

RAISING THE BAR

Lakmé Fashion Week trumped many of its own precedents for a gamut of reasons this season. High-voltage support from a smattering of film icons, glimpses of a select social and industrialist set, strong media presence and a more or less successful format of offsite shows. Amidst all the fashion bonhomie, two designers stood a cut above the rest, thanks to the profile of a dream guest list but most importantly, because of the impeccable finesse of the collections they showcased. Anamika Khanna and Anand Kabra, take a bow. Nisha Jhangiani reports...

The whispers began on a lazy Sunday morning. Anamika Khanna's much-touted finale presentation, in readiness to unfold within the magnificently poised walls of Mumbai's historic Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum, was sinking under the troubled waters of a political protest. A few hours later, the salvo of bad news was delivered via frantic calls and messages, redirecting the invitees to the Palladium Hotel, with an urgent request to arrive latest by nine pm. Sceptical about this unimagined change of plan, I nevertheless reached the venue on time, only to be tagged with a VIP wrist band and led to the open courtyard (otherwise reserved for snacking, lounging and cigarette breaks during fashion week). Sonakshi Sinha was patiently waiting for the magnum opus to begin, cheerily chatting her way through the hour. Verve's editor, Anuradha Mahindra, a rare sight at any fashion event these days, was being welcomed by all who knew her, even as she held on to her companion, daughter Divya. Suhani Pittie, who had designed the jewellery for sister Anamika, walked past harried

but calm, shrugging her shoulders and crossing her fingers when asked when the show would open its doors to all who were flocked outside.

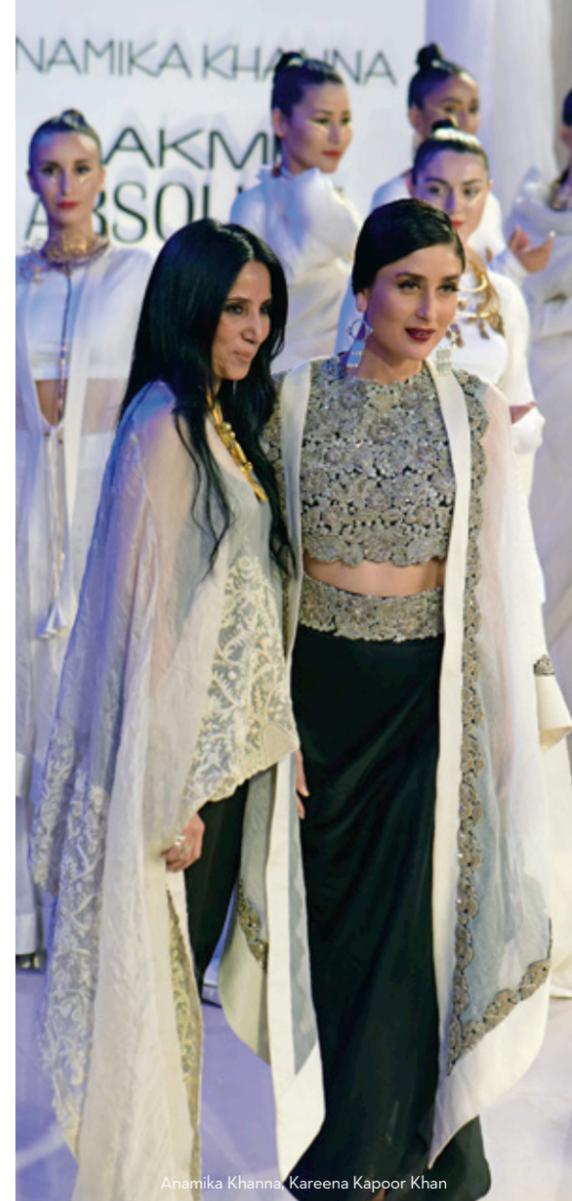
And finally, when we were let in, we saw a lobby that had been hastily converted into a presentation space. Photographers were crammed by the staircase, editors could only be accommodated on the second row due to a severe shortage of front-row placements and Ms Khanna, the creator of all that was being prepped backstage, was dashing here and there, worry etched clearly on her visage.

And even I was saying my own little prayer for the petite designer, what I was hearing and seeing suggested that no appeals would be needed. Rohit Bal had apparently knotted his *lungi* earlier on and gotten down to brass tacks, assisting in every area possible, with Manish Malhotra and Tarun Tahiliani pitching in where they could. It became hard to predict whether Mumbai's elite or Mumbai's Bollywood was causing a paparazzi stir; both mingled together beautifully when Saif Ali Khan walked over to Rita Dhody, all *aadaab* and grace personified even as Devaunshi Mehta looked on.

Nita Ambani posed resplendently with daughter Isha before taking her seat and animatedly greeting Deepika Padukone, Karisma Kapoor and Shabana Azmi. Rhea Kapoor looked prepared to cheer already.

