The Barmy One

Vivienne Westwood in a brilliant world of her own.

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Last month in Milan, Dora Swire, a small, fit 83-year-old, talked of how her daughter really hadn't changed much over the years. 'When she was a girl she was like she is now, only small,' she observed. 'She's become cleverer. She was always stubborn, inquisitive and bossy. I have two other children, just as important'.

Her other children are not quite as famous or influential as Vivienne Westwood, 57, and they do not invite their mother to catwalk shows or perfume launches. Indeed that very morning Dora Swire had sat among fashion buyers and press as Westwood unveiled next year's spring/summer menswear collection, the usual dynamite parade of grandeur, farce and painted flesh inspired by paganism, the rustic idyll, Aristotle and the commedia dell'arte: in other words, men with very big penises wore straw shirts and jerkins with holes in.

Dora Swire loved it all, and it helped her forget that British Airways had lost all her own clothes the previous day. Consequently she was wearing a Westwood-branded teeshirt, and talked of how she'd like to wear more of her daughter's gear but was now too fat.

She sounded like Vivienne: Derbyshire vowels pushed as flat as they go, and then pushed softly through a slightly mean mouth – a good combination for ticking people off. She said she wished people would just forget about the Sex Pistols and her 'rubberwear for the office', and would remember that her daughter had done things since, by which she meant pirate gear, ethnic wear, the mini-crini, the rocking-horse shoe, the immaculate tartans and tweeds, the kilts and ballgowns – creations that now hang in public galleries and have been ripped off by any designer with even half a sense of what's good for them.

Throughout the amassing of all these collections, the story with Westwood is underwritten by three subplots: the first suggests that she is a genius at design and a dunce at business; the second that she has been heavily reliant on the creativity of men; and the third advances the view that she is totally nuts. None of these are mutually exclusive; all of them may be useful in understanding the complexities of a beautifully created image and the construction of some quite breathtaking clothes.

'Oh, the BARMY one,' exclaims an editor on a women's fashion magazine who nonetheless appreciates the value to her employers of Westwood's meagre advertising budget. 'She's a gently tragic character. She lives in this extraordinary bubble of self-regard. Her shows are not so much of a must-see anymore. She's very talented, but very self-indulgent. There is a certain irritation with her just always doing the same thing.'

'Oh, everybody looks up to her as a total genius,' says the model Susie Bick, who frequently works for Westwood. 'I know from Bella Freud, Azzedine

Alaia and Valentino that they all love her clothes. Versace was a huge fan, and they were all keen to help her when she was on the way up. Other designers realise that Vivienne always goes first, and opens up the doors for everyone else.' Bick says she is addicted to Westwood's clothes, for they make her legs look longer and her breasts bigger, and she is empowered by their femininity.
'She's very intimidating, that's for sure,' says David Collins, the architect who designed the Westwood shops in Japan. 'I felt if I put one foot wrong verbally I would feel such a fool. Usually when I meet clients I'm constantly interrupting, but I found with Vivienne that she bodes no interruptions. I found that I had to concentrate very hard, like I was in a lecture. In the same way that she is not going to make her clothing for you easy, she is also not going to make her thought processes for you easy.'
'She's an auto-didact,' says the writer Jon Savage, who chronicled her influence on punk in his book England's Dreaming. 'When she does interviews she's got the thing that she knows that she wants to say, and she says it, and if you ask her to do anything else she gets thrown, and it's pretty difficult.'

In Milan, Westwood has many things she wants to say. We meet in the ornate drawing room that had housed her show a few hours earlier. 'Nice building,' I say. 'I can pinpoint it to the late 18th century from the paintings up there,' Westwood says, looking up at the ceiling. 'Probably 1790.'
Over the past three decades Westwood has done more than design clothes; she has designed her mind. It is not possible to have a conversation with her without her sedulous learning spilling out in unusual forms, so that at times she sounds like a dotty museum guide, or a schoolgirl drunk on Cole's Notes. 'Neckties are the first thing to mention,' she says. 'The necktie has always been something that has always been, expresses very much, it's near to the face, enhancing the face, and it's the Christmas tree lights going the other way, or it's the Christmas tree switch light probably coming from the man's crotch, quite honestly.' Theories tick in her head like little mines. She is drinking warm water. 'It's not to do with sex, but the form of him, it's the focus of the way he's been constructed. In a lady it's the waist. Anyway, so where was I? Oh the necktie – it's very often been seen as a sublimation of his noble soul, you know?'
Her estimation of her own work is a little clearer, though seldom modest: her clothes are for heroes, she explains, and a streak of heroism, obsessive attention to detail and refined cut have run through her work since she began designing in 1970. Westwood has been important to modern fashion because of her cultured plundering of the past, her astonishing lust for experiment, and for her bravery in the face of occasional ridicule, most famously when a collection received hoots of derision when modelled on Wogan. Sometimes her work is insane, and sometimes it is art, and Westwood may be unique in failing to grasp, or care about, the gap between the two. 'I do think I have had a very big influence,' she says, which inevitably means that others have profited from her originality. 'They do sometimes call me the designer's designer.'

