

Jonathan Saunders in his
studio in north London

THE HIGH-FLYING SCOTSMAN

Beloved of everyone from Sam Cam to Michelle Obama, Jonathan Saunders is one of Britain's hottest fashion designers – and quite possibly the shrewdest and least showy. He talks to KATE SALTER

PHOTOGRAPH BY JO METSON SCOTT

At his studio in a tall, rather ramshackle building in Islington, north London, Jonathan Saunders is just back from having his hair cut ready for the *Stella* photo-shoot ('a little Polish place round the corner – £8, brilliant'). He pops his head round the door to say a bright 'hello!', polishes off the rest of a sandwich and nips out again for a quick cigarette.

In the corridor a pile of Christian Louboutin shoe-boxes is stacked to waist-height, ready for Saunders' next fashion show. In his office, a huge bookshelf groans with dozens of art books on everything from the Bauhaus to Japanese cinema. There is a photograph on his desk of him and his best friend and managing director of the company, Yvie, who has known Saunders since they were teenagers. In the corner of the room is a dog basket for Amber, Saunders' four-legged companion, who strolls around good-naturedly looking for something to eat. The cosy, informal air to the place seems surprising, somehow, being as it is the home of one of fashion's biggest stars.

Jonathan Saunders is currently one of British fashion's hottest talents and his meteoric rise was made official two weeks ago when he won the prestigious British Fashion Council/Vogue Designer Fashion Fund. The £200,000 prize has

previously been won by Erdem and Christopher Kane, both now firmly established labels. Saunders' name has been on fashion editors' lips for a few years now, but it is more recently that his intricate prints, beautiful use of colour and clever tailoring have won him legions of fans both in, and outside of, the fashion industry.

'It's fantastic we won,' he says, sitting down at his desk with a cup of tea. 'It's really great for the team because they've worked so hard – they've always worked hard but especially over the last year and a half, two years.' It is a mark of his success that, despite the recession, in the past two years Saunders, 34, has expanded his range to include a menswear collection and two new mid-season womenswear collections – all with a permanent staff of just nine.

The prize money will help with staffing levels, but Saunders says another important aspect of the award is the access to high-level mentors in the industry it will provide. Saunders is so prolific – his clothes are worn by Samantha Cameron and Michelle Obama among others, and he also designs ranges for Debenhams, Escada and Smythson – that he hardly seems to need a mentor. But along with his contemporaries and friends Richard Nicoll, Christopher Kane, Roksanda Ilincic and Louise Gray, Saunders seems to be a new breed of designer, one all too aware of the need to build a solid business base as well as create show-stopping frocks.

'People have always been really excited about the energy that comes from London fashion,' Saunders says, adjusting his baggy knitted jumper. 'But what's interesting about the last few years is that, rather than just being known for ideas, the designers that have come out of London have been able to balance creative with business. At the end of the day we are fashion designers, not artists, and we provide a product for our customers.'

There is very little fluffy fashion speak with Saunders. He clearly loves colour and texture and can create a print that looks steeped in art history yet thoroughly modern, but he is also very straightforward, with real business savvy. Perhaps this is the secret of his success: as well as being able to make heart-stoppingly beautiful clothes, he never forgets that they have to be worn by real people. 'I've got a great bunch of women who work with me here,' he says. 'It takes you out of your bubble and you realise, "OK, this thing that I've created,

how are you going to wear it, what are you going to wear it with?"'

Saunders' spring/summer collection includes tailored sundresses in romantic prints, dirndl skirts in sumptuous fabrics, floaty chiffon blouses and tailored jackets – it was a collection that had the *Stella* fashion staff raving, and *Vogue* called it 'beautiful from the moment it started to the moment it ended'. It was also a collection that was eminently wearable, and Saunders says that focusing more on separates is a conscious move.

'It's about listening to your customer,' he says, 'understanding what you are as a brand.' It doesn't sound very romantic, I say. 'No, but if you're about print, and you're about colour, and you're about

From top: a graphic-print dress from one of Saunders' early shows, in 2004; three outfits from his spring/summer 2012 collection



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optimism, and you're about a brave mixture of colour, then having a part of your business driven by separates allows your customer to wear it how she wants. You can't be too pompous and dictate how she wears it.'

Perhaps he was always this precocious, but when I ask if he always wanted to be a fashion designer he gives a flat, definite 'no'. Saunders will happily natter away on most subjects, but his personal life is not one of them. He grew up in Glasgow, the son of Jehovah's Witnesses, and although it's explained beforehand that this isn't something he's comfortable discussing, one can imagine that fashion designer was not an occupation that was going to go down a storm with Mr and Mrs Saunders.

