



The Only One

By Hilton Als

***New Yorker*, 1994**

One night last spring, the fashion editor André Leon Talley attended an all-made nude review at the Gaiety Theatre, on West Forty-sixth Street. He was dressed in a red waist-length military jacket with gold epaulets and black cuffs, black military trousers with a gold stripe down each leg, black patent-leather pumps with grosgrain bows, gray silk socks with black ribbing, white gloves, and a faux-fur muff. Accompanying him, rather like another accessory, was the young English designer John Galliano.

As the driver opened the car door in front of the theatre, Talley, characteristically, issued a directive followed by a question: "I shall expect you here upon my return at once! Lord, child, how am I gonna get out of this car in all this drag?" He did not pause for an answer. He stretched out this long left leg, placed his foot on the sidewalk, and, grabbing the back of the driver's seat, hoisted himself up and out—a maneuver whose inelegance he countered by adjusting his muff with a flourish.

Appearances are significant to André Leon Talley, who seeks always to live up to the grand amalgamation of his three names. He has sienna-brown skin and slightly graying close-cropped hair. He is six feet seven and has large hands and large feet and a barrel chest. He has been described as "a big girl." He is gap-toothed and full-mouthed. His speech combines and old-school Negro syntax, French words (for sardonic emphasis), and a posh British accent. Though a wide audience may know him from his periodic television appearances on CNN and VH1, it is in the world of magazines that he has made his name. Currently the creative director of *Vogue*, formerly the creative director of *HG* and a writer, stylist, and photographer for *Women's Wear Daily*, *Interview*, and the *Times Magazine*. André Leon Talley is, at forty-six, fashion's most voluble arbiter, custodian, and promoter of glamour.

Inside the Gaiety—a small, dark space with a stage, a movie screen, and two tiers of seats—some men sat in various states of undress and arousal while others dozed off quietly. Talley and Galliano stood in the middle of the aisle to the left of the stage and waited for the dancers to appear. Talley was hoping for a "moment." He finds moments in other people's impulses ("I can tell you were about to have a moment"), work ("What Mr. Lagerfeld and I were after in those photographs was a moment"), architecture ("This room could use a certain... moment"), social gatherings ("These people are having a moment"). When the dancers entered, one by one, Talley said, "This is a major moment, child." Swaying to loud disco music

against a backdrop of gold lamé, the young men, who were either nude or partly so, offered the men in the front row a thigh to be touched, a biceps to be rubbed.

“Ooh!” Talley exclaimed. “It’s *nostalgie de la boue*! It’s ‘Dejeuner sur l’Herbe,’ no? Manet. The flesh. The young men. The languorous fall and gall of the flesh to dare itself to fall *on the herbe*.” André Leon Talley came down hard on the word *herbe* as he caught sight of a lavishly tanned young man onstage who was naked except for cowboy boots and, as his smile revealed, a retainer. “What can one do?” Talley moaned. “What can one do with such piquant insouciance? How can one live without the *vitality* of the cowboy boots and teeth and retainers and so forth?”

Before the end of the performance, Talley led Galliano into a room on one side of the theatre, where several other men were waiting for dancers. Upon identifying André Leon Talley as “That fashion man off the TV,” a black drag queen, who wore jeans, a cream-colored halter top, and an upswept hairdo, and sat on the lap of a bespectacled older white man, said, “That’s what I want you to make me feel like, baby, a white woman. A white woman who’s getting out of your Mercedes-Benz and going into Gucci to buy me some new drawers because you wrecked them. Just fabulous.”

“This is charming,” Talley said, calling attention to a makeshift bar with bowls of pretzels and potato chips and fruit punch. “For the guests who have come to pay homage to the breathtaking ability of the personnel.” His muff grazed the top of the potato chips.

