

REVIEW



Brunello Cucinelli in Mongolia, and his muted palette at Milan show.

manding, difficult customers?

Just the other day we had a general meeting, and I paid compliments to my direct sales agents, for how really kind they are.

Well, bad behavior can be learned. I believe that children do what you do, not what you say.

I agree. The other day, we went out to a restaurant, and we all went back to the kitchen in the back, just to say hi and thank you to the staff who work there. And on the street, when you see people begging, when you hand money to them, do not humiliate them.

Many studies show the more money you have, the less empathy you have. Why is that?

It's bad to be competitive about money. There's also the fact that 30, 40 years ago we had no idea



EARN YOUR LUCK

Brunello Cucinelli on Ancient Philosophy—and Practical Jokes

The king of quiet luxury on humility among the rich and why he remains hopeful about humanity

BY HOLLY PETERSON

I have news for all the billionaires out there replacing flashy status symbols with stealthier emblems of wealth. Much of your low-key look can be traced back to billionaire Brunello Cucinelli.

Recognizable by a subtle sparkly strip hidden inside a collar or on an aglet at the end of a drawstring cord, Cucinelli's luxury clothing brand employs a muted palette of tans and grays. Those not in the know might faint at the prices—\$4,600 for a cashmere-and-silk sweater, \$11,800 for a suede jacket—but that hasn't dampened sales. The company now has 160 stand-alone stores spanning 40 countries and saw \$1.6 billion in revenue last year.

Cucinelli, 72, grew up in poverty in central Italy. As a teen, he divided his time between school and driving oxen to till the land. By age 24, he'd dropped out of engineering school to read philosophy and pursue modeling.

In 1978, when he decided to make bold-colored cashmere sweaters for women, a dye expert said he was "crazy to dye cashmere in these colors." Determined, Cucinelli borrowed enough money to buy 20 kilograms of

ecru-colored cashmere to make 60 bright sweaters. They quickly sold out.

Today, he bases the brand in Solomeo, Italy. He runs his business by the "humanistic capitalism" he derived from ancient philosophers whose names he casually drops in conversation.

Cucinelli credits his work and life intent to Marcus Aurelius, who said you should always live as if it's the last day of your life.

Tell me about the earthen colors in your collections. Why are so many of your fabrics tans, ivories or "goat-colored"?

Beauty, order, tidiness, these are the basics. But what matters most is to live in harmony with creation. Xenophanes said that from earth all things come. When I was pulling the oxen in the fields, my dad would tell me, "The farrows; they should be straight," for that simple reason.

Who was first to support your clothing line?

Barney Pressman at Barney's, he was the first one to display my goods in the New York shop window 35 years ago. That was esteem and respect, and we used to joke a lot. Playing jokes and pranks, it needs to be amusing

and not belittling, obviously. I still play practical jokes. Never offensive, always respectful. It's something really joyful to play jokes. People have stopped joking because with AI, there are no jokes.

You had an original idea and created a behemoth brand pretty much on your own intuition and steam. Is that luck or savvy?

I think life is broken down into three phases. Epicurus says the first part comes directly inherited from your parents. The second part is destiny, fate. And then there's me, my own making. I've always tried to find a way between what came from the heavens, fate and what I can do myself.

You've said how you treat your employees comes from how poorly your father was treated in a concrete manufacturing plant. You wanted to do the opposite.

You shouldn't send any business-related emails after 5:30, because you have your own life. It means focus. And we need to work a fair number of hours so we have time left for our families, our needs, our friends and ourselves. We all start working at 8 a.m., everybody has a lunch break at 1 p.m. sharp for an hour and a half, and then 2:30 to

5:30—that's it. But we work in a very concentrated way. Otherwise, 30% of our time is wasted on nothing. And there's no time left for the heavens.

Do you believe that money corrupts people? How you treat others lies within the human soul. I would admit that having money tends to make you arrogant. But deep down, I believe that the human soul is good.

I also believe in the good of most people. That's why I'm confused why people who have money change their behavior and adopt a belief that some people are valued higher as human beings.

How many rich people do you know who are willing to listen? Not very many. Pythagoras jotted down three pages called the Golden Verses, where he gives tips on how to lead a good life. One in particular struck me, telling us that before you go to bed, review all your deeds of the day three times before you fall asleep. If you did something good, rejoice, something bad, repent. If you don't behave properly, are you going to have a sound sleep?

Do you have advice for your salespeople when they have de-

as to how much money someone had, whereas now the fact that we do know has exacerbated the competition. What we need to retrieve is the basic tenets of human beings, like great politics, great family and religion or spirituality. We have to go back to believing in powerful ideals.

I don't know how you persuade American CEOs who are competing with China to increase humanity in the office.

How can we become more human instead of being overwhelmed with this technology? How can we put humanism into the technological equation? What humanity is struggling with nowadays is the malady in their soul.

Are you fearful of the future for generations to come?

