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Australia's queen of the KAFTAN has built an EMPIRE from her VIBRANT designs. But it took a MELTDOWN and discovery of MEDITATION to build her up stronger than EVER.

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT

A kaftan is a wearable contradiction. Aloof, yet alluring. Sophisticated, yet playful. Exotic, yet homely. It's as commonplace on the runway as it is on the beach. And while it wafts along the currents of contemporary fashion, its origins are ancient, with countless iterations flowing throughout history. Christian Dior dabbled in versions of the classic garment in the '50s, as did Yves Saint Laurent in the '60s. And now, Australian designer Camilla Franks is catapulting this symbol of breezy liberation far into the future.

The iconic, vibrant patterns sold by her namesake company, Camilla, dance their way across resort wear, ready-to-wear, homewares and accessories inspired by the sumptuous spoils of her global wanderings. She has 19 retail stores in Australia, around 700 wholesaler accounts across 56 countries, and employs more than 150 staff. Oprah and Beyoncé lead the procession of her devoted, silk-draped celebrity clients and – fuelled in part by robberies (in which nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of stock was stolen during two weeks in 2012) – there's even a black market for Camilla's wares. Still, Camilla remains for the everywoman.

"I wasn't really accepted in the world of fashion at the beginning, but I've never followed trends or tried to conform to how a fashion designer should be – where's the authenticity in that?" says Camilla. "I've kept my designs true to the concept of inclusiveness and acceptance, and everyone is welcome, so people feel freedom, they feel joy."

Bursting onto the scene at Sydney's Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in 2004, the then 26-year-old Camilla came as she was – with itchy feet for travel, zero fashion experience and a kaftan concept. Thirteen years, and a multi-million-dollar empire later, she ponders the somewhat obvious question: Isn't it hard, as a nobody, to launch at fashion week?

"No. Because I don't really take no for an answer," she replies, point-blank.

"I was petrified, but I love that saying, 'Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen'," she says, borrowing the words of Brené Brown. "I just threw myself out there back in the day. I was relentless and persistent and wore my heart on my sleeve. If you really work hard and put yourself out there, magic happens. It just does."

Launching in a spectacularly theatrical fashion – with an opera she choreographed and directed herself, no less – her meticulously hand-embellished designs flattered women with curves, pregnant women, young girls and ladies in their seventies. >

CAMILLA FRANKS

CAMILLA WEARS: FROM RIO WITH LOVE COLLECTION, AVAILABLE FROM JULY 5 CAMILLA.COM / PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW COWEN / HAIR: JULIANA MARGS / LOCATION: CALABASH BAY LODGE, AVAILABLE TO BOOK ON AIRBNB.COM.AU

“Unfortunately, with fashion, sometimes, comes ageism and shapeism, which naturally leads women to feel intimidated and disempowered to express themselves,” says Camilla. So, early in her business career, she hosted an in-house private shopping session for women who didn’t feel comfortable in retail stores. “I celebrated all women, and I don’t think the fashion industry had really seen fashion celebrated like that. No one in the industry knew of me, so it was important that I stayed authentic to who I was. I did it my way.”

Raised in the harbourside Sydney suburb of Watson’s Bay, Camilla’s father was an architect and artist, her mother a model, fashion stylist and buyer. And Camilla soon learnt that creativity is boundless. “It really has no rules and it never really should.”

She danced from an early age and dabbled with her own events company before graduating from high school – upon which she worked as a TV producer under Aussie advertising magnate John Singleton, and then as a music video producer overseas. “Part of being a producer is never being afraid to challenge – this experience came into play [later] when I was managing deadlines and budgets and negotiating with suppliers, especially off the beaten track in India or China.”

Camilla even worked as an actor for a short time and that’s when she found her true calling – though it wasn’t her skills on the stage (“To be honest, I wasn’t the best actress”), as much as what she wore on stage that sealed her fate.

“I’d go to markets and buy vintage fabrics and antique saris, and started to make my own rehearsal gear,” she says. (She inherited her bohemian style from her kaftan-, kimono- and headscarf-wearing mother and grandmother.)

“People in the fashion industry started calling me, asking if they could come to my house to buy some of these unique,

I just THREW myself out there back in the day. I was RELENTLESS and PERSISTENT and wore my heart on my sleeve. If you REALLY work hard and put YOURSELF out there, MAGIC happens.

one-off pieces. So that’s how it all began, and I thought, ‘Well, this looks easy!’,” she laughs.

Camilla took a loan from her parents (which she paid back within her first season) and adopted an attitude similar to Richard Branson’s “screw it, let’s do it” approach in taking the plunge.