The room contained framed photographs from Madonna’s book “Sex,” which depicted scenes of louche S & M violence (Madonna, in an evening dress being abused, nude dancers with collars, being ridden by Daniel de La Falaise in a dinner jacket). The scenes had been enacted and photographed at the Gaiety. “*Miss Ciccone*,” Talley said, with disdain, barely looking at the photographs. “My dear, we do *not* discuss the vulgar.”

In inspecting and appraising his surroundings, André Leon Talley was working—the creative director in pursuit of inspiration. It is the same sort of work he does in the more conventional environs of his working day. At *Vogue*, Talley is many things—art director, stylist, fashion writer, and producer. As a producer, Talley suggests unlikely combinations, hoping for interesting results. Recently, he arranged to have Camilla Nickerson, a young fashion editor at *Vogue* and a proponent of the glamour-misshapen-by-irony look, design a photo spread on Geoffrey Beene, a designer committed to glamour not misshapen by anything. As an art director, Talley from time to time oversees cover shoots, especially those involving celebrities. He tries to insure that the photographer will produce an image that makes both the clothes and the celebrity look appealing and provides enough clear space in the frame for the magazine’s art director to strip in cover lines. At the same time, Talley encourages the celebrity to project the kind of attitude that *Vogue* seeks to promote on its covers: relaxed and elegant but accessible. He does so by acting as both therapist and stylist. He soothes his subjects’ anxieties about the

cover shoot by exclaiming, as he dresses them, that this or that garment has never looked better.

It is in the production of stories he conceives on his own that Talley employs all his talents simultaneously. Before a season's new designer collections are shown to the press, Talley visits various houses to look for recurring motifs, in order to build a story around them. During a recent season, he discerned that two or three collections featured lace. *Vogue* then devised a story based on the mystery of lace, and had Helmut Newton photograph lace gloves, lace boots, and lace bodices in a way that enhanced the mystery. Talley chose which details of the clothes should be photographed. In conjunction with Newton, he also chose the models, the hair-and-makeup people, and the locations.

Talley will sometimes write the text to accompany the fashion spread he has conceived. At other times, he will act simply as a cultural reporter, writing pieces on new designers and choosing the best examples of their work to be photographed. Talley has written on interiors, too, directing the photographer to capture images that complement his text. "My dear, an editor must, *must* be there to fluff the pillows!" he says, explaining his presence at photo shoots.

André Leon Talley's office at *Vogue* in Paris, where he is based, is a high-ceilinged space, painted white, with large windows facing the Boulevard Saint-Germain; it is surprisingly bare, except for two desks and many photographs on the walls, including a large one in color by Karl Lagerfeld of Talley carrying a big fur muff. There Talley will sometimes perform a kind of boss-man theatre—throw papers about, slam telephones down, noisily expel the incompetent. "This is too much. What story do we need to be working on, children? What *story*? Let's get cracking, darlings, on fur. *Fuh, fuh, fuh*. One must set the mood around the *fuh* and the heels, the hair, the skin, the nipples under the *fuh*, the hair around the nipples, the *fuh* clinging to the nipples, sweat, oysters, champagne, *régence*!" He conveys not only dissatisfaction but also the promise that, once he is satisfied, his reflexive endearments ("darling," "child," and so forth) will be heartfelt.

André Leon Talley, in a blue pin-striped suit, walked in his office one day making several demands that could not be met, since his assistant was not there to meet them. That Talley had, an hour before, dismissed his assistant for the day was a fact he chose to ignore. He sat at his desk and began upsetting papers on it—papers that had clearly been left in some order. He then complained about the lack of order. He complained about the lack of a witness to the lack of order. He summoned by intercom a young woman named Georgie Newbery, an assistant in the fashion department, to be such a witness.

"Georgie!" Talley exclaimed as she quietly entered the room. Her eyes were focused on Talley, who, as a result of the attention, seemed to grow larger. "I told Sam never, neva to leave my desk in this state of...disorder! I can't find my papers."

"What papers, André?" Newbery asked.