I'm 72, and I was there when the fax was born, the email, and everything seemed so scary, but I believe in humanity. Just yesterday I was having lunch with my grandchildren, and when you have the future just in front of you, you cannot but think that it will be a bright one. My 15-year-old granddaughter said to me, "When I start working at your company, the first thing I'm gonna do is fire you on the spot."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

PHOTO LEFT: BRUNELLO CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI; CUCINELLI

MASTERPIECE | 'INVITATION TO THE DANCE' (1956), BY GENE KELLY

Leaping Into Cine-Dance

BY ROBERT S. MACK

IF THE MGM MOVIE "Invitation to the Dance" is remembered at all, it's for "Sinbad the Sailor," one of the film's three stories, in which a live-action Gene Kelly waltzes with an animated Scheherazade—a cartoon fantasy set to Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's score named for that legendary teller of tales. While the sequence was a technical feat for its time, many today view the 93-minute film itself as little more than a historical curiosity.

While filmed performances are usually stale, the movie has long struck me, as a professional ballet dancer who discovered "Invitation" in college, as an example of how cinema and dance can be memorably combined. Backed by Arthur Freed, the legendary producer of MGM musicals, "Invitation" remains an audacious extravaganza and an underappreciated achievement in cine-dance.

In the early decades of Hollywood musicals, ballet had been at most a secondary art, especially compared to the prevalence of tap dance. Films used ballet as a perfunctory nod to high culture, for instance employing the likes of George Balanchine to create brief numbers for films such as "The Goldwyn Follies" in 1938. More provocative explora-

tions of ballet included "The Red Shoes." But the dancing in that 1948 British drama is not its primary medium of storytelling.

Since his career began, Kelly had been pushing cine-dance forward, directing his first sequence and experimenting with double exposure in the "Alter Ego" dance for the 1944 film "Cover Girl." As he began co-directing with Stanley Donen, Kelly choreographed dance sequences that told stories within stories in films such as "On the Town" and "Singin' in the Rain," as well as the Vincente Minnelli film "An American in Paris."

But Kelly's track record and box-office power couldn't quell MGM's concerns about the commercial viability of his passion project. While he wanted to focus purely on directing, the studio insisted that he appear in the film along with the cadre of ballet dancers he had chosen.

"Invitation" begins with "Circus," with Kelly made up as a clown who pines for a beautiful performer, danced by Claire Sombert, who is herself in love with a chiseled acrobat, played by Igor Youskevitch. Sombert and Youskevitch rendezvous for a haunting, lamplight pas de deux. She then discovers Kelly carressing the cloak she left behind, but when Youskevitch finds them together, tragedy ensues.

This is certainly the most technically balletic sequence in the film, and Kelly visibly stretches his artistry while bringing all his expertise to bear. He shoots in long takes that keep the dancers centered in the frame and uninterrupted by the jumpy editing that is common today, knowing exactly how to capture the line of the dancers and the natural flow of the movement.

The second sequence, "Ring Around the Rosy"—based on "La Ronde," Arthur Schnitzler's play about marital infidelity—is more satirical. It features a MacGuffin, a garish gold bracelet passed down from one couple to the next, from all walks of New York life, depicted in starkly minimal sets. Kelly creates jazzy, sensual dances to André Previn's score punctuated with sardonic keyboard solos performed off-screen by Previn himself.

The all-star ensemble of ballet dancers enjoys more screen time than it typically would have in a Hollywood film. In one sequence, Claude Bessy, a Paris Opera étoile, plays a model, wooed by her lover and eating a sandwich with the most royal disinterest. In another,



Claire Sombert and Igor Youskevitch in 'Circus.'

the Balanchine ballerina Diana Adams struts around as a jealous, leggy henchman girl. In the finale, Tamara Toumanova, a legend of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, is a streetwalker dancing by lamplight. In "Ring Around the Rosy"—unlike in "Circus"—Kelly employs dynamic camera movement, but it becomes part of the dance without drawing attention to itself.

The final sequence, "Sinbad," allows the film to end on a lighter note. Kelly had combined live action and animation previously, dancing with Jerry the Mouse in the 1945 film "Anchors Aweigh." But to show a live-action dancer partnering an animated figure in an entirely painted landscape as autumn leaves swirl in slow motion around them was another feat altogether. The painstaking animation and tracking process involved months of additional rehearsal and shooting with

dancer Carol Haney, the live model for Scheherazade.

"Invitation" is an achievement in dance for cinema, freed from the spatial and temporal limits of live performance, weaving stories without dialogue, lyrics, or narration. While Kelly, for all his talent, was not the most technical ballet dancer himself, he choreographs each sequence to his dancers' quence to his dancers' strengths. Today, it is hard to imagine any mainstream director allowing dance to speak for itself the way Kelly does.

Critics panned the film, and "Invitation" would be one of the last musicals produced by MGM. No ballet anthology film was ever produced by a major American studio again, and today it is available only on DVD.

Kelly continued to promote classical dancing in popular culture, producing a television special, "Dancing: A Man's Game," in 1958; he choreographed "Pas de Deux" for the Paris Opera Ballet in 1960. But "Invitation to the Dance" is his boldest legacy to the dance world and deserves to be appreciated for its groundbreaking blend of ballet and cinematic storytelling.

Mr. Mack is a writer, filmmaker and professional ballet dancer with the Sarasota Ballet.

AUGUST