But, fittingly so, the above was hardly a parameter of the show's success. When the real heroes descended down the spiral staircase, even the most jaded could not help but applaud. Definition here, deconstruction there...a fluid falling dhoti connected with a structured zardosi overlay. Cutwork and threadwork reinterpreted and aligned to Khanna's signature shapes and colours; free-flowing drapes, long coats, billowing capes in a precise palette of ebony, ivory, gunmetal, silver and nude-gold. The woman once again merged refined craft with effortless style. And despite the phenomenal upheaval generated by a small-minded sect intending jeopardy, the sheer strength in the solidarity emanating from Anamika's own fraternity, coupled with the unflinching support of her influential admirers, showed, without doubt, that a winner can take her crown against all odds.

IT BECAME HARD TO PREDICT WHETHER MUMBAI'S ELITE OR MUMBAI'S BOLLYWOOD WAS CAUSING A PAPARAZZI STIR; BOTH MINGLED TOGETHER BEAUTIFULLY WHEN SAIF ALI KHAN WALKED OVER TO RITA DHODY, ALL AADAAB AND GRACE PERSONIFIED EVEN AS DEVAUNSHI MEHTA LOOKED ON.



Anamika Khanna, Kareena Kapoor Khan



Nita Ambani, Isha Ambani



Deepika Padukone

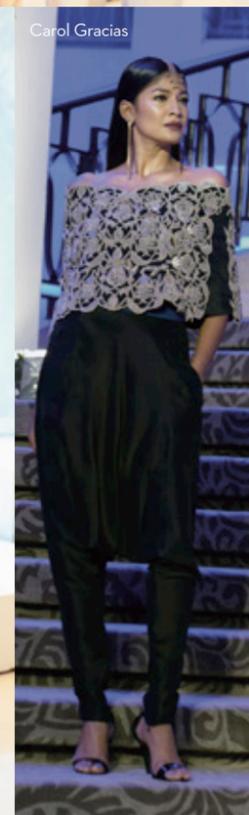
Jacqueline Fernandez



Saif Ali Khan



Sonakshi Sinha



Carol Gracias





Surily Goel, Manish Malhotra



Sabina Chopra



Natasha Chib, Maneka Thadani



Shahid Datawala, Bhawna Sharma



Marielou Phillips



ROHIT BAL AND MANISH MALHOTRA MINGLED FREELY, PRAISING A SHARARA, ADJUSTING AN-ABOUT-TO-SLITHER-OFF DRAPE AND DISCREETLY IMPARTING ENCOURAGING ADVICE – A DREAM MOMENT FOR ANY DESIGNER WHO LOOKS UP TO HIS SENIOR COUNTERPARTS.



Sangita Kathiwada, Priya Nathani



Rhea Kapoor, Pernia Qureshi



Sona Mohapatra, Anand Bhushan



Roohi Jaikishan, Verve's Nisha Jhangiani



Anand Kabra, Rohit Bal



Aditi Rao Hydari, Jacqueline Fernandez



Arundhati De, Shobhaa De, Avantikka Kilachand

At the quieter end of this spectrum stood a designer much lauded and acclaimed but one who had taken a backseat from active applause for the last few seasons. Anand Kabra chose his return with a very specific structure - a venue within the hotel but nowhere near the show areas; a concept driven by installation and imagery rather than live demonstration on mobile form and a closed-door guest list.

Kabra's tension was subtly palpable the afternoon of his showing. A 3D mapping that was to evoke a strong print story coupled with Nizami nostalgia on the walls of his suite was taking precious hours to be perfected. Lifeless mannequins that required artful adornment were proving to be as uncompromising as an irate customer. The carefully selected gourmet bites, chosen to echo the contemporary Indian mood of the display, were ready to roll, the champagne already chilling on ice.

Surily Goel was the first to arrive, 15 minutes before show time. Having recently worn one of Anand's

creations to a top brass destination wedding, she was ready to scout again, offering keen inputs on whatever caught her eye. Aditi Rao Hydari made an early entrance, infusing her custom-made lehnga with a paradoxically enchanting mix of grandeur and demureness. In a matter of minutes, the room was bursting to capacity. Shobhaa De and Roohi Jaikishan, both first-time visitors to a Kabra showing, took their time leisurely taking in the glorious ambience of couture-to-wear, and near the entrance, Jacqueline Fernandez posed and preened in her specially created silk jumpsuit with an open beaded and laced jacket. Rohit Bal and Manish Malhotra (another common thread of support between Anamika and Anand) mingled freely, praising a *sharara*, adjusting an-about-to-slither-off drape and discreetly imparting encouraging advice - a dream moment for any designer who looks up to his senior counterparts.

And circling this happy chaos, were four mini-collections aesthetically marking their attendance. The *mul* line

stood tall, glorious in its purity of cut and fabric, enhanced with restrained embroidery while the unapologetic printed pattern section chose a bolder, more individualistic vibe in vermilion, ochre, black and ivory. Zardosis and laces completed the quartet, closing the collection with distinctive motifs that were infused with the essence of Hyderabad, confidently aware that they would fit in with any sophisticated occasion that demands elegance. Especially when paired with satin-smooth embellished sandals and a capsule compilation of pearl, onyx and metal baubles, gently superimposed with dainty ornamentation, all conceptualised by the designer to culminate his fashion message.

What Anamika Khanna and Anand Kabra achieved, to great success, was to take freely from an indomitable Indian heritage and sync that rich tradition with a modern twist, one that made every garment they presented indisputably their voice. They took the ball and smashed it out of the stadium. More power to them.