

Meet EL PRESIDENTE

Robert Duffy is the brain behind Marc Jacobs. He brings simply everything on to the market: clothes, handbags, the collection for the traditional design house Louis Vuitton, skateboards, tableware, even plasters. You can ruin a fashion brand like that. Or make it the most sought-after in the world. It can happen to any employee. It's not the ringing of the alarm clock that wakes him from his sleep one morning but the question: Why, please, are our handbags not doing as well as Louis Vuitton's? Or: We must get Sofia Coppola straightaway for our new campaign. Whoever works for, next to, behind or under Robert Duffy, must occasionally experience being half asleep struggling for an answer, when the boss has long since hung up so he can apply himself to the next problem. He who leads an empire can't waste time.

Robert Duffy, President of Marc Jacobs – he places no value on titles: “I have a whole load of them depending on which day it is” – is no normal businessman. He knows a lot about everything. He knows, how quality materials are manufactured, he can tell good buttons from bad ones. He even sits in at fittings. Not really that astonishing, when one knows how Duffy defines his work: “I see myself as a circus director. We work with so many extremely talented individualists, that it needs someone to hold it all together.” Marc Jacobs and Robert Duffy have been a team for 23 years – certainly one of the most productive “marriages” in the history of fashion. Together they have built up Marc Jacobs International – in 2006 alone they turned over 500 million dollars. And together they have won the traditional design house Louis Vuitton over to their way of thinking. And thanks to their joint success they've made the label into the leading brand of the French luxury goods group Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton S.A.

Jacobs and Duffy are best friends, they trust one another implicitly and when one of them says something, the other almost always finishes the sentence. And despite this, they could not be more different. In contrast to Jacobs, who grew up as the son of Jewish theatrical agents in Manhattan's Upper West Side and early on won over the upper class, Duffy grew up in Pennsylvania, in America's mid-west. Duffy has an unbelievably peaceful aura. He is around 50, grey-haired, good-looking and almost always dressed in jeans and trainers. Jacobs is the complete opposite: a temperamental New York designer, who has sometimes been known to get carried away with drugs and alcohol and disappear for days. If anyone then manages to sober Jacobs up again, it's Duffy. His way in to the fashion world was through his cousin, head of fashion in a department store in Pittsburgh, and later with Calvin Klein in New York. But Duffy set his sights higher: “I wanted to own Calvin Klein. And not just work there as head of fashion.” Aged 21, Duffy got his first job: he had landed a position in purchasing with the upmarket New York department store, Bergdorf Goodman. His next job at the classic Seventh Avenue manufacturer Ruben Thomas was a little less glamorous. “But I was young and needed the money,” Duffy always likes to apologize for this job.

Luckily, in order not to lose Duffy, Ruben Thomas offered him full creative responsibility. That was in 1984 and Duffy accepted. For his first team, a new talented young designer was needed. So he went to the degree class fashion show at the Parsons School of Art: “I looked at the catwalk and noted ‘love this’, ‘love that’, and at the end of the show there were five looks on my list – all from one and the same designer.” Duffy had fallen in love with the style of Marc Jacobs. What about it fascinated him exactly? “His clothes made me laugh. They were new and looked as if they had already been worn for years. They looked so friendly, a bit awkward and not at all alarming.” After a few years of tireless searching, moving from one financial backer to another, Duffy, now 35, and the 25-year-old Jacobs were offered positions with Perry Ellis – Duffy as President and Jacobs as Director of Design. “It was frightening,” says Duffy today about the 700 million dollar business. “I was certain that we were making a mistake but we did it anyway. And we were fired – a big exit.” This was for the legendary Grunge collection, which brought about both fatal figures and also the worst criticism in the whole of the company's history. And it was the only time the pair made it to the front page of the New

108 York Times: “Marc Jacobs And Robert Duffy Fired At Perry

Ellis”. Under the terms of their contract, the Perry management had to pay their employees for another six months. Time enough for Duffy to scrape some money together and conjure up Marc Jacobs International out of nothing. It didn't take long for the boys to become New York's favourite design underdogs. Lovely pieces, fashion spreads and support from the retail trade did the rest. Even Gianni Versace came to their show and offered his help: so Duffy and Jacobs took the next plane to Milan. The design legend Gianni advised first finding a supporter, who was putting money into the market, until they made a profit. This would allow Jacobs and Duffy to live. But the most important advice: “Whatever you two do, don't split up – stay together, if you don't, you won't make it.” And so this is what they did.

