

Timeless but Timely

by Silvia Bombardini



photo: Paul Wetherell

It's been 163 summers and Bally's still full of surprises — they were the ones, after all, who created the pump back in 1890. And it's certainly not your everyday accessories designer who will suddenly find himself at the creative helm of a domain of such scope and scale and yet keep his feet firmly on the ground, dressed in his signature Portland double monks at that. With an irresistible trail of experiences that goes from Céline to McQueen and Christian Dior, Pablo Coppola joined Bally in 2013, and earlier this year was promptly promoted to creative director of the entire brand. With his heart in the archives and his mind in the future, Pablo talks essential wardrobes and subliminal branding, heritage and modern lenses, gentlemen and gentlewomen: he's the man who will make sure Bally will be there, to keep us on our toes, for at least 163 seasons more.

Silvia Bombardini: Founded in a family basement in Switzerland as early as 1851, Bally may well be the longest-running global luxury brand in the world. What was in style 163 years ago, and what has stayed? Has the perfect shoe already been created and if so, what's the role of contemporary design, or do you imagine there's still a better fit for Cinderella to be found in our time?

Pablo Coppola: I'm not so sure what was chic back then, but what I'm certain about is that Karl Franz Bally's aim was to produce functional shoes, with a comfortable fit, in a streamlined

and modern way. After all these years I guess our aim is just the same.

SB: I know you were born in Buenos Aires, probably with Italian roots, but not much else about your own path. Would you tell me something about your childhood and fashion, what did people around you use to wear back then, and was this always your vocation or what else could you have done instead?

PC: My interest in fashion was born through fashion magazines; I used to read and study anything that came my way — The Face, I-D, French issues of Vogue, Self Service, Purple, and so on. Early on I was sure I wanted to work in fashion, even if at the time I hardly knew what I could do, or how to get there. I guess that the most fashionable thing I had around me was my mother, as any child would, and although I don't remember much about her outfits I can still recall the smell of her make-up, her perfume... her '80s python boots.

SB: Now that you're based in London, is there anything about your homeland that you miss?

PC: Nothing at all. I've lived in London before, for more than nine years, so coming back now was a bit like coming home. I'm used to moving; I must admit, I even enjoy it!

SB: Your appointment as Bally's most comprehensive creative director may still be fairly recent, but your first collections, as well as a striking *résumé*, denote a high level of familiarity when dealing with heritage

brands, like Burberry for example. What are the challenges and the rewards of working alongside tradition, and do you believe emerging labels today can still hope for this kind of longevity or were those just very special times, where market gaps allowed for the most ambitious ideas to be welcome and flourish?

PC: There is no set formula for success, otherwise it would be too easy, but I do believe that we have all the ingredients to do the turnaround of this wonderful brand. I would also like to point out that not all heritage brands are the same, and that not many have the history that Bally does. But I'm sure an emerging label of today, if it specializes in a specific product range and is consistent over the years while building and expanding the brand, will one day become what we call now a heritage brand. I think it's great to look at the past and celebrate all the great things people before us have done, but it's very important to also be aware of today, of now... And to keep an eye on the future.

SB: Time, after all, is a particularly serious matter in Switzerland: a natural inclination towards the finest, long-lasting materials and a sincere preoccupation with timelessness are among the noblest virtues of Bally, and signature traits of the Swiss. But how does this virtual indestructibility fit in with the fast-paced environment of the fashion industry? What is today, for you, the appeal of the classic and familiar as opposed to the trendy?

PC: Yes, I think the classic notion of timeless will always win over trendy. Personally, I still look back at the '60s and '70s for reference points of what I like the most. I have not lived those years, but I think they must have been fantastic ones! All of this makes sense only if we adapt it though, or look at it with modern lenses. Our motto here is "timeless but timely."

SB: It is true that accessories generally live longer lives than clothes, and as we suit, get used to, and grow attached to each other like an old couple of lovers, a pair of oxfords can become an invaluable mirror of anyone's personality. And accessories have always been your background — until now, when you found yourself suddenly at the center of a much larger scope. The results have been just as perfect, however, so I wonder, how does one proceed to grow a collection, somehow antonymously, from the accessories up?

