

FASHION FOCUS CHICAGO -- "MARIO, MAKE ME A MODEL"

Brittany Lawler



Fashion Focus Chicago celebrates the seventh annual style extravaganza, which features some of the Chicago's top designers and while showcasing runway shows in Millennium Park as well as events throughout the city. On Wednesday, October 19, Mario Tricoli teamed up with Vitaminwater and presented *InspireDesign*, which is the grand finale to the Mario, Make Me a Model contest. The Mario Tricoli fashion show took place in the Millennium Park Tent at the Chase Promenade. The week's events were coordinated and directed by the Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture, as well as the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

Chicago's flourishing fashion industry is displaying the season's latest trends and promoting local Chicago designers. The night's event showed five designers' lines including Reddoll, by Tatyana Merenyuk. A Chicago native that dreams of one day showing at New York Fashion week. "I live in New York right now and that definitely inspired my new collection. I think it has more grown up pieces and it could be worn by more mature women," said Reddoll designer Tatyana Merenyuk.

Mario, Make Me A Model's fashion show producer Lisa Marie McComb selected the designers based on specific criteria, including—whether they were Chicago based; available in boutiques with a record of production and delivery; in addition to looking for a fresh mix of styles, so there would be no repetition among the segments. And finally she interviewed the designers about their collections' inspirations.

Each segment opened with a graphic representation of the designer's focus through an animated depiction of the designer's own sketch; with videos on either side of the runway, showing the designer's main motivation for the collection. "The way I work, things just come together. I don't like to plan too much. I'm a very visual person and I like to work with the fabric to see how it turns out," said Ms. Merenyuk.

Ms. McComb was able to put together a show that individualized each designer, by pairing the different collections with songs that fit design's style. Songs like "Dreamwear," by Gary Wright, which accompanied the designs of Imaginary People by Olivia Shanks and "99 Red Balloons," by Nena, which complimented the classic, feminine silhouettes and playful style of Reddoll.



In addition Mario Tricoli, Vitaminwater and Michigan Avenue magazine brought live music to the stage with a performance from Brandon and Lucas Marx, sons of the legendary singer-song writer Richard Marx.

With a great lineup of exciting and fresh designers, only one was repeated from the 2010 show. "This was my second time showing with Mario. It's an honor to work with them and to show in my hometown. It was really wonderful to be apart of the show," said Ms. Merenyuk.

After the last competition, the five finalists completed their last challenge—walking the runway amongst professional models. "Choosing just one winner was impossible because we had such a diverse, talented group of finalists this year," Mario Tricoli told the audience, as he hugged the each of the contestants. Tricoli, made a personal appearance just to announce the 2011 winners, and revealed Mercedes Johnson

and Junli Park as the winners.

Both winners, new to the world of modeling, went through the two months of strenuous competition and training to become the next Mario, Make Me a Model winner. "It was a lot of fun, but I was really nervous," said winner Ms. Johnson. "We all became a big group of friends. We were all really nice and supportive towards one another."



The five finalists underwent a model transformation—learning to walk and pose, while honing their skills. Since the beginning of the competition in 2008, nearly 2,000 contestants have auditioned for the contest. "I met with six judges and they asked me questions about myself and my appearance—asking can I change your hair? Or your makeup?" said Park.

The program has launched more than half of the modeling careers of those who tried out, which have now gone on to work as professional models. "I still can't believe I won and I can't believe it's over. I feel like it just happened," said winner Ms. Park. "I feel like it's just my beginning."

Fashion Focus Chicago has brought attention to Chicago for being a style-setting city. Chicago fashion is where creativity and innovation meet vibrant design. It's an everlasting motivation that's instilled into the very fabric of fashion. Chicago has produced some of today's most imaginative designers and models. This

year's Fashion Focus Chicago showcased promising models and designers that will undoubtedly grace the pages of "Vogue" magazine or strut down the catwalks of Paris or Milan. "Mario, thanks for making me a model," said Ms. Johnson.