



Robert Rodriguez: All Grown Up

From relaxed days to red-carpet soirées, this starlet favorite has you covered—beautifully

by **JILL JOHNSON** photographs by **STUART PETTICAN**

IT'S AN AMERICAN-DREAM STORY. At the age of four, a boy moves with his family from Cuba to Miami. After school he works at his mother's clothing factory sewing shirt collars, and now his name is on the labels of dresses flouncing down red carpets and on the Council of Fashion Designers of America's members' list.

"My mother gave me a book about Christian Dior when I was a young boy—it was my bible," says Robert Rodriguez. "I loved art. I was always sketching. I thought, I need to start sketching because I can't sew shirt collars all my life!" He chuckles. "When I turned eighteen, I moved to New York. I attended FIT."

As a student Rodriguez won the prestigious Critics Award for Best Designer of the Year. He graduated in 1986 and, fortuitously, landed his first job at Christian Dior. "I guess it was meant to be!" he says. After moving to L.A., Rodriguez parlayed his talent and the craftsmanship he learned at Dior into his own line. He and business partner Nicola Guarna launched the sophisticated and sexy Robert Rodriguez collection in 2003.

With clients running the gamut from Scarlett Johansson to Oprah Winfrey, Robert Rodriguez designs for all ages, but he doesn't do matronly. His specialty is more va-va-voom (think Kim and Kourtney Kardashian, Eva Longoria, Angelina Jolie, Heidi Klum). For the more understated

Connecticut woman, the timing couldn't be better. Rodriguez's spring line ushers in "the return of femininity, soft fabrics, clothes that are not so structured," he says. "There are beautiful tailored suits—suits are coming back. The white pantsuit was a big item for us. We also did lots of colorful prints and embellishments."

Rodriguez lists architecture, the arts, nature and travel among his sources of inspiration, but for spring 2011, '70s glam fueled his creations. He elaborates: "It's

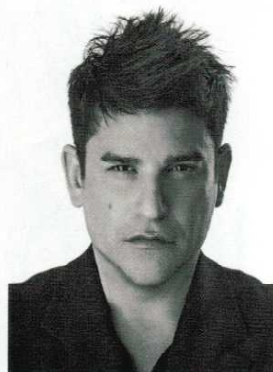
the return of the disco times, Studio 54—long maxi dresses and skirts, lots of gold." The designer's favorite items include "an amazing wide-leg pleated pant, the maxi dresses, the leather pieces and beaded '70s-inspired pieces."

"The women in Fairfield County are very sophisticated. For them, there are a lot of polished pieces in the collection." Rodriguez

also imagines "the wide-leg pant with a tee or little cashmere sweater."

Maria Casabianca, who opened the Soma boutique in Westport last June, envisioned her customer in Robert Rodriguez from day one. "I started by carrying his black stretch pants and white jeans. These might sound ordinary but they are far from it. Because he uses amazing fabric, the 'basic' black pant can be worn for day or evening. They are superchic and very comfortable."

Maria, also an FIT graduate, says, "The collection really speaks to a woman who



doesn't want to dress like her teenage daughter. Most of my clients are very health-conscious and fit. They want to wear clothes that are flattering and sexy without being vulgar. Robert Rodriguez fits the bill perfectly." This spring Soma will add the designer's lower-priced Robbi & Nikki line, which Rodriguez describes as "a younger, relaxed, weekend-wear collection."

Robert Rodriguez also has a Black Label collection featuring evening wear, and in 2009 he launched a jewelry line. Each necklace has the appearance of several different necklaces stacked together: a tangle of black and red strands of looped glass accented by gunmetal chains, for example. These unusual, eye-catching accessories are priced in the \$200 to \$300 range, as are most Robert Rodriguez blouses.

The line is known for quality fabrics and embellishments, and artisans sew the hand-beaded tops. "He does unique, fabulous blouses," comments personal shopper Jennifer Lau. Celebrating his roots and Hispanic Heritage Month, last fall Rodriguez teamed up with Nordstrom to design a shirt, with profits from sales benefiting a program for Latina adolescents. It was no standard tee. Using Spanish flamenco dancing as inspiration, Rodriguez created a draped silhouette with a black lace overlay and a flurry of feathers adorning one shoulder.

What's ahead for the guy who once sewed shirt collars? In the short-term, a '60s inspired fall collection. In the long term: "I'm looking forward to building the brand even more," says Rodriguez, who's a youthful forty-six. "I'd like to expand into different categories: shoes, handbags, maybe a men's collections, [my own] stores." He was "totally blown away" by his induction into the CFDA last year. "I was excited, humbled, very honored," says Rodriguez. "I feel good about my career and where I am. I'm in a very good place." ●

Robert Rodriguez Collection is available at Saks Fifth Avenue. Robbi & Nikki is available at Lord & Taylor, Suzie Cream Cheese, Soma, Pastiche and Togs. Visit robertrodriguezcollection.com