“If I knew what was involved with growing this business, I wouldn’t have even started,” the designer says. “I threw myself into a world I knew absolutely nothing about – I was naive – but this only helped me in pushing industry boundaries that I didn’t know existed.”

Shortly after her dazzling launch, leading Australian department store David Jones asked to view her collection. “I had no idea what line books, margins or RRP’s were,” says Camilla, who showed her luxury kaftans – that sell for around AU\$500-\$700 – on a mannequin named Shelly who was missing most of her fingers.

David Jones did decide to stock her first collection, but Camilla says the department store worried she’d be a one-hit-wonder. (For the record, Camilla is currently one of their best-performing fashion brands.)

“I believed in my baby with my whole heart, and I knew she’d continue to flourish and grow, but I had to work hard to prove them wrong. You can’t just sit there and rely on your first collection. You’ve got to evolve, you’ve got to develop, you’ve got to be better.”

The demand from David Jones sent her to Hong Kong and India in search of suppliers, where she faced the challenge of meeting minimum order quantities. “It’s a huge roadblock when you want to develop and grow creatively, because some of the new categories or new looks and feels don’t really take off for a while. So to

get around this, still today, I have to sell them the Camilla dream. I only really worked with suppliers who believed in my vision and wanted to join this crazy ride of mine.”

She sat on excess stock just to meet minimum production orders. “I’m not going to lie, it wasn’t easy. But it only lasts for a certain amount of years. You get through.” >





Over time, Camilla has formed a close connection with India, where she now has a factory, company apartment, 10 rescue dogs and a “dream team” that manufactures around 80 per cent of her label. “In the early days I’d travel there in hopes of finding local artisans dedicated to their craft to help me realise my creative vision,” she says. “And somewhere along the line I met my angels – the husband-and-wife team [and now business partners] that were as passionate about my brand as I was.”

Now, every garment is hand cut and every print is placed by hand, in factories in India, Australia and sometimes China. But each season – and every inch of print that graces her creations – starts with Camilla and her head designer Jenna Redfern taking to the skies.

“Travel does that really special thing to your soul that nothing else can. It strips you back, pushes you out of your comfort zone and forces you into the unknown. I find that’s when we create our best work,” says Camilla.

April of this year saw the unveiling of a capsule collection in partnership with Dubai Tourism, inspired by the crafts, calligraphy, shisha pipes and spices of the city. Not long before, Camilla traversed the mountainous regions of China to learn from batik artisans in order to create her striking Chinese Whispers collection. And in July 2017, she’ll unveil her latest collection, From Rio With Love, which has a few more tailored pieces peppered among her iconic flowing kaftans, all inspired by her Brazilian travels.

“We often don’t speak the same language, but we share a common language through textiles, sound, food experiences, colour experiences, beading and dance. And it connects us. I immerse myself into these worlds,” she says.

Returning home with 40,000 to 50,000 photos, souvenirs and fabric swatches, the hard work – around 20 months of it, from inspiration to collection launch – begins. “We have a huge design space in our office that becomes a working canvas with the textiles, the clothes, the photographs, the rugs, the pots... whatever I’ve brought back. We’ll often just sit late into the night, on the floor, surrounded by all these travel treasures – and lots of bottles of wine,” she smiles.

On the topic of her team, Camilla is just as honest. “You can’t do epic sh*t with basic people. And my girls ain’t basic. I only want to work with innovative people who really push creative boundaries and bring fresh and creative and crazy thinking to the table.”

She calls them her ‘tribe’ – and doesn’t use the word lightly, having spent time in remote parts of Kenya with the Pokot tribe and Maasai people during the making of last year’s Jambo Jambo collection.

“We’re all born to connect. It’s how we’re built, how we feel we belong and how we can present our most authentic, imperfect self to the world. So I really want to make sure my tribe are firing on all cylinders and are the best versions of themselves.”

To make that happen, her team does weekly meditations, yoga and training sessions, and Camilla herself has seen a meditation coach a couple of times a week, ever since her “awakening”. In late 2013, having barely shaken five years of recurrent glandular fever and still working up to 17 hours a day, she was struck by Bell’s palsy – a type of facial paralysis often linked to stress.

“My body was crying out for me to slow down, but I didn’t listen. It came to a grand crescendo while I was working on a collection in India. I was in my showroom and all of a sudden I felt this huge pain in my head and I ran to the mirror. My face just felt heavy, and the whole left side of my face had dropped so it looked like I’d had a stroke... I’d spent so many years running like a racehorse and finally had an emotional, spiritual and physical meltdown.”

So came a ruthless reassessing of her behaviours, diet, exercise and relationships. “It was a huge overhaul... I had to come to terms with events that I’d never really properly confronted, out of fear maybe, like my brother Ben passing away.”

