

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

DR JEAN VAN SINDEREN LAW, Director of Development and Alumni Relations, in University College Cork, on 5 June 2015, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*, on **DON O'NEILL**

A Sheansailéir agus a mhuintir uilig na hOllscoile,

“Fashion” according to Coco Chanel “is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street, it has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.” Fashion is part of individual and national identities, who and what we are as individuals and who we are as peoples. Fashion design is a form of artistic expression a creative means through which fashion designers respond to social, cultural and political concerns while all the while embracing technological changes. Beyond its primary functions of determining how people look or should look and providing pleasure, it has also served as a catalyst for the economy, uniting the two opposite poles of contemporary culture i.e., the desire for creativity and the need for production.

Fashion involving design and production on one side, and sales and distribution on the other is a key economic, cultural and social force. The fashion industry's current revenue is conservatively estimated at over \$327 Billion worldwide. That's almost three times more than the turnover of Google, Facebook and all the other internet media companies combined. In fashion the globalisation of taste, power and production now plays a major role. There are approximately 20,000 fashion designers in the United States alone. Out of this ever growing number only a handful will make it to the top. Even fewer will become household names. Most fashion designers' creations will not grace the pages of Vogue, In Style or Cosmopolitan nor will they have the opportunity to dress Hollywood's elite. It takes imagination, talent, individuality, uniqueness of thought and expression and dogged determination to not

only survive but to flourish in such a chaotic and competitive landscape and it is in this context and against that background that Don O'Neill has made his name globally as a fashion designer par excellence.

Born in Ballyheigue in North Kerry on June 12th 1966, Don is the eldest son of Anne-Marie (Mim) and Donal O'Neill both natives of Ballyheigue and brother to Deirdre and Patrick. Theirs was a happy childhood. As a very creative and imaginative child, Don loved to play with Lego, was intrigued by airplanes and for a time was convinced he would become a pilot. To this day he is obsessed with Science Fiction. His mother and her clothing inspired him. She was a wonderful seamstress and like many Irish mothers, Mim used to make her children's clothes and also worked beautiful tapestries. In those days, he loved to drape Deirdre's Cindy doll in beautiful fabrics, usually his mother's silk scarves. Don went to secondary school in Causeway comprehensive school in Ballyheigue, there he became a Kerry champion step dancer. As they grew to teenagers, Deirdre was to replace Cindy as Don's fashion victim, using his mother's sewing machine she was to be pinned and prodded and sent forth as a great beauty, but not before she had to pose on the rocks on Ballyheigue beach or by an old church on a mountain behind the village as he pictured his sister wearing his creations.

In 1971 Mim and Donal, opened their home as a bed and breakfast in the summer time. In the sitting room of O'Neills Bed and Breakfast came people from all over the world, connecting the O'Neill's to places not yet travelled. Thus Don's experience of his parents, an experience from which he has learned so much, was of two people spending their energy constantly taking care of other people. His mother exuded love, generosity, humour and warmth. The loss of Mim three years ago in July 2012 at the young age of 69 has left a deep void in all their lives not least in Don's. Theirs was a religious background and Don's faith to this day is intense. His spirituality has been hugely cathartic for him. He believes he is blessed and has been in the right place at the right time. His mother Mim is always at his side.

Encouragement played a key part in Don's childhood, encouragement from his home and acceptance that it was alright for a little boy to be more interested in designing dresses than playing football. At the age of 7 or 8 when Don was in third class in the

Bouleenshere National School in Ballyheigue, Mrs Moynihan, their teacher, asked the children to draw a picture illustrating their “news”, what they had done at the weekend. Don drew a picture of his family in their car driving up a hill to their grandmother’s house, they were going to “Nans”. Mrs Moynihan picked up his picture, held it up to the class in admiration and said “Don O’Neill is a great artist”. Don wrote to Mrs Moynihan almost 30 years later to tell her how much of a difference that comment had made to him and to thank her. Let us never underestimate the value of good teaching and of encouragement.

