such as Barneys New York, Neiman Marcus, Harvey Nichols and Joyce in Hong Kong. Women swooned over what she was doing. This was underwear as outer wear. This was the lace and silk of the French boudoir on public display.

No wonder she was invited to Paris. Her first showing in 1995 at Angelina's Tearoom on the Rue de Rivoli “went off like a firecracker”, according to Maggie Alderson, the London-based novelist and fashion writer. “She was right for the moment ... very feminine. It all looked so vintage.”

By the following year, Collette was back again in this Queen of Cities, again at Angelina's. Again, she knocked them out. By this time, she was also on the cover of the American fashion bible, *Women's Wear Daily*, as well as the new Australian Designer of the Year.

By 1997, she'd been presented with the Louis Vuitton Business Award and the following year inducted into the Australian Businesswomen's Hall of Fame. She was now a regular at Le Carrousel du Louvre, the salons under the hallowed Louvre complex where the official Paris collections were shown. She was collaborating with friends Catherine Martin and Baz Luhrmann on her autumn/winter show; opening a new boutique in London's Chelsea Green; being honoured by London's Victoria and Albert Museum; launching an exclusive lingerie collection called Wild Hearts through Marks & Spencer's UK outlets

with the help of another friend, the supermodel Helena Christensen.

She'd become relentlessly, wildly, almost preternaturally successful, a celebrity in her own right with a \$20million business. She would eventually become style ambassador for Sydney and have a stamp of herself issued by Australia Post. There was a wax model of Kylie Minogue wearing one of her dresses at Madame Tussaud's. There was Halle Berry turning up at the premiere of *Die Another Day* in Los Angeles in one of her gorgeous, shimmering creations. And there were Nicole Kidman and Julia Roberts and Cate Blanchett and Sarah O'Hare and

Naomi Watts and Claudia Schiffer and Charlize Theron and Megan Gale and Jerry Hall and Cameron Diaz and Elle Macpherson and Madonna stepping out into their own rarefied nights wearing her beautifully crafted numbers.

And then, of course, there were also the good women of Savannah and Sydney and Minneapolis and Moscow, cities around the world where women had decided likewise that Dinnigan was *de rigueur*. What was it? Was it the antique lace, the monet silk, the Italian hand-embroidery, the drapes, the ruffles, the flounces, the whisper of romance? It was the whole thing – the design, the colours, the beautiful crafting, the attention to detail in everything from knickers to slips to bodice dresses or jewelled pendant gowns. And, yes, it was the sheer seductiveness that was so appealing as well. As French poet Charles Baudelaire put it once, “Sexuality is the lyricism of the masses”, and now it seemed the misses, if not the masses, were all singing from the same song sheet.

CALL IT YOUTHFUL rebellion, intellectual snobbery or the rude indifference of an Australian male, but I have never followed fashion, nor understood its cruel vagaries and whims. (In other words, I was just kidding before about my spring/summer wardrobe!) Be that as it may, an assignment in Paris can rearrange your heart and head. In this instance, it can make you eager to not only understand everything about the Collette Dinnigan style, but also the Collette Dinnigan person.

The first bit, however, is much easier than the second. You can look at a pair of lacy little shorts or a silk bodice dress >>>



HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY NUNZIO CARBONE



Clockwise from left: Collette wearing her own design; Australian model Grace Small in a dress from Collette's latest collection; dresses from the spring/summer collection hang in preparation for the show.

and go, “Ooh la la”. You can arrive in Paris and base yourself near Dinnigan headquarters, in the heart of the Marais district, and marvel at the exquisite symmetry between woman and place. The woman being, of course, Collette, the place being this famed neighbourhood of narrow medieval streets, old cafes, hip bars, hosiery shops, dressmakers, fruit and vegetable peddlers, and, of course, beautiful mansions where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were once prisoners.

