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Fashion designer Valentino Garavani, subject of Matt Tyrnauer's "Valentino, The Last Emperor," surrounded by several of his trademark red gowns.

“The Last Emperor” explores Valentino’s reign

A reviewer finds new documentary to be lacking depth but oh, the gowns...

By Maria Garcia

In these recessionary times, when even the Oscar red carpet lacked the glamour of previous years, nostalgia seems inevitable. “Valentino: The Last Emperor” is an eulogy to a bygone era of haute couture which the iconic Italian designer epitomizes. Valentino, who retired last year, and his longtime partner, Giancarlo Giammetti, are gilded figures of the beau-monde: Everything about their lives is excessive and overwrought, yet novice director Matt Tyrnauer is smitten. He’s made a documentary from the perspective of an apprentice who continually surrenders control to the skin-deep subjects of his

affection—and sometimes to the dogs. Valentino’s six pugs and Giammetti take turns stealing the show, while Valentino himself remains enigmatic.

There are the gowns, the true measure of the couturier, and we do get to see many of them since part of the documentary is devoted to the extravagant three-day celebration of Valentino’s 45th anniversary in the business. They’re displayed, rather awkwardly, in Rome’s Ara Pacis Museum as part of the festivities, and Tyrnauer was there for the hanging of the show. What we don’t get is perspective: For most of us, Valentino’s gowns are museum pieces, part of the costume collection at the Metropolitan, so understanding what differentiates them from other beautiful couture gowns—costing tens of thousands of dollars—would help to explain Valentino’s longevity.

Despite two years spent with his subjects and 250 hours of raw footage, Tyrnauer’s dilettante approach to documentary storytelling fails to depict the essence of Valentino’s art, which is the process that begins with inspiration, and continues to conception and fabrication. The film opens with the designer’s 2007 spring prêt-à-porter show and then ►



Director Matt Tyrnauer (left) with his subject, fashion designer Valentino Garavani.



Fashion designer Valentino Garavani at a photo call for his 40th Anniversary at Ara Pacis in Rome.

shifts, awkwardly, to the year before, when Valentino is preparing the line. Brief sequences provide a glimpse of how the gowns are made: For instance, we see the couturier draping a nude model with “Valentino red” silk chiffon, and sketching at a cluttered desk, the pugs occupying every inch of space below him. Valentino then discusses the red gown with his charismatic head seamstress Antoinette de Angelis, but afterward, in sequences with the thirty-five seamstresses, we don’t witness the sewing of that particular gown, nor the complete process employed to make any of the dresses.

Walter Veltroni, a politician and the former mayor of Rome once said: “There is the Pope, and there is Valentino. In this city, I don’t know who else is as famous.” Valentino, named for the Italian silent screen star, is not Roman by birth—he was born in Voghera, not far from Milan, in 1932, and knew early on his purpose in life. In the documentary, he says that as a boy, he watched Hollywood movies, and dreamed of dressing their female stars. Valentino first learned his trade from an aunt, and at 17, went to Paris to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He then apprenticed with legendary couturiers Jean Dessès (in 2001, Renee Zellweger wore a yellow vintage Dessès to the Oscars) and Guy Laroche. In 1959, with financing from his parents, Valentino opened his own atelier on the Via Condotti in Rome. In 1960, he met Giammetti, who was then an architecture student.

By the time Valentino had his breakout show in 1962, and began to dress American socialites like Babe Paley, he and Giammetti had formed the company that bore his name. Valentino was among the first couturiers to design “ready to wear” collections, and the first to open boutiques around the world in the 1960s and 1970s. Jacqueline Kennedy cemented Valentino’s international reputation when she ordered a custom-designed line of black suits and dresses for the year she spent in mourning for her husband, President Kennedy. Valentino dressed Elizabeth Taylor—who was wearing a Valentino the first time she met Richard Burton—among many other stars and aristocrats, and in 1967 won fashion’s coveted Neiman Marcus Award. In 2005,

France awarded him the *Légion d’Honneur* for his preservation of Wideville, a 17th-century chateau outside Paris, which once belonged to Louise de la Vallière, the mistress of Louis XIV. It’s one of Valentino’s half-dozen residences.

The “last emperor” status Tyrnauer confers on Valentino, and the autonomy the couturier always enjoyed, came at a price, one that is not adequately explained in the documentary. Valentino’s company has been sold three times. Giammetti, who engineered those sales and who is considered a genius in fashion circles, says the designer has no idea what anything costs, hinting at the need for cash to maintain their lifestyle, but he sniffs in denial when asked if Valentino was subject to investor demands. While lamenting the decline of originality and craft in haute couture, Tyrnauer fails to point out that it was Giammetti’s unprecedented methods for running Valentino’s company, and his influence on the industry over the years, that began the push to mass-marketing and branding which now chills the hearts of fashionistas.

As to the classic, dreamy, feminine dresses that are hallmark Valentino, we see them float down the runway, an unchanging aesthetic at work in every piece. The man himself, as the documentary makes apparent, is too thin, too tan and too coiffed, a narcissist who only grudgingly articulates his respect for Giammetti—yet it’s obvious Giammetti adores his former lover. Valentino is right to complain, as he does to Giammetti in one scene, that the filmmakers are not giving him his due. Narcissists may attract people happy to bask in their spotlight, but these attendant stars are hardly to be entrusted with biography, and Matt Tyrnauer—his production company is, ironically, called Acolyte Films—is no exception. The only thing Tyrnauer got right was the music, drawn mostly from Nino Rota, the great Milanese composer best-known for scoring the films of Fellini and Francis Ford Coppola. No doubt “Valentino: The Last Emperor” will strike a chord with audiences nostalgic for “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” and with anyone who imagines they will one day dress the stars. ▲