'My first thought was to do something practical with my hands,' Saunders says.

'I always loved making things, but I certainly wasn't thumbing through *Vogue* as an early teenager. I always wanted to go to art school and I was always creatively minded,' He smiles. 'Maybe it's a Scottish thing but I always had an awareness of the pretentious image that fashion had and therefore I didn't want that to be my job, even though I loved it. So I thought that doing something practical and creative with my hands would be an interesting way to dabble in it.'

Saunders left home at 16, which must have helped forge his grit and determination, and went

to study furniture design at Glasgow School of Art. Two years into the course he switched to a printed textiles degree, and 'absolutely loved it'. After art school he left Glasgow for London, where he applied to the MA fashion course at Central Saint Martins. He was accepted despite not having a single fashion sketch in his portfolio.

Saint Martins was, he says, a tough experience. 'Coming from a textiles background initially, I continually felt a little bit out of place. There were feelings of inadequacy in the initial stages. You know, "Who am I kidding?"' But despite the pressure he obviously thrived. He nods. 'I think

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irrespective of what you do or what your craft is, or your skill, a burning ambition to do something and to keep going at it is vital at that stage otherwise you just get chewed up and spat out at that college.' On the strength of his MA show, Alexander McQueen commissioned him to make prints for his label. He went on to work at Chloé and Pucci before launching his own label in 2003. A year later one of his dresses was on the cover of British *Vogue*.

In no other city, Saunders says, are young designers given the chance to showcase their work so soon. 'What's exciting about London, and I've said it before, is the spit-and-sawdust way you start. You come out of college, make your own collection in your bedroom or your tiny studio with whatever you can get your hands on, and then it's put on style.com, vogue.com, and you're assessed alongside many other big brands!'

The internet may have helped the way young designers launch their brands, but it has also led to an insatiable thirst for new fashion. 'What was relevant six months ago is now not relevant anymore because we live in a world that thrives on change,' says Saunders. 'Fashion along with anything these days is much more global and much more democratic in a way because everyone can see it straight away. There's live streaming of fashion shows, there are four collections a year now for womenswear, there's a continual delivery of clothes. There's *a lot* out there now.' As he says this he looks exhausted at the thought. How does he keep up? 'You have to be a certain type of

person to do this,' Saunders says, and he does have a quiet intensity to him that suggests he's not one to sit still for long.

The day this article appears Saunders is launching his autumn/winter collection at London Fashion Week (just as his spring/summer collection hits the shops). Does he find the shows stressful? He gives me a wry smile and tells me that the fabrics that he had to order as soon as the last collection was finished will only arrive from Italy two weeks before the show – 'So basically you have two weeks to make 180 pieces.' The models won't arrive for their fittings, straight from New York fashion week, until the day before. Inevitably, Saunders rarely gets any sleep before the show. Someone usually takes him aside, he says, and tells him 'you need to sort yourself out, Jonathan. You need to shave, you need to brush your teeth, quite possibly go for a sunbed to get rid of that grey tinge you've got because you've smoked 60 cigarettes a day for the last three weeks.' Despite all this, it is the part of his job he enjoys most. 'I thrive on it, I love that buzz. Seeing my clothes on gorgeous girls, it's so exciting.'

Does he ever feel nostalgic for the old days, when there wasn't the pressure of living up to everyone's expectations? He looks up at the grey sky through the roof-light in the ceiling. 'Yes, I do. But I don't feel nostalgic for the torture that it was. It used to feel quite torturous, never quite getting to what you wanted to achieve, not quite having the knowledge or the experience to be able to translate your ideas. I don't miss that.'

As to where he wants to take the business next, the only way is up. 'With any growing business you can't rest on your laurels,' he says. 'It's not about something just ticking over. If you haven't grown, you've not been successful.'

He admits that he's something of a perfectionist but says, 'I think you have to be. I'm really ambitious and I'm really driven and I don't give up and I think that's crucial.' He harks back to something he learnt all those years ago at Saint Martins, something that seems to sum up Saunders perfectly: 'You have to have thick skin at the same time as being quite sensitive – it's quite a funny way to be.' ●



From top: Thandie Newton and Sienna Miller wearing Jonathan Saunders; the designer with Samantha Cameron at a fashion-week party at No 10 last year