It is here that Collette has her showroom and where she rents an apartment for herself, her one-year-old daughter, Estella, and the nanny, and where she reserves a charming old-world hotel near the River Seine for her friends and family who fly in from around the world. “There’s a life, a *vivre* that happens here,” she says breezily. “It’s beautiful and I love it, and it’s good for the team.”

And what a team: hair and make-up artists, jewellers, lighting designers, stylists (in this case David Beckham’s very own, Karl Plewka), models – 17 of them from around the world, including Australia’s 16-year-old Grace Small – hoteliers, drivers, PR people, agents ... and Collette running the whole show like an air-traffic controller.

So, yes, it is no wonder that she appears slightly uptight when we first meet backstage half an hour before she is to present to the world’s fashion media and buyers. Eight months of work distilled into 10 tantalising and terrifying make-or-break minutes. There are models in various states of, how shall we say, *dishabille*, taking last gasps on cigarettes, looking alarmingly bulimic and pale as they prepare for their pony walk into the headlights. There are assistants barking orders. There is Estella being handed between mother and nanny, and there are the family members and friends lurking at a respectful distance, including one customer from Australia called Yuki, who admits to owning no fewer than 500 Collette Dinnigan dresses. “When I was younger,” she tells me breathlessly, “I used to take my mother’s credit card and buy all these dresses, and my mother would check the statements each month and ask me: ‘What are Collette Dinnigans?’ I’d just tell her they were computer software.”

I barely have time to digest all this when the show begins – my first catwalk, of course – and I for one can’t stop tapping my feet to a track by The Killers and gaping incredulously at the ribcages and breasts and legs and flourish of rock chic chiffons and lace that come cavorting past me from my second-row seat, not to mention trying to get a better view of the pregnant Tina Arena and the



Above: Halle Berry wears Collette Dinnigan at the premiere of *Die Another Day* in 2002. Below: Sarah O’Hare, client and good friend, in a Dinnigan design.



Australian actor Rose Byrne in the front row.

I feel like the *ingénue* abroad, especially alongside my esteemed colleague from *Newsweek*, who turns to me at one point and asks dryly, “Did you see Alexander McQueen?” “No, who’s Alexander McQueen?” I reply cheerfully, still tapping my feet to the thumping music.

(Only later do I learn that Alexander McQueen is just one of the world’s most important fashion designers and this goes some way towards explaining the look of withering disdain my American friend has shot in my direction.)

Yet more importantly, the show, by all accounts, is a triumph. “After 10 years in the business, why mess with a winning formula?” enthused the *International Herald Tribune*. In my gushing ignorance, I am more than ready to agree.

COLLETTE DINNIGAN doesn’t make things easy for a journalist trying to profile her. On my arrival in Paris, I found that I’d been disinvited to an after-show party with her and her friends, only to be re-invited at the 11th hour. Then there was the lunch invitation for friends and members of the international press in the palatial Marie Antoinette Salon of the Hotel de Crillon which was never extended; and, finally, a dinner with Collette and her friends (including one close mutual friend) which I was told it would be better not to attend.

Perhaps it was (unsubstantiated) rumours of a new boyfriend. Perhaps it was past dealings with gossip rags, especially around the time of her much-publicised break-up with television presenter Richard Wilkins, Estella’s father. Perhaps it was because she’d seen what relentless media scrutiny could do – and had done – to late friends such as Paula Yates and Michael Hutchence, although given her friendship with Lachlan Murdoch, a former publisher himself of prurient tabloids such as the *News of the World* and London’s *The Sun*, this would seem a little ironic.

Or perhaps it was just that behind the glamorous Nordic cool of those steel-blue eyes Collette Dinnigan was far more insecure and tightly wound than one would ever imagine and far more prone to dramatic turns and ruffling feathers than may have ever been reported before.

“I find it astounding the way she treats people ... and I’m amazed it’s never been written before,” says one who knows her well and has worked with her.

