

Looking for Mr. MOSCHILLO

A close encounter with Saverio Moschillo, “made in Italy” fashion business guru and co-owner of the John Richmond brand name with the designer. A quick outline of a life of adventure, packed with success, that has robbed him of none of his realness. A busy man with bags of charisma and a fertile mind, who is difficult to pin down but is generous when he says

yes. He’s almost on time: I’d been told twenty to four and it’s four o’clock. I’ve been hanging around all day for the interview: first midday, then two o’clock and at last, when I manage to get a precise time, I have less than an hour to get across town. So I take the metro: much quicker than any taxi, but choc-a-bloc and steaming hot, even if it’s only April. I’m overheated and gasping by the time I get to Superstudio, where they’re shooting the John Richmond beachwear collection, and a fretful press officer tells me to take a seat at the bar. We grab a few seconds to explain what sort of interview I’m after and the press officer vanishes on the wave of a promise to come back with him. It really doesn’t take long before the object of my desires appears at the back of the room. He’s wearing a pinstripe suit with a black crewneck. He’s tanned. His curly dark hair is tinged with grey. He wears a lot of rings (from the new John Richmond collection, he explains later).

He stops a few feet away as he’s on the phone. His tone is friendly as he talks to some guy called Rodolfo. It takes him a few minutes to finish while I squirm in my armchair. When he does finish, he smiles with the consummate air of someone who has no doubt as to their own charm: he asks my name, asks me how I am, carries my hand to his lips and plants a whacking great kiss.

Looks like we’re ready to shoot except that I feel he’s uneasy. Right. He starts to play with his cell almost immediately, probably replying to some SMS, then he glances at the notes he’s brought with him, then the phone rings again.

Luisa this time. “Luisa, my love” actually, but however friendly the greeting, his voice is brusque. Not rude, not cross, just a shade cool, definitely abrupt. Luisa gets sorted in a few seconds and finally he looks at me and actually sees me.

The mobile gets turned off, he relaxes on the sofa and sips the coffee the waiter has set on the side table. He smiles.

I think I need to be quick – I’ve only got 15 minutes – so I explain that we don’t use traditional interviews at kid’s wear. My editor wouldn’t know what to do with turnovers and profit margins, and definitely no old news that has already done the rounds of every other paper. I want something personal. Something no one else has heard, maybe?

So I ask him to just tell me about himself, about his life. I’m sure there’ll be some intriguing snippet we can explore.

He looks at me and continues to smile. Shrewdly. Is he complacent or unenthusiastic?

He’d be happier if I just asked some specific questions. Let’s start at Ariano Irpino, then. The village where he was born and which has a big place in his heart still. It’s a town, he says, correcting my error. A town where strong, illustrious and resolute figures have been born. All clever, sensitive people who are, above all, very hard workers.

I apologize and I ask him to tell me more. But he clams up. He’s writing a book, he confides, so he wants to keep it under wraps.

I insist, politely.

Just a story or two, an anecdote ...

He yields in the end. But of his own volition: Saverio Moschillo isn’t someone who is easily persuaded by other people.

He starts with when he was just four years old and he already rode horses and attended to the small herd of cattle owned by his parents, who ran a little farming business. That was when he started feeling he was different from other kids his age: more mature, more curious, more reckless.

Do I sound pretentious? He stops short to ask me, victim of an attack of modesty.

Text PETRA BARKHOF AND PATRIZIA MEZZANZANICA

Photo MAURIZIO GALIMBERTI

I look back at him but I can’t reply. He doesn’t sound humble but he doesn’t sound bigheaded either. Realistic is more like it.

I tell him what I think and he goes on.

He tells me about when he was five and he won a local Palio competition.

He was little and skinny and everyone else – more than 60 contestants – was grown up. But he won the lot: hams, cheeses, the foxtail, and even 10,000 lire, which was a small fortune in those days especially for a child his age. My dad couldn’t believe, he says. He’d tried to talk me out of it but I’d listened to my mum, who was egging me on. By the time I was six I was driving a car and a tractor around the fields. I’d even learned about engines so I could even fix them when they broke down. So I started dreaming of having my own ranch, like in the American films I saw at the cinema or on TV. I was living in the future already, dreaming big dreams, hungry to learn.

