

# Love, MANOLO *(a tribute)*

On October 8, 2010, I met Manolo Blahnik. He'd been in town to promote his fall collection, as well as his newly published book of sketches, *Manolo's New Shoes*. And as we sat down, not far from the shoe salon that showcased his impressive collection, I was taken by the man's contagious zest for life, and felt instantly that I was in the presence of someone truly remarkable.

**T**he black framed glasses, dapper bow tie, the melodic, hard-to-place accent—there is but one Manolo, and we can't help but love him. Women flock to Neiman Marcus (as they did this past October) to have "Love, Manolo" perfectly scribbled on the soles of their newly purchased pumps. With that signature, you've defied all degrees of separation and are left with a precious memento. And you walk away with pep in your step, confident that the delightful sound of his voice saying something in the way of "Oh, you like the shoe? Thank you, darling," will ring in your ears with each wear. I think Suzy Menkes, fashion editor of the *International Herald Tribune*, put it best: "Manolo is up there with Marlene, Marilyn, and Jackie, among single word immortals."

Who knew what awesome fate awaited him when in 1970 Diana Vreeland, then editor-in-chief of American *Vogue*, took a look at his theater set design sketches and advised him to fixate on his fanciful shoes. Manolo loved Vreeland and had been impressed with her for years. He fondly recalls being "petrified with fear," wearing a "ridiculous suit in gingham" the day he was to meet her. You needn't have worried, Manolo. She loved it, of course.

Of Spanish and Czech heritage, having lived, studied, and worked throughout Europe, Manolo's knowledge and appreciation for languages, arts, and the humanities, his love of silent films and Fellini, of Lorca's verses from *Romancero Gitano*, among so many others, results in the frenzy of cross-references wrapped up in each of his creations. And as Oscar-winning costume designer Milena Canonero once

quipped, "Manolo creates characters with his shoes." For if each shoe told a story, it would be a hybrid of allusions from both past and present, of culture, nature, and object, all the while maintaining a sense of wear, and believe it or not, practicality. "Shoes *must* function" he insists. "The hideous platforms women wear in Hollywood [pause for sigh of utter disdain] they are so vile and passé. They generate an insecure walk on the part of the woman." There is method to his mastery of women's footwear and in his understanding of how properly executed details directly translate to a woman's posture and the way she walks. Time spent in factories studying the art of shoe making lent itself immensely to the cultivation of his trade. After all, it can't be easy to make "Manolos" as comfortable as they are captivating. And, he shares, "as time goes by, I become more of a perfectionist."

Yes, he is head of one of the world's foremost fashion labels—his name synonymous with luxury, his style conjuring fancy and decadence. He is timeless and *avante-garde* all at once. But for all the reasons he has to be cavalier, he couldn't be further from it. Gracious, wonderful, with lots of panache—that's how I'd describe Manolo.

As we parted amongst a crowd of women, pumps and books grasped tightly in arms, he thanked me for speaking with him and called out, "Please let's talk the next time I'm in town! There's so much to do today and so little time!" One can only hope for such a rain check. Merci, Manolo. Till we meet again! ■ —LENA DAKESSIAN

*"If Manolo has an Achilles heel, it is his sweet tooth, and so, consequently, the shoes are confectionary—high-glucose bonbons for the foot."*

—AMY FINE COLLINS, SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT TO VANITY FAIR.