As a teenager Don was challenged coming to terms with his sexuality. When handed the book on the facts of life he eagerly perused it to see would he find a chapter which would help him understand his feelings, there was no such chapter and instead he prayed to be cured. Angels in my Hair, by Lorna Byrne, a writer he greatly admires, and who is here today has been a great source of comfort to Don explaining that God already knows which of his children will be lesbian or gay at conception. This is part of their life path and he loves them as much as everyone else.

Having completed his leaving cert, at age 16 Don set off to study art at the Crawford School of Art here in Cork but was so homesick that he dropped out after three months. He then enrolled in a cookery school in Dublin, winning prizes there and appearing on his first magazine front cover not as a fashion designer but as a chef. However his cookery books bore not new recipes in the margins but sketches of evening gowns. At that time he won a fashion competition which gave him free tuition in the Barbara Bourke College of Fashion in Dublin. He graduated with distinction before moving to London to apprentice with the famous British fashion designer Gina Fratini, Royal couturier and fabled ball gown designer.

His desire to succeed as a fashion designer drew him to Paris where Christian Dior and Christian Lacroix offered him internships for the winter of 1993. Don chose to work with Lacroix who was exceptionally kind to him and generous in the extreme with his advice. Don does not believe he has had “failures” per se but he does have regrets which he shares generously with young people. Of that time, Don regrets that he did not spend more time with the seamstresses with their decades of experience

“les petits mains” as he calls them, watching them at work constructing garments and in so doing honing his craft. He advises all young people to use those experiences and to not waste valuable time. Don won a coveted Morrison visa and moved to New York in 1993. Christian Lacroix wrote him letters of introduction to the US fashion world.

However Earlier that year as Don stitched together costumes for the Baroque Opera “Phaeton” created for the re-opening of “The Opera de Lyon”, a young French man by the name of Pascal Guillerme was playing the roll of Phaeton, the Sun God. Don fell in love with him over the month of working in the Theatre de Genvilliers and on April 28th 1993, they had their first date. Their fate was sealed. We welcome Pascal, Dons fiancée here today. Through all these years, Pascal has been by Dons side and Don by Pascals. Pascal, an accomplished floral designer with his own successful business called “Fleurs de Pascal” helps produce the runway shows and his creations play an enormous part of the visual and auditory virtuosity that is a Don O’Neill fashion show. For the last three years those shows have been the highlight of the Rose of Tralee festival when he brings 30 gowns from New York and presents a spectacle which is over-subscribed each year, many say it is the highlight of the festivities. Pascal also makes sure that their home in Brooklyn is a place of refuge, love and solace. In an email to me on April 22nd 2015 Don wrote “To love, to honor, to hold, in sickness and in health without ever taking these vows, Pascal epitomizes them. There is no country, no state, no law that can decree that this is not love or not valid”. On May 22nd, 2015 Ireland opened its heart, we said Yes to marriage equality....

On arrival in New York with Pascal, he was hired by the American evening wear designer Carmen Marc Valvo who was the owner and creative director of the company and thus Don had the opportunity to indulge his creativity without bearing the responsibilities and risks of running a business. He progressed from junior designer to design director and in a ten year period grew the business to a \$20M dollar company. He was making his mark as a sought after fashion designer. In 2005 he got a call from the JS Group to head up the Badgley Mischka Platinum Label. Mark Badgley and James Mischka are hailed today as one of the top 10 American designers and as the darlings of the Hollywood set. He was in the role just

three weeks when asked to show his samples to American luxury speciality department store Neiman Marcus. Under severe pressure he created 20 dresses and showed them to the Neiman Marcus buyers from whom he received a standing ovation. It was a surreal experience he recalls. The expectation would be that revenue would be \$2-3M the first season, it was in fact \$9M. Don O'Neill was leading the Badgley Mishka brand to heights where it was never before. He was designing stunning dresses that sold. He recalls seeing Anna Wintour Editor-In-Chief of American Vogue and one of the most influential forces in the fashion world in the front row as he showed his collection, several pieces from which would be worn by Natalie Portman and Nicole Kidman on the covers of some of the most important fashion magazines.

