



Two Ambitious Projects Bring Alexander McQueen's Story To Life

By Steve Baltin



The late designer Alexander McQueen wasn't just a rock star in the fashion world, dubbed "Fashion's closest thing to a rock star," he was a friend or inspiration to many rock stars, including David Bowie, Lady Gaga, Courtney Love, Bjork and Beyonce, among others, who wore his clothes.

Now, McQueen, who died at the age of 40 in 2010 of suicide, is getting the full rock star treatment. Producer Rick Lazes and McQueen's nephew, Gary, have teamed up for two very different and distinct projects celebrating the life and legacy of the designer.

House of McQueen, a play starring *Bridgerton*'s Luke Newton and acclaimed Broadway veteran Emily Skinner, opens off Broadway September 9 officially. Meanwhile, across the country in LA, *Provocateur*, an immersive show will take you on a tour through McQueen's life and works beginning January 1.

I spoke at length with Lazes and Gary McQueen about the ambitious dual slate.

Steve Baltin: The two simultaneous shows is fascinating because obviously they're very different audiences and very different experiences. Where did the idea come from and how do you imagine them going on tour? Will they take different routes? Talk about how they'll expand going forward and where it started.

Rick Lazes: They are two very different animals. *House of McQueen* is a major production; it has a big cast, hundreds of costumes. In order to even produce *House of McQueen* we couldn't find a theater that really had the attributes that we needed and that would be fit to his legacy so we're actually building a theater. That's part of the project in Hudson Yards, a 15,000 square foot theater that we're building from the ground up. *House of McQueen* can play primarily in major markets. The plan is after New York to play London, Paris and Milan. *Provocateur* is a different kind of experience. *Provocateur* is a living documentary of Lee's life. It's about 10,000 square feet. It's composed of 10 rooms starting with his childhood bedroom, his first school, his first job at a tailor shop, and his first fashion show when he was making costumes out of literally plastic bags. It's like walking in a documentary. And Gary and I have worked together since we first met to make sure about the authenticity of the experience. So, *Provocateur* is an immersive exhibit where you walk through his life and Lee, in his own words, through dozens of interviews that we've licensed, tells his life story. Gary McQueen: So, it hits a key





milestone in the shows that he created as well, leading up to Plato's Atlantis at the end. Also, we're going to bring Lee to life as well as a finale using holographic technology.

Lazes: Yeah, that's a good point. *Provocateur* is based on technology because there are no actors. There are holograms, there's digital projection mapping, there are video projections and in the final scene we take you into the metaverse and you put on goggles, and you actually go backstage and see a fashion show with Lee interacting with the models and the makeup artists and then we actually take you out onto the runway. *House of McQueen* is an unconventional theatrical experience, but people actually sit in seats and there's a stage. It uses technology also. We have about a thousand square feet of LED screens. But the story is more about his work and his life and his relationship to his mother and his relationship to his mentor, Isabella Blow, in a very theatrical performance. With music, although it's not a musical, there's no singing and dancing. So, they are two very different projects, and they've been working in tandem. Having Gary on the team keeps us grounded and authentic, and he brings us back.

McQueen: I come from a unique stance and standpoint being both his nephew and I'm an artist myself. That's where Rick and I met actually in Art Basel Miami when I was exhibiting there with holographic technology, but I also worked with Lee Alexander McQueen as well. I worked alongside him for seven years, which is 14 shows. So, it gives me quite a well-rounded view of him, both personally and creatively, which is quite a unique place to be

Baltin: How do these shows reflect his vision?

McQueen: He's always dreamed of incorporating both technology and physical art with his collection. And what I'm doing with Rick pays tribute to Lee's love of blending technology and art. It's getting the balance of everything right, to create an atmosphere and experiences that are truly immersive. So, you're really brought into Lee's world and that will be done through various screen technologies, the narration done by Lee where we're using Lee's voice mixed with some AI to help narrate the viewer through the experience. Also, it's important to have obviously authentic physical garments from these collections alongside those so they blend seamlessly into one experience.