But they have seldom called her the marketer's marketer. The downside of extreme innovation and the wilful disregard of commercial trends has for years meant only financial vulnerability. 'I always wanted to make money,'

she says, but has too often encountered practical and ethical problems with mass production and the exploitation of her name.
Until now, it seems, when everything's happening. In September, Harvey Nichols will launch Boudoir, a Westwood scent many years in the making, a product which may, if successful, make her more money than her couture. There are already very successful Westwood wedding dresses, designed despite her loathing of the institution. Earlier this year, she launched Anglomania, a cheaper streetwear line which plundered the greatest from her archives – something piratical here, something tartaned there – and twisted them back into something her younger fans might afford. And in her new men's line there are such things as Westwood beach towels and duffel bags and umbrellas designed by colleagues in her studio, all bearing the Westwood Orb logo, all devoured by her clientele in Tokyo and Kyoto. Westwood shrugs. 'I didn't really want to do it at first, this mass-market thing. I thought, 'Oh my God, for the first time in my life I've got to think about what people actually want'.'
Carlo D'Amario, her Italian manager for the past 13 years, and the architect of her financial survival, told her when they met that he thought it was pathetic that she believed that clothes could effect change. 'I thought that I could make clothes for young people that would help them make this stand against the establishment. But Carlo said that this establishment is like a car that goes at 100 miles per hour, and it will always go at this speed no matter what obstacles you throw at it.' She explains that Carlo is mad about cars. 'He said that I must therefore get a 200 miles per hour. I don't know what he meant by that, but I know what I meant by it: forget attacking the establishment, and just go to a place where the establishment hasn't even got to. And the way to go ahead is to go into the past. I would describe it really as a nostalgia for a better future. Something like that.'

She was born near Tintwistle, a small village by the Derbyshire-Cheshire border, in 1941. Her father worked at Walls, her mother at a greengrocer, and later they ran the post office together. They treated their children with freedom and respect; Vivienne would walk her younger brother and sister to school and church, the latter an institution she has come to detest.
Looking back, Westwood describes a happy, rather puritan childhood, and one with narrow dreams. There was little literature in the house, and seemingly little ambition, but her brother Gordon has since detected some heretical spark. Vivienne 'Was tough and good at getting people to do what she wanted, almost to the point of being a bit selfish.' He remembers her giving him a crewcut, and the neighbours being shocked. Her mother made her some clothes, and Vivienne entertained the usual romantic dreams of ballgowns and fancy-dress, but it wasn't until she was 14 that she realised the power of clothes to transform. At 14 she began to dress like a woman, she says, but photos suggest that her style was dowdy. She shone at school, and was always 'fighting battles... I was never spiteful to other children. I just couldn't understand why people would want to be like that.' There was another uncommon trait: 'I was always very very deep. In fact I never wanted to do fashion. Not that I think fashion is a superficial thing at all, but I wanted to read.'
She laments that no one introduced her to libraries or the possibility of university. She did attend Harrow Art School when she moved to the area

with her parents at 17, but left after a term 'because I really didn't know how a working class girl like me could possibly make a living in the art world.'

She waitressed in Jersey, and then became a primary school teacher, where she says she was driven by a sense of injustice and a feeling that the ability to learn should be treasured even by the very young. 'She especially liked teaching children with learning disabilities, and I think they related to her,' her second son Joe says. 'She's always been very good at opening up people's imaginations.'

She met a man she liked at a dance, and became Derek Westwood's wife when she was 21. He later ran his own dancehall, and trained to be a pilot, and they had a son, and Vivienne Westwood now very much resents the conclusion that their marriage later disintegrated because he was too boring. 'We had separate interests… you grow apart from people.'