“The papers, darling! The papers! I need a telephone number on the...papers! Can you believe this, child?” Talley asked of no one in particular. “I need the number of the soiree, darling,” he said, slumping in a caricature of weariness. He covered his face with his hands and moaned. Newbery picked a piece of paper off his assistant’s desk and handed it to him. Talley seemed dissatisfied at having the phone number, the problem solved, the event over. He paused, as if to consider the next event he would create. Looking up at Newbery, Talley said, “Georgie, I need three thousand francs! At *once!*”

André Leon Talley has been the creative director of *Vogue* for six years. During that time, he has seen many looks come and go—the grunge look, the schoolgirl look, the sex-kitten look, the New Romantic look, the reconstituted-hippie look, the athletic-wear-meets-the-street look. In the years I have known him, though, Talley’s own look has consistently been one of rigorous excess. In his way, he has become the last editorial custodian of unfettered glamour, and the only fashion editor who figures at all in the popular imagination. He is the fashion editor who, seemingly sparing no expense for models, clothes, props, photographers, and airplane tickets to far-flung locations—a farm in Wales, a burlesque house on West Forty-sixth—pursues that which the public will perceive, without naming it, as allure.

This pursuit begins in Talley’s Paris apartment, which is situated near the Invalides, where Napoleon is entombed. The apartment is small but rich in talismans of allure: scented candles, flower-patterned draperies that puddle on the floor, a large flower-patterned screen, a Regency bed, books artfully arranged on a table in the vestibule. The walls are covered in beige rice paper. There is a small dark room off the vestibule with a VCR attached to an oversized television; on the walls are a number of drawings by Karl Lagerfeld and a poster-size, black-and-white photograph of a black man’s torso by Annie Leibovitz.

Talley begins telephoning in the morning, often as early as six o’clock, to suss out what might be “the next thing.” When Talley telephones a designer, he may ask, “Darling, have you had a moment?” In an industry notoriously suspicious of language, Talley’s grandiloquence transports the designer into the role of artist. It does so by placing the designer’s work in the realm of the historic: “This collection is more diving than the last, Monsieur Ferree, in that it is a high moment of Grecian simplicity, of fluted skirts in the material of a high rustling megamoment, from room to room, a la the essence of King Louis XV, a la the true spirit of couture!” On the other hand, Talley does not see the work without the frame of commerce around it; in this sense, he is like an art dealer, whose survival is based on an evaluation of the market and how the work at hand will shape the market, or be shaped by it, in future months. When Chanel, Dior, de la Renta, and other couture and ready-to-wear house advertise in *Vogue*, they signal the affinity between their aesthetic and the world that André Leon Talley has created. Designers trust him, and the women’s husbands trust him with their wives. Drawing on this fund of trust, Talley presents, in the pages of *Vogue*, the work of European designers in

an atmosphere or guilt-free exuberance that an American audience, standing in line at the supermarket reading *Vogue*, can trust.

“Magazines are not a Diderot moment of *oeuvre*ness,” Talley says. “They are monthly ventures that should amuse and earn money by showing how kind money can be.” In the stories that Talley has produced for *Vogue* in recent years—“The Armani Edge,” “Feets of Brilliance,” “Which Way Couture?,” and “The Couture Journals,” among others—everything is seduction. Talley’s delicate orchestration and manipulation of the designers and buyers and photographers and editorial staff contributing to his vision are never seen, of course. What matters most to André Leon Talley is the image in his head of a woman looking at the page and imagining herself on it, unaware of all that André Leon Talley has contributed to her imagination.

André Leon Talley says he owes his desire to uphold what he calls “the world of opulence! opulence! opulence! maintenance! maintenance! maintenance!” to the late Diana Vreeland, who was the fashion editor for twenty-five years at *Harper’s Bazaar*, the editor-in-chief of *Vogue* for eight years, and thereafter a special consultant to the Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Institute, where she mounted audacious shows on Balenciaga, the eighteenth-century woman, equestrian fashion, and Yves Saint Laurent. It was during Vreeland’s planning and installation of one such show—“Romantic and Glamorous Hollywood Design,” in 1974—that Talley and Vreeland first met, through the parents of one of his college classmates. He later came to work for her as an unpaid assistant.