And so, with all this hanging heavily in the Indian summer air, we meet again in her suite at the Hotel de Crillon, where Collette has been staying for four nights while the show and the after-party and dinners are in full swing. (Estella is >>>

Below, left: Collette's marriage to musician Bernie Lynch ended after nine years. Right: Daughter Estella didn't save her relationship with TV personality Richard Wilkins.



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apparently with her by day and then returns to the Marais at night to join the nanny.)

In her black silk satin pyjama pants and black merino wool top, she is a picture of lithe and elegant loveliness as she greets me at the door and leads me to a place on the couch, with its outlook onto an 18th-century inner courtyard. She takes up a seat opposite me, barefooted and cross-legged, and orders that bottle of ambrosial red.

We begin by talking about her father, whom she praises fulsomely, but then, out of the blue, decides to pull back from discussing further, especially as it relates to their relationship. “All those things we think our fathers aren’t,” she says ambiguously. “People see them in a different light, so I won’t go there ...”

We move on to sailing the world with her family and *that* white pointer. “Who told that story?” she shoots back nervously, as if I’m one myself and this might be some kind of ambush at sea. I urge her back towards the story.

Then there’s a question about where her mother, Sheila, learned to do batik. “She was creative. I don’t know. She just learnt it herself.” *Okay, just asking.* Or about where she keeps her mother’s ashes at home. “I’m not even going to go there.”

Did she die from breast cancer, I wonder. “No, no, she didn’t. It gets reported like that.”

Deep vein thrombosis? “No. She had a heart attack.”

Right. We are circling each other, so thank God for that blessed bottle of

Chateau de Chamirey Mercurey, which I can feel warming my blood and emboldening my spirit. Are you hard to work with, I venture? And finally some refreshing candour. “I’ve heard so many people – some of my very good friends say, ‘You’re so difficult, no wonder no one can be with you’, but at the same time they love me dearly ... because they know when I do something I do it with my heart. I don’t let anyone down. I’m very loyal and I never forget. I have a very sharp memory.”

Twenty minutes later, unprompted, she returns to this theme. “You said to me before, ‘Do people find you hard to work with?’ Yes, probably because I do have the attention to detail. But apart from that, I just want people who are professional ... and second best isn’t good enough.”

Do you drive yourself crazy with your attention to detail? “I think I drive other people crazy more than I drive myself crazy.” More candour. *Hallelujah.*

Needless to say, Collette’s much-publicised break-up last year with Richard Wilkins, before the birth of their daughter, Estella, would not have helped her emotional confidence, especially given the break-up of her nine-year marriage to musician Bernie Lynch three years earlier. She admits as much now.

“It was very painful I think for us both [Richard and I], because we were very deeply in love and, for whatever reasons, it didn’t work out. And it’s unfortunate because it doesn’t help having the press tracking your every movement ... People are so interested in other people’s business

and it’s usually birth, death, marriages, affairs. It’s not when life is wonderful.

“But you know what ... I don’t really want to talk too much about it because my relationship is what my relationship was, and a lot of people don’t know and they presume to know what happened. And I think it’s also something for Estella. She needs a relationship with her father and I do as well.”

Fair enough. And it’s when she’s discussing this divine daughter of hers that she is at her most disarming. As her friend, jewellery designer Victoria Spring, observes to *The Weekly*, “I never thought Collette would embrace motherhood like she has. She is really giving and cute with [Estella] because she lets her guard down.”

And there it is in a nutshell. When Collette Dinnigan lets her guard down, she can be all these things – cute, giving, joyful, generous of heart and soul – so much so that by the end of our interview I am convinced there is even a rapport between us, one evidenced perhaps by her gift to me of a perfumed Collette Dinnigan candle.

Collette Dinnigan is an extraordinary talent and singular success story, a testament to what vision and fierce determination can bring a woman from *Down Under*. She is also a person who when she speaks of the simple things in life – love for child and friends and home cooking and music and passion at all cost over fame – you want to like her. You really do.

It’s just that, well ... if only she weren’t waiting for that shark attack. ■

An Australian in Paris continued