In 2009, for a variety of reasons including the fact that Badgley Miska was now becoming recognized as being Don O'Neill, a decision was taken that he would develop his own label. He would leave a comfortable position and start off again. He chose the name Theia, the Greek goddess from which all light proceeded. Phaeton, the character that Pascal was playing when Don laid eyes on him first, was the grandson of Theia and his name means "the "radiant one". I wonder is there a link.... As the collection opened to rave reviews Lehmann Brothers collapsed, demand for couture dropped significantly, but the business survived, people were supportive as Don had built up meaningful and respectful relationships with the buyers and he was still designing beautiful dresses from evening wear to bridal that were affordable having decided on a price point not costing more than \$2,500. As creative director of Theia, a global brand and a multi-million dollar business, Don's vision is to help women feel confident and glamorous from the inside out. His designs have donned nominees and winners of music, film and television awards, his gowns have graced the red carpet at the Emmys, the Academy Awards, the BAFTAs, the IFTAs, the Golden Globe awards etc. He has featured in the Wall Street Journal, People, In Style, Country living, The Oprah Magazine, Cosmopolitan, Vogue to mention but a few. Oprah Winfrey wore a Theia gold gown to the 2012 Oscars and referred to it as the most comfortable gown she had ever worn. Amongst those who wear his creations are thousands of ordinary women plus the aforementioned Oprah Winfrey, Amy Poehler, Carrie Underwood, Brooke Anderson, Mary McAleese, Priyanka

Chopra, Gabourey Sidibe, Taylor Swift, Chloe Kardashian, Gayle King, Angela Basset, Lisa Rinna, Anne Anderson and the list goes on.

Nature was the greatest or perhaps the most enduring influence on Don. It seems that everything that he creates is connected in some way to nature. In his collections he explores elements of nature particularly light and shape, something about living in harmony with the natural world seems to permeate his designs. He recalls being fascinated by the reflection of the sun on the ocean in Ballyheigue and saw it a magical piece of fabric which he longed to cut with a scissors and make into a sparkling gown. Don attended a Joseph Walsh exhibition at The New York Armory in November 2014 at which he saw the Lumenaria 2, a large scale dining table surfaced with a hand cast translucent amber resin over an ebony black sinuous, undulating wooden base. Having sought approval from Joseph, the Autumn 2015 collection of Don O'Neill is serendipitously inspired by his contemporary designer, fellow country man and graduand Joseph Walsh and thanks to Don's typical generosity I have the pleasure of wearing for this unique occasion a Don O'Neill designed dress inspired by Joseph Walsh.

Don takes nothing for granted. He grapples with self esteem and confidence in the sense that he knows that every show could be his last show, he is only as good as his last dress.

An Irish man, a Kerryman, and perhaps more importantly a Ballyheigue man, Don O'Neill is a celebrated and successful designer of fashion on the world stage. In a career which brings him from Ballyheigue, to Cork, to Dublin, to London, to Paris to New York, he is a role model for aspiring, young designers and signifies what a combination of hard work and creativity can achieve. An inspiration for young men who also like them may have had or are having concerns coming to terms with their sexuality Don and Pascal are a couple who through their love, work and altruism make the lives of those they encounter better.

Yours is a story of creativity, talent, courage, humour, exuberance, perseverance, independence of thought of taking on the difficult and of not leaving fear get in your way. You are a great ambassador for Ireland, a person who through your art

celebrates the inspiration that this country offers, a fashion designer of the highest level but more than this you are a man, a dear friend to many, whose deepest wish is to enable people feel good about themselves and using your talent for design simply as the conduit for this greater energy.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, is a saying which first featured in ancient Greece in the 3rd century. On reflecting on the life and work of Don O'Neill, it is my observation that this saying should be further embroidered "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and in the heart and mind of the beheld".

This is a University which prides itself on a tradition of independent thinking, whose values enable people achieve their true potential. It is a place where we journey to understand identities particularly, Irish identities through scholarship, learning and research while nurturing entrepreneurship, creativity and meaningful relationships. It is thus fitting that this University honours Don O'Neill, the embodiment of these values...

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque universitas!

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.