Camilla was 17 when her 14-year-old brother tragically fell from the cliffs near their childhood home. “I turned my back on things and hid behind the brand for so long. For me it was a big,

beautiful Band-Aid. But the reward of taking the Band-Aid off was clarity, forgiveness, inner peace and a fountain of self-worth that I’d disconnected with somewhere along the way.

“Nowadays I’m focused on building and nurturing better relationships – healthier relationships – and prioritising ‘Milla time’ by investing in healthier practices like my meditation.” >

TRAVEL does that really SPECIAL thing to your SOUL that nothing else can. It pushes you out of your COMFORT zone.

Camilla, who's now 41, takes a few weeks off each year (this winter she's holidaying with her fiancé in Wales), and has learnt to say 'no'.

"Such a simple behaviour, but such a difficult one when you're a high achiever and a perfectionist, and you feel guilt and shame when you say no. So for me, it was really important that I learnt that. I'm really good at saying no now."

On finding some semblance of balance in the early years of business, the woman who used to steam outfits alone in a hotel room while trying to get her collection into the world says, "It's going to consume every waking moment and, to a point, define who you are. My advice is to just take a step back every so

often to recognise and celebrate how far you've come, and what you've actually built. I didn't do that so much in the beginning. I wish I had."

Camilla's mistakes have been – and still are – a source of wisdom, in particular hiring the wrong people ("I've been hurt a few times in this respect, but some of these people have been my biggest teachers") and trying to do it all herself.

In 2004, when she opened her first store in Bondi, Camilla was a one-woman show. "It was all smoke and mirrors... I was even my own head of finance, which was a bit of a worry." She called on her acting skills, pretending to transfer calls from a single line to her various 'departments' and 'staff'.

"As much as juggling all these gigs drove me into the ground some days, it was an invaluable experience. I think wearing all the hats is something that every new business has to face. It's part of the journey."

So too is rejection. Camilla grew accustomed to it as she tried to get in front of global department stores.

"I used to schlep my collections around the world, on my own, season after season, rejection after rejection. I was turned away a lot. And when you put every part of your heart and soul into something, it's easy to fall into that trap of feeling like a failure, especially when you're a creative.

"Because I had no fashion experience, I was vulnerable, but with the confidence to challenge I pushed on through and got the results."

This year, during fashion week, Camilla hosted a group of global buyers at her Woollahra, Sydney, home "with

I was DRIVEN by passion, obviously, but also a LOT of FEAR – not knowing what the HELL I was doing or WHERE it was going to LEAD.

everyone from Saks to Net-a-Porter and Harvey Nichols. Originally, they didn't buy it off the bat. But they sit there now, years and years into our relationship. Bergdorf Goodman said, 'I remember when you used to beat on our door... It's crazy to think if you weren't fearless and persistent all those years ago, and kept coming back to us, the brand wouldn't be there.'"

In spite of the setbacks, Camilla has enjoyed "a pretty steady rise" of late, with her annual growth now sitting at 30 per cent. "International is where our vision and strategy lies now," she says, adding that they're looking at more categories. Camilla's renewed push into the US – which currently accounts for 50 per cent of sales – will start with her own store in LA, and she also has an eye on Europe.

With hindsight, Camilla wishes she could "travel back in time and grab that naive, barefoot girl in Bondi Beach by her shoulders and tell her what a crazy journey she's about to undertake". Her highlights include stripping down to her knickers when modelling half of her Paddington store for Beyoncé (who walked out with 40 pieces), and downing tequila shots with Oprah (who wore Camilla in front of the Sydney Opera House, causing their website to crash, the item selling out within 48 hours, and having to go back into production).

"I was driven by passion, obviously, but also a lot of fear – not knowing what the hell I was doing or where it was going to lead. And never in my wildest dreams

did I imagine my baby would boom the way she has."

For now, a Camilla hotel in the South of France is one fancy she's flirting with, but the developments she's most passionate about are charitable.

She recently became an ambassador for The Hunger Project, donates AU\$1 to charity from every item she sells via platform I Equal Change (so far raising nearly AU\$27,000 for numerous causes including Australia's Food Bank), and published a coffee table book – the profits of which built a textiles school for women in Laos. "Now I want to take that same concept into my sacred home, India," says Camilla who, on a recent trip to Delhi, tried to help a woman being abused on the streets.

"Enough is enough. It's time to drive forward with our social and spiritual responsibilities and facilitate the power to change. Our tribe extends far beyond the walls of Camilla. We are every woman and must stand together to protect and empower whoever and wherever she is." ■

