

COMPETITION DRESSING

IT ISN'T AN OLYMPIC SPORT, BUT FOR SLOANE CROSLLEY, STYLE IS A CONTEST

I have lived in New York my entire life but have never been to Brighton Beach. My first legitimate opportunity was the premiere of Lifetime's reality series *Russian Dolls*. One could argue that I still haven't been to Brighton Beach. But how could I resist attending such an exotic affair?

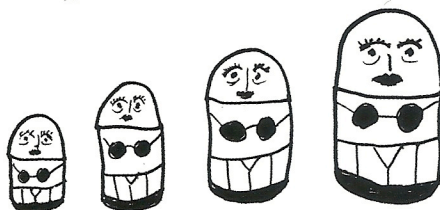
A friend affiliated with the show informed me that a Rolls-Royce Phantom would pick us up in Manhattan and escort us to the famously over-the-top Rasputin nightclub (Vegas plus vodka). She also arranged for said vehicle to pick us up outside Tom & Jerry's, an East Village dive populated by our media peers. There was only one element of the evening I did take quite seriously: What on earth should I wear?

It has long been said that women don't dress for men so much as they dress for each other, but that's not exactly accurate. We do dress up for men and the occasion, but morphing ourselves into stock images of glamour is a simple process—a dress is a single choice, generally dictated by the occasion. If attracting men could be diagrammed like football plays, you'd see an arrow pointing down at a woman's cleavage, one pointing at the heel and another one pointing up at the hemline. That's pretty much it.

Dressing up for men is easy. What women really spend our time, money, closet space and competitive juices on is dressing down for each other. Unless we're going to a Russian nightclub with a red carpet, we operate in an era of casual glamour, of "Oh, this old thing?" Make no mistake: The glitter may be more expensive, less comfortable and more apt to make jaws gape, but that everyday Seventies album-cover chic requires far more effort. You have to know how to layer and clash with flair and how to be an amateur textile engineer when it comes to getting your arms into straps and sleeves that might intimidate the average woman. You have to gauge that right combination of high/low and make it look effortless. Dressing for each other takes time and talent.

But how do you know you're dealing with a truly competitive dresser? An uncomplimented

fashion enthusiast will beam and say "Thanks, it was twenty dollars!" when you compliment her top. That person is your friend. However, you've entered a whole other realm of fashion consciousness when the response goes something like: "This? Oh God, it's from, like, Zara a million years ago" or, even better, "I can't even remember where I got it—Italy somewhere, maybe?" As if to



say: What went so horribly wrong with your aesthetic sensibility that you would deem this exotic or noteworthy? Essentially: My eye is better than your eye. That person came to play.

Competitive dressing once hinged on luxury designers. Now my ideal outfit might include chunky boots, a brightly belted silk jumpsuit, a long sweater or faux-fur vest and one arm covered in cuffs. It's not about a single name brand. Winning the game now is about being chic without a playbook, about leaving the set plays for the boys. Nowadays when I spot a pattern of red lips on a heel (Prada, '05) or bucking horses on a skirt (Chloé, '03), what I'm seeing is an ironic, almost bemused acknowledgment of that time not so long ago when competitive dressing was more up front and less sly.

Of course, just because we've loosened the reins on our label consciousness, that doesn't mean we've been blinded. I know an Isabel Marant dress or a Mulberry handbag when I see one. Still, dressing now is far more about mastering one's natural style to the point where it looks as if we grabbed a pair of fuchsia shorts, threw black tights underneath and finished it off with just the right variety of vintage necklaces on our way out the door. But that effortlessness can be calculated. For certain occasions I put together the most nonchalant outfit I can muster in the most premeditated manner possible. I pick up half the outfit from the dry cleaner, then comb my apartment for very specific accessories. For whom am I doing all this? Both sexes, I suppose. Though the truth is that only the women will appreciate the complexity of it.

It was, therefore, a relief to attend a reality show premiere in Brighton Beach where all hems were hiked up and all necklines pulled down. These women took competitive dressing to a whole new level, doing far more than throwing on a cocktail dress. I've seen Louboutins before, but not like this. These must have been special-ordered. The ladies were made up. While one six-foot-tall blonde in a minidress checked her text messages, I spotted Swarovski crystals covering her eyelids. So, what did I wind up wearing to this understated affair? What I had on that day already: a white tank, a DVF skirt "from, like, a million years ago" and sandals older than dirt. You see, for competitive dressing one has to be in it to win it. And I know when I'm out of my league. **BG**

If attracting men could be diagrammed like football plays, you'd see an arrow pointing down at a woman's cleavage, one pointing at the heel and another one pointing up at the hemline.