Vreeland was the most recognizable person in the fashion industry—indeed, the very image of the fashion editor—with her heavily rouged cheeks and lips, red fingernails, and sleek black hair; her red environments; her pronouncements (bluejeans “are the most beautiful things since the gondola”; Brigitte Bardot’s “lips made Mick Jagger’s lips possible”); her credos (“Of course, you understand I’m looking for the most *far-fetched* perfection”; “There’s nothing more boring than narcissism—the tragedy of being totally...me”); her standards (having her paper money ironed, the soles of her shoes bugged with rhinoceros horn); and her extravagance of vision (photographic emphasis on nudity, drugs, and jewels).

By the time they met, Talley had gradually constructed a self that was recognizably a precursor of the André Leon Talley of today. And its most influential component was the formidable chic of his maternal grandmother. Talley was born in Washington, D.C., and when he was two months old he was sent by his parents to live with his grandmother Bennie Frances Davis, in Durham, North Carolina. “An extraordinary woman with blue hair, like Elsie de Wolfe” is how he describes her. “You know what one fundamental difference between whites and blacks is? If there’s trouble at home for white people, they send the child to a psychiatrist. Black folks just send you to live with Grandma.”

As a teenager, Talley made regular trips to the white section of Durham to buy *Vogue*, and these forays were another significant influence on his development. “My uncles cried ‘Scandal!

Scandal!’ when I said I wanted to grow up to be a fashion editor,” he says. “I discovered so early that the world was *cruel*. My mother didn’t like my clothes. Those white people in Durham were so awful. And there I was, just this lone jigaboo...creature. And fashion in *Vogue* seemed so kind. So *opulently* kind. A perfect image of things. I began to think like an editor when I began to imagine presenting the women I knew in the pages of *Vogue*: my grandmother’s style of perfection in the clothes she made; her version of couture.”

In a snapshot of Talley from his college days, he is sitting with two female friends. What makes him recognizable is not just his physical appearance—the long thin body; the large, vulnerable mouth jutting out from the long, thin face—but also his clothes. Unlike the other students, who are dressed in T-shirts and jeans, Talley wears a blue sweater with short sleeves over a white shirt with long sleeves, a brooch in the shape of a crescent moon, large aviator glasses with yellow lenses, and a blue knit hat. He looks delighted to be wearing these clothes. He looks delighted to be with these women.

Talley earned a B.A. in French literature at North Carolina Central University in 1970. His interest in the world of allure outside his grandmother’s closet, away from Durham, coincided with his interest in French. He says of his discovery that couture was a part of French culture, and that his grandmother practiced her version of it, “You could have knocked me over with a feather! And it was stretching all the way back to the ancien régime darling! Introduced to me by my first French instructor, Miss Cynthia P. Smith, in the fields of Durham, North Carolina! The entire French oeuvre of oldness and awfulness flipping one out into the Belle Époque bodice of the music hall, Toulouse-Lautrec, an atmosphere of decadence, leading us to Josephine Baker and...me!”

Talley’s immersion in French gave him a model to identify with: Baudelaire, on whose work he wrote his master’s thesis, at Brown University in the early seventies. And it was while he was at Brown, liberated by the Baudelairean image of the flaneur, that Talley began to exercise full his penchant for extravagant personal dress. He was known for draping himself in a number of cashmere sweaters. He was known for buying, on his teaching-assistant stipend, Louis Vuitton luggage.