She had already met Malcolm McLaren, an art school friend of her brother's, who believes that she was indeed desperately looking for an escape from bland suburbia. He remembers the first sight of her pushing a pram, head in the clouds. She remembers a man with piggy eyes and a hundred manifestos. Their partnership began in the late Sixties with jewellery, which Westwood sold at Portobello market, and then moved on to selling teddy boy wear at their leased shop in the King's Road. For a long while their forte was stealing ideas and warping them into something extreme: fetish-wear in the early Seventies (the shop was called Sex) later gave way to punk (by now Seditionaries), and some of their most delinquent customers were moulded into the Sex Pistols. Punk made Westwood's name, of course, but it also made her whole: to see her dancing at the side of the stage while Johnny Rotten wore her rip-wear – it was obvious she had waited all her life to be set free like this.

Westwood clearly did the bulk of the work on the clothes, Jon Savage says. 'She did all the shit work, and McLaren would come in near the end and give it a twist. They both understood the value of a good idea in the right place.' Savage bought an Anarchy shirt, some pointed studded boots, and one of those electric-coloured stringy mohair sweaters. Not long ago he again wore the sweater to a media party, and found that it still evoked aggression. He thought, 'gee whizz, it MUST be a powerful garment.'

'The essential thing about Vivienne,' he says, 'which meant she always reminded me of Margaret Thatcher, is that she had this furious morality. That was her great importance in punk. She passed that furious morality onto her followers in the shop, and I think influenced Johnny Rotten more than he'd like to admit. I don't think that's changed very much.'

Westwood and McLaren clearly learnt the lessons of glam: pop was nothing without its accompanying fashion statement. So the artists McLaren created came with a conceptual package supplied by Westwood: Adam Ant was a buccaneer, Bow Wow Wow posed like the Parisian bourgeoisie, and the Buffalo Girls went third-world ethnic. Those collections now hang in the V&A and galleries in America and Italy, but poor management and a passion for the ludicrous – such as the artwork-cum-shop that was Nostalgia for Mud – ensured Westwood made little money. Some people believe she didn't much care, but her son Joe Corre (another McLaren co-creation) remembers a conversation he once had about teaching. 'She lectured at Berlin and Vienna, and I asked her why she didn't teach at St Martin's. She said, 'Because they don't pay nearly enough'.'

Corre, whose name derives from McLaren's grandmother, runs the successful lingerie company Agent Provocateur, but used to manage his mother's affairs, and remembers arguing with her that she should be more commercial. 'But now I see that she was right. The people who are big now – Galliano, McQueen – how long are they going to be big for when there has been so much marketing and hype? What my mother has done has been absolutely true and real, and so now there's not a chink in her armour.'

He describes a childhood of enviable freedom. They lived in a flat in Clapham, where Westwood lives still. With gigs to attend and clothes to run-up, his parents weren't home all that much. 'Let's say that I might not always have had cooked dinners when I came home from school and all those mumsy things that other kids had, but I regard the other things she gave me – the ability to believe in my own ideas – as far more important.'

Corre says that some of his friend would be disciplined with a belt, 'but with me she would just give me one of her looks – far more terrifying. The threat from her was that I would just be considered stupid, an imbecile, and I didn't want to be like that.'

'If I brought those same children up today I would give them a different education,' Westwood says. 'I would bring them up better. Malcolm was so anti-family, and I got it into my head through all this hippy propaganda that the nuclear family was something harmful, that children shouldn't necessarily be the product of their parents. But if I can say anything about my children it is that they're not conservative, and I treated them with respect, and they could argue with me and I would listen. But on the other hand they had to respect me: they would never be allowed to come out of their room until I got up, whatever time that was.'

She tells the story of how she and McLaren set her two boys – aged 9 and 13 – the task of cycling to Devon by themselves. She got a phonecall from the police after they had stopped to ask directions to a youth hostel. They arrived safely after four days, to be met by her father with a chequered flat. What does her other son Ben do now? 'Not very much. Bit of photography, just scrapes a living. But at least he's a reader.'

So: reading. Around the time she split with McLaren (who went to Hollywood and took up with Lauren Hutton) she came under the influence of a man called Gary Ness. 'He directs my reading,' she explains softly. 'He'd been reading in the field of unorthodox opinion, he was a painter who trained at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. His point of view is heretical, unorthodox, original. He has opinions, in short. He is very keen on the manifesto of L'Arts Pour L'Arts. I don't want to say anything