PC: Well, as you said, it is all very new for me to oversee all these product categories, so it's a learning curve for me as well. I do have a great support system around me, though. I'm very privileged to be able to work with people I consider friends, who I trust unconditionally. Maybe it's because we have known each other for a long time, or just because we've worked together before — but it is nonetheless something priceless. To go

back to the subject of accessories, I think it's only normal for me to start from there, as this is what I've done all of my professional life. Now I just have more things to do.

SB: I've read that one first, very necessary step was a visit to Ursula at the Bally archives, back in the northwestern hamlet of Schönenwerd. What wonders did you witness there? Was there perhaps a particular piece from seasons past that especially charmed or inspired you?

PC: Yes, Ursula is our greatest ambassador for all things Bally and she takes good care of more than 34,000 pairs of shoes and tons of documents, photos, books, patterns, posters. The list is endless. There are so many things that it is hard to concentrate when you are there. For an accessories designer it's almost better than heaven — or at least for this one!

Off the top of my head, I loved the '50s and '60s women's shoes — and what I liked about them the most is that I found them very relevant for today.

SB: Something I'd love to see if I ever got to go there myself, are those incredible painted advertisements from the beginning of the twentieth century by early graphic artists like Bernard Villemot and Laurent Berset. Back then, Bally shoes were a favorite and the most versatile model for the arts, long before any Campbell soup. I've heard that you were considering bringing the tradition of illustration back to the company, is that really so?

PC: Well yes, I would love to do that. I think it's something that we do need to bring back. I haven't had the time to tackle this properly yet. But I will do it.

SB: To sum up: the essential respect for the past, your own taste, intuition and skill, a coherent vision across the lines, and a push for-

ward toward always uncharted shores. How do you balance all these values, and would there be a single item from AW14 that you would single out to best embody your views?

PC: I would love to explain to you how we do it, but I honestly have no clue. I guess it just happens; we start with something and then it takes shape organically. If I had to highlight something — and I must say that this is like asking a parent which of his children he loves the most — I would say the Gentlewoman bag, as it is structured, simple and clean, unfussy, and strangely practical. All that a Bally product should be.

SB: Last century, Bally's soles may have walked from the top of Mount Everest to the craters of the moon, but now a softer, kinder sort of elegance, hushed and pared down, seems to call for more relaxing times. Is there still space for heroes though, in the Bally universe? Who is presently your muse, and who exactly do you design for?

PC: Given that we are masters of shoemaking, I'm sure there will always be place to create special shoes for iconic moments. But only time will tell.

I don't really have a muse though, and I don't believe in the term. It's sort of out of place for me, as we cater to many different customers, and it would be very limiting to narrow it down to one. For sure we design for modern people in general, people who share our values of quality not only on craftsmanship but also the quality of design.

SB: Another distinctive touch of recent seasons is the consistent and welcome shortage of logos. It's a principled choice of course, and worthy, one that appears to address a rather specific target too: a more conscious customer, more confident and at ease, less pretentious. How did this decision come about, and how was it received?

PC: I think it was very well received! But this is true for a specific type of product and client. On the other hand we own very recognizable signifiers such as the "Bally stripe," that for us in certain cases can work as a sort of logo or subliminal branding. At this moment in time there are people who value anonymity and others that want to belong to a club, a clan, or a gang. Well, it's all fine with me, as long as it's the Bally gang.

SB: The first thing Régine Zylberberg looks at on a man is his footwear. Let's pick a couple from SS15 and try our luck: what kind of man, would you guess, could go for the leather monk-strap shoes with hiker-boot sole, and who would instead prefer the slender Scribe Novo dress loafer? Which pair would you personally choose for yourself?

PC: I'm sure Régine has seen a lot of good shoes! I could be the man wearing the Portland double monk shoe. It's the perfect dress shoe for me as I would wear it with anything: denim, chinos, a casual suit... On the other hand a very elegant man, who regularly wears formal suits would be the ideal client for the Scribe Novo; our inspiration here was our CEO, Frédéric de Narp. It's for a sharp and sophisticated kind of businessman. A Bally gentleman.

SB: You've described the AW14 women's collection as a "palette cleanser" for Bally, but could you give us any clue yet as to what will follow next?

PC: I'd say that it will be a build-up on the same concept of an essential wardrobe. Only that now we will start adding different layers, all of these being consistent with our initial message.

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