“Obviously, he was not going to teach French,” Dr. Yvonne Cormier, a schoolmate of Talley’s at Brown, says. “André thought it was just good manners to look wonderful. It was a *moral* issue. And his language reflected that. André could never just go to his room and study. He had to *exclaim*, ‘They’ve sent me to this prison! Now I have to go to my chambers and have a moment.’”

After Talley left Brown and completed his stint as a volunteer with Diana Vreeland at the Met, he became known in New York fashion circles for these things: insisting, at his local post office, on the most *beautiful* current stamps and holding up the line until they materialized; serving as a personal shopper for Miles Davis at the request of Davis’s companion, Cicely Tyson; answering the telephone at Andy Warhol’s *Interview*, his capacity as a receptionist, with a jaunty “*Bonjour!*” and taking down messages in purple ink (for bad news) and gold

(good news); wearing a pith helmet and kneesocks in the summer; being referred to by the envious as Queen Kong; becoming friends with the heiress Doris Duke and attending, at her invitation, many of her appearances as a singer with a black gospel choir; overspending on clothes and furnishings and running up personal debts in his habitual effort to live up to the grand amalgamation of his three names.

The late seventies, when André Leon Talley came into his own, is the period when designers like Yves Saint Laurent and Halston produced the clothes that Talley covered at the beginning of his career as a fashion editor at *WWD*, clothes often described as glamorous. It is the period referred to in the clothes being produced now by designers like Marc Jacobs and Anna Sui. "It was a time when I could take Mrs. Vreeland and Lee Radziwill to a LaBelle concert at the Beacon and it wouldn't look like I was about to mug them," Talley says.

Daniela Morera, a correspondent for Italian *Vogue*, has a different recollection. "André was privileged because he was a close friend of Mrs. Vreeland's," she says. "Black people were as segregated in the industry then as they are now. They've always been the don't-get-too-close-darling exotic. André enjoyed a lot of attention from whites because he was ambitious and amusing. He says it wasn't bad, because he didn't know how bad it was for other blacks in the business. He was successful because he wasn't a threat. He'll never be an editor-in-chief. How could America have *that* dictating what the women of America will wear? Or representing them? No matter that André's been the greatest crossover act in the industry for quite some time. Like forever."

Talley's fascination stems, in part, from his being the *only one*. In the media or the arts, the only one is usually male, always somewhat "colored," and almost always gay. His career is based, in varying degrees, on talent, race, nonsexual charisma, and an association with people in power. To all appearances, the only one is a person with power, but is not *the* power. He is not defined but controlled by a professional title, because he believes in the importance of his title and of the power with which it associates him. If he is black, he is a symbol of white anxiety about his presence in the larger world and the guilt such anxiety provokes. Other anxieties preoccupy him: anxieties about salary and prestige and someone else's opinion ultimately being more highly valued than his. He elicits many emotions from his colleagues, friendship and loyalty rarely being among them, since he does not believe in friendship that is innocent of an interest in what his title can do.

Talley is positioned, uniquely, at the intersection of fashion, magazine publishing, television, and high society. He regards his position as a privilege, and he flaunts it. "A large point of his life is *Vogue*," Candy Pratts Price, the magazine's fashion director, says about him. "Which explains the vulnerable, intense moods he goes through when he thinks someone here is against him. We've all been there with those moods of his, and *there* is pretty intense."

Talley's emotional involvement with women rises in part from nostalgia. He seems to project his grandmother's intentions and concerns for him, and Cynthia P. Smith's and Diana

