

# THE VISUALIZER

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Artistic Director [Kirsten Dehlholm](#) has spent three decades as the glue holding together the chaotic theatre ensemble known as Hotel Pro Forma. Internationally acclaimed for her multi-sensory performances, she is one of few visionaries strong enough to be considered a genre in her own right. We listened in as fashion journalist [Chris Pedersen](#) met her for a conversation about style, theatre and fashion.



A performance by Hotel Pro Forma is like sushi: you either like it, or you don't. To some the ensemble's multilayered plays provide a pleasurable tickle to the senses; to others they are arduous exercises in patience and high-brow avant-gardism. To each his own. One thing is certain: Kirsten Dehlholm is an incomparable visual composer. She works with optical effects, illusions, and spatial manipulations to leave her instantly recognizable visual fingerprint on everything she touches - one reason she is universally respected in Danish fashion circles.

Her work is a constant subversion of anything anticipated and traditional; a blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, actors and audience, as well as fashion and theatre. Since the 2011 Manga-inspired performance War Sum Up, she has cooperated with designer Henrik Vibskov on several plays,

including Kosmos+, which opens in Copenhagen in February this year. Next year, Wali Mohammed Barrech - the most talked-about newcomer on the Danish fashion scene - will add his futuristic silhouette to Neoarctic, an electronic opera in 12 parts performed by the Latvian Radio Choir.

That's why we're here tonight at the Hotel Pro Forma headquarters on Amager, the island adjacent to Copenhagen. Kirsten greets us with sparkling blue eyes and a firm handshake, dressed in a simple black dress, an open multicoloured jacket, and high heels. As a teenager, she dyed her hair a bold shade of raspberry. The fiery locks have been her signature look ever since and leave you with no doubt she's used to making the decisions around here. As we sit down by a large kitchen table, red wine is poured, and words begin to flow. →

Chris: What does a designer like Henrik Vibskov add to your work?

Kirsten: He adds an artistic layer. Every single element of our performances is independently developed, and when put together they must be comprehensive and synergistic works of art. Along the way surprises may occur, because I can't always see the big picture before I begin adding elements together. But I like being surprised, and I like surprising others.

From the outside, it seems like Hotel Pro Forma is a collective with a top-down approach.

You're right. It's important to have an artistic team, who sometimes work individually, sometimes together, but not like a collective. Each artist has to bring individual skills to the process. And then I have to moderate it so the elements will not overpower each other.

Isn't that really difficult?

Yes and no. Often I'm very clear about what works for me. I follow my nose and my gut feeling, and it's my privilege to choose the creative parts.

Does that require a close relationship with the people you work with?

Indeed, confidence is very important. And I need their permission to say no and turn down ideas. If a manuscript is too rich in emotions, I may cut them out if they are communicated elsewhere in the play, via music, lights or gestures. One component shouldn't contain it all. Theatre costumes tend to be too illustrative of time or character. That is why I never use traditional costume designers for my plays. I only work with people from the fashion world who can bring their own expressions and add something I would never have thought of to my plays.

How did you come to work with Henrik Vibskov?

While doing the play called War Sum Up in 2011. The visual side consists of simplified and enlarged Manga drawings, and I felt that Henrik would fit in well. His costumes weren't over the top, just very clean cut and two-dimensional. We have worked together a few times since then.

How do you do it?

I tell him my ideas; he takes notes. He's so busy that I haven't yet asked him to do a collection just for me. He usually adapts something he already has. My next collaboration will be with Wali Mohammed Barrech.



“When I see a catwalk show, I often wish the models would stand still for a moment so I could actually view those works of art”

Why him?

It's for a play called Neoarctic. I like how he mixes new fabrics such as neoprene with fur and oversized shapes – very futuristic. Wali and Henrik share two very important traits: humor and exaggeration. What's interesting about fashion is that it can draw on things from the theatre, such as masks, which can work really well on the catwalk or in editorials. Whereas it wouldn't work on the stage – it would be cliché. What's interesting about fashion is that it can draw on some, but not all, things from the theatre. Masks can work really well on the catwalk or in editorials, but wouldn't work on the stage – it would be a cliché.

That's right. In fashion it's not about translating emotions directly.

When I see a catwalk show, I often wish the models would stand still for a moment so I could actually view those works of art.

I never want to look at it for too long. I see a snapshot and hide it away inside. I can't recall what I actually go see during the fashion weeks, but a few weeks later some outfits pop into my mind. Just like when you've been really drunk and begin to recall random scenes from the night before. That's what I go by when I write.

You don't use photos?

No, I have clear memories of the things I like. At Vibskov's latest show it was a neoprene sweater with a tribal face that made me think a lot afterwards.

I'd like to direct a catwalk show and have the models recite some lines to add some content to the show.

Fashion designers don't want content. They're scared of it. But you're from a generation where clothes were very political and laden with messages.

Yes. There was way more conformity in society in the 1960s, but clothes were a rebellion



Chris Pedersen Born 1977. Former editor-in-chief of Cover Man magazine. Reports on style and fashion for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

Kirsten Dehlholm Born 1945. Co-founded the theatre troupe Billedstoffteateret in 1977; Artistic director at Hotel Pro Forma since 1985.

against convention. These demonstrations of rebellion then turned into fashion and were commercially exploited at an increasingly rapid pace.

When I went to New York in the 1990s to go clubbing, everyone dressed up in creative costumes. Now people go to parties looking like they just had coffee at some posh café. Something has happened in the past five to ten years. Much of the wildness and hedonism has been replaced by neatness.

At the same time, fashion has been getting better. Look at the Danish catwalks: better design, more art on the catwalk than there ever was.

Henrik and Stine Goya were the first to do that, also Bettina Bakdal, and Baum & Pferdgarten in their early years. It was a small scene of very experimental designers.

And there are even more of those now.

Yes, Wali is a good example. But how are all of these young designers supposed to survive? They can't all boil down their style to a printed sweater and a pair of jeans. The younger generations seem to be more daring in their style, but I don't know if they can afford Wali's stuff.

Maybe not.

Good taste is kind of suffocating here in Scandinavia. Danish design is defined by timelessness in line with our proud furniture tradition. Fine, because furniture shouldn't be shuffled around too often, whereas clothing has much more flexibility. But when the ideal for fashion is measured by the Arne Jacobsen paradigm, it gets really boring, like €100 black t-shirts.

It must be maddening to do at least two collections per year, plus everything else.

How long do you spend producing a play?

Three to four years. I'm so slow. This summer I'm producing a three-part Rachmaninov opera at La Monnaie in Brussels, one of the finest opera houses in Europe. I'm collaborating with Manon Kündig, a Swiss female designer who does prints for Prada. She doesn't like fashion, which is why she's so great at what she does. I usually have two or three large projects simultaneously in the works, and then comes the rest of my work. I'm very proud of what Hotel Pro Forma has achieved and I want to emphasize that the final result is always the product of a group effort. It's not just about me.