Lazes: We're working with collectors from around the world. Gill Linton with Byronesque of Paris is an amazing curator that has worked with the Met. She's been putting together the displays. There will be a display of Haute Couture original dresses, both in New York and in *Provocateur*, in both markets. In the play we don't reproduce his dresses or try to copy his dresses. It's really about his story, his work and his personal relationships. But tandem to *House of McQueen* is an exhibit in the same building that's available to people that come to see the play before, during the intermission and after. They can walk through a mini-Savage Beauty exhibit. It's amazing, 650,000 people showed up for Savage Beauty. And I was told recently that if you go to a cocktail party in New York today and haven't been to Savage Beauty, you have FOMO (laughs). It's an amazing demand for his work and his art. What always intrigued me was he was always conceived of, and his reputation was of a great fashion designer, but he never got credit for being an amazing artist. That was one of the angsts that he'd had, along with the mercantilism of the fashion industry, first from Givenchy and then Gucci. Ultimately, that's what overwhelmed him. But no matter how large his obstacles were, and how difficult his personal life became, it fueled his art, and his art kept getting better and better right to the very end.

McQueen: For me, it's really about keeping his legacy alive. I was very privileged to be able to spend that time with him, from a young age where he used to babysit into working with him at Alexander McQueen. A lot of people won't get that opportunity, obviously. So, for myself, it's really important to keep that legacy alive and let people experience some of those highlights of Lee's life through Lee's different experiences.

Baltin: Talk about also expanding the legacy and celebrating the stuff that you don't feel got celebrated enough in his life.





McQueen: I took part in the McQueen documentary film. I was in that, and I created the hero image for that film. I think it's important that people understand Lee as a person. He's very human. If you met him, you wouldn't really bat an eyelid. But he had this God-given gift and he was very relatable in a way. He comes from a working-class background and worked very hard at it. It's really an inspiring story of how he achieved everything that he achieved and knocked down boundaries, both in terms of class and creatively

Lazes: What you just touched on also is his influence not only on fashion but on music, art and really all of pop culture in the 21st century. And he touches on issues that are so relevant today of rejection, homophobia, depression, anxiety and ultimately suicide that are problems that affect a very wide swath of our demographics. So, part of our mission here is that there couldn't be a time in American history when there has been more divisiveness and antagonizing antagonism among different cultures, races, religions and walks of life. So, our goal here is to help start that healing process. One of his famous quotes, which he had tattooed on his arm, was "Love looks, not with the eyes, but with the mind." That's what he stood for. He also said, "Find beauty in everything" with another one of his quotes. These are quotes that are so relevant and timely to today. Many young fashionists, young people that are interested in fashion that might not even know who he is. But his message will resound of kindness and creativity.

Baltin: The musician that reminds me most of is Bowie. Because Bowie was that total genius chameleon who blended everything so well. The other thing though, there's been immersive shows about Bowie and there's been so much about him already posthumously. I'm curious if there were things that you looked at or that inspired *Provocateur*.

Lazes: The David Bowie immersive show was amazing. It brought you into his life. I saw it at the Brooklyn Museum. And we actually are using the technology they used. I don't know if you remember from that show, but you put on headphones, and it followed you around with a satellite. It knew where you were. So, when you went into different rooms, it automatically synced you up, whether he was in a recording studio or on a stage or backstage putting on his costumes. You could follow him around and it knew where you were. And it made it very personal and emotional. And we're using that same technology. They have satellites in all the rooms. So, as you walk into the room, if Lee is speaking or working on a dress or talking to a model, you immediately are immersed in his conversation without having to touch any buttons, it's pretty magical. Immersive shows have become the flavor du jour among particularly younger demographic and museums who supported them because some of their audience is aging out. But our show is very different because it has a story. Lee tells the story in his own voice. It's very personal and emotional. It's not just showing pictures of his fashion shows. So, it's interesting that you talk about Bowie because it's one of my favorites, it's a great show.