Vreeland's as well, onto his female colleagues at *Vogue*, and he seems to feel spurned when they exercise the independence inherent in a modern-day professional relationship. Often, the results are disastrous. When Talley is in favor, his colleagues adopt him as a totem of editorial success; when his is not, they regard him as a glittering but superfluous accessory. His interest in romance is nostalgic, too. For him, romance is not about ending his loneliness; rather, it flows from the idea, expounded by Baudelaire, that love is never truly attained, only yearned for. (Talley's contemporary version of this: "No man, child," he might say, telephoning from his apartment in Paris. "No man. Just another video evening alone for the child of culture.") Talley's romantic yearnings are melancholic: he is susceptible to the prolonged, unrequited "crush" but is immune to involvement. He avoids engaging men he is attracted to. Generally, he is attracted to men who avoid him. He avoids the potential rejection and hurt that are invariable aspects of romantic love. Going to a gay bar with Talley, then, is an odd experience. In gay bars, as a rule, all bets are off: everyone is the same as everyone else because everyone is after the same thing. In a sense, the common pursuit divests everyone present of his title. Talley rarely speaks to anyone in this sort of environment. Mostly, he glowers at men he finds appealing and lays the blame for their lack of immediate interest in him on racism, or on the sexually paranoid environment that AIDS has fostered everywhere. Perhaps he just prefers the imager of love made familiar by fashion magazines: images of the subject exhausted by "feeling," undone by crush, recuperating in an atmosphere of glamour and allure.

Once, in New York, I had dinner with Talley and his friend the comedian Sandra Bernhard. She asked me how long I had known André. I said, "I fell in love with him in Paris," There was silence—a silence that André did not fill with being pleased at or made shy by my comment. He grew large in his seat. He grew very dark and angry. And then he exclaimed, with great force, "You did not fall in love with me! You were in love with Paris! It was all the fabulous things I showed you in Paris! Lagerfeld's house! Dior! It wasn't me! It wasn't! It was Paris!" When I first met Talley, I did not tell him that my interest in him was based in part on what other blacks in the fashion industry had said about him, on the way they had pointed him out as the only one. Blacks in the fashion industry have spoken of Talley with varying degrees of reverence, envy, and mistrust (which is how non-blacks in the fashion industry have spoken of him as well). One black American designer has called André Leon Talley "a fool. He'll only help those kids—designers like Galliano—if they've got social juice, if they're liked by socialites, the women who tell André what to do." Talley complains about people who underestimate the difficulty of his position. "It's exhausting to be the only one with the access, the influence, to prevent the children from looking like jigaboos in the magazine—when they do appear in the magazine. It's lonely."

Talley gave a luncheon in Paris a few years ago to celebrate the couture season's start. The people he welcomed to the luncheon—held in the Café Flore's private dining room, on the

second floor—including Kenneth Jay Lane, a jewelry designer; Inès de la Fressange, a former Chanel model and spokesperson; Joe Eula, a fashion illustrator; Roxanne Lowitt, a photographer; and Maxime de la Falaise, a fashion doyenne, and her daughter, LouLou, the Yves Saint Laurent muse.

Following shirred eggs and many bottles of wine, Roxanne Lowitt, her black hair and black Chinese jacket a blur of organization, invited the guests to assemble in order to be photographed. LouLou de la Falaise removed an ancient huge round compact from her purse and began to powder her nose as her mother sat in readiness. Joe Eula ignored Lowitt and continued drinking. Talley got up from his seat to sit near Maxime de la Falaise, who had admired a large turquoise ring he wore.

“Look, LouLou!” Talley shouted. “The color of this ring is divine, no? Just like the stone you gave me!”

“What?” LouLou de La Falaise asked, barely disguising her boredom.

“This ring, child. Just like the stone you gave me, no?”

LouLou de La Falaise did not respond. She nodded toward Roxanne Lowitt, and Lowitt instructed her to stand behind Maxime de La Falaise and Talley. LouLou de La Falaise said, “I will stand there only if André tries not to look like such a nigger dandy.”

Several people laughed, loudly. None louder than André Leon Talley. But it seemed to me that a couple of things happened before he started laughing: he shuttered his eyes, his grin grew larger, and his back went rigid, as he saw his belief in the durability of glamour and allure shatter before him in a million glistening bits. Talley attempted to pick those pieces up. He sighed, then stood and said, “Come on, children. Let’s seesomething. Let’s visit the house of Galliano.”