The next big step came in 1997. Duffy was dead set on stirring up 143 years of French tradition at Louis Vuitton. At this time all traditional design houses were on the search for new blood and were appointing cool, young designers. And all at once the two of them found themselves back in the entrance hall of the biggest luxury goods group. That this was not a cosy chat over a coffee was clear from the beginning: suddenly Jacobs, a gay, unpredictable New York club kid in Stan Smiths, and Duffy, a gay workaholic, always in the fast lane, were meeting a group of the powers that be of French fashion with their black suits, big cars and unshakeable belief in good manners.

The drama could begin. Duffy was still in Paris. A studio had to be built. Up until this point Louis Vuitton had never made anything other than handbags and luggage. Duffy had to put together a whole new team. The pressure on his shoulders was immense. Not just a whole ready-to-wear line had to be created – Jacob's drug problem was reaching a peak. Jacobs says today, “Duffy saved my life.” And then there was also the constant battle for the attention of LVMH boss, Bernard Arnault. Not that he did not value the couple's work, but it often seemed Arnault had found his favourite in John Galliano. Arnault considered his theatrical style for Dior the ne plus ultra of creativity. Recently though all problems seem to have been settled for good: Jacobs and Duffy have signed again, this time a contract with Louis Vuitton through to 2013. “Louis Vuitton is a giant machine. Everything you want, you get. Everything! Every material in every colour. So I am always envious. I am always envious, because we must score the same home run with Marc Jacobs as we have with Louis Vuitton. And every season is so important,” explains Duffy. The Vuitton-Jacobs combination is one of the big success stories in fashion – perhaps even the biggest. When Duffy and Jacobs signed the contract in 1997, Louis Vuitton was turning over 1.2 billion dollars. Today the pair have made it a 3.5 billion dollar brand.

But Duffy is not satisfied yet. He is on the point of creating a third brand. One somewhat cheaper than the phenomenally successful line Marc by Marc Jacobs. And there is also Little Marc, the children's line. Bark Jacobs for dogs. And Stinky Rat, a line which was born with just T-shirts. In the meantime purses, skateboards, surfboards, key rings, everything you could need for an easy-going outfit is being sold under the Stinky Rat brand. A new shop is always being opened somewhere in the world: Paris, Dubai, Las Vegas, a second in San Francisco, one in Moscow and also the long-awaited shop in London celebrated its opening this year. But doesn't Marc Jacobs's exclusivity get lost somewhere in all this? “I never want to see a single product that I don't like in the shops. Or that isn't cool,” is Duffy's comment on that. “But all the same, I do worry that we are getting too big. That I'm losing control. I worry about that every day. The truth is that this thought keeps me awake all night.”

So where exactly does Duffy's ingenious recipe for success lie? No question, he has an unbelievable feel for talent. Not only did he once employ Tom Ford for Perry Ellis. He discovered Marc Jacobs. And he has personally put together both the Louis Vuitton team and that of Marc Jacobs. Perhaps also because he never thinks small – he would like to have an empire as great as that of Ralph Lauren. Or because he has remained a lateral thinker. After all, it was also his idea, to make the US boutiques left-wing

liberal political centres for a while and to display ballot papers next to the Hillary T-shirts. Last summer he tried to take two weeks holiday. He couldn't get away until three days before he was due to come home. So, how long can the Jacobs phenomenon go on like this? “I hope for ever. Long after we are no longer here,” says the man who claims never to have had a single strategy.