I left home quite young, I was just 14 when I moved into a bedsit in town. It had got to be too much, living with my dad. Not that we didn’t love each other, quite the opposite, we were bound by deep affection, but we were just so different and we couldn’t find a way of communicating.

I had money saved and I did odd jobs to earn a living while I went to school. When I left high school I went to Naples University. I got into the rag trade when I was hired by a small company making outerwear. I worked with the owner and sometimes he took me with him when he had to go to Prato to buy fabrics. He was blind and he had learned to identify any cloth in the storerooms by feel: even the blends. I remember he used to say – you see, Saverio, this is 70% wool and 30% acrylic, or 80% cotton and 20% silk. I’d look at him astonished and, in the meantime I was getting keener and learning for myself. I spent a couple of years with him and then I met the man who changed my life: Guido Ranieri. The man who not only taught me a profession but also loved me like a son. He was well-known and respected in our trade, and he owned a company that represented several fashion brands. He gave me job as an agent and let me stay in his home. I lived with his family, with his own son. He was teacher for life, the person who encouraged me to improve, who congratulated me for my successes and gave me confidence. This work is something you have in your blood, he’d say. And I believed him so I worked even harder. If I became a successful man, in less than ten years one of the most famous at international level with prestigious showrooms in one of the most important cities, it is also thanks to him.

It was precisely at the peak of this business that John Richmond came into my life. I’m talking 1996 or so. I’d met him before, in London, years back, and I’d taken to him then: a punk in black boots, tight trousers, covered in rings and pins and chains. He was a mate of David Bowie and Mick Jagger. I didn’t speak a word of English and his Italian was equally fluent, but we managed to chat anyway, in our own way. We downed gallons of tea that time.

I bumped into him years later, in a company where I’d gone to sign a contract. I saw a clothes rack hidden and half-covered by a cloth, with a bomber, kilts, some jackets, trousers, sticking out. They were lovely items. Original. So I had a better look and I asked around and when they said it was him, I was struck by lightning. I want this, I said to myself. I called him the next day and after a year we were 50-50 partners.

We’ve been working together ever since, getting along as well as we did at the start; we share a desire to grow, to improve, to conquer new markets. He’s the artist – I’m the business brains and brawn. Our next project is a chain of 100 Richmond stores that will be flagships for the Richmond X line of youth prêt-à-porter, for Richmond Denim and for the Richmond jr kidswear collections, plus accessories. After the first store in Riyadh, we opened one in Mexico City and the next will be Milan. Give us five years and the world will be ours.

The children’s wear is very satisfying too. John thought I was joking when I asked him to design it. But I’ve seen his

092 kids Phoenix and Harley D. wearing the clothes he had



made up for them. He’s a fantastic dad, he has bags of talent so I just thought of a whole range. I was right. Like I usually am for a product. I might be just a businessman, but I do understand style. And I listen to my instinct and to my feelings. I’m eccentric in my own way, even if my feet are firmly planted on the ground and I try never to get carried away.

Right, so now we’ve got to where I am now. I’ve left out a lot – you can read that in the book: when I was a boxer, for instance. And women, who have been crucial in my life: they’ve always helped me and been close. 90% of my staff worldwide are women. They are my strength although I doubt your paper wants to know that.

Maybe not my paper. But I want to know it even though I don’t dare ask. And an hour has passed – way more than the 15 minutes I expected. I had to sweat for this interview, but then he was generous. I can see that in the way he talks about himself and I’m quite charmed by him.

Well, I say, trying to think of something original as a closing shot. Is there anything else?

He can’t believe it.

Yes, he says appreciatively, a slogan I never forget. I think you’ll like it.

Then he gets up and leaves. But he doesn’t kiss my hand.

The slogan is:

If you’re worth it, wing it. If you ain’t worth it, you won’t wing it, And if you’re worth it and you don’t wing it, you’re a worm.

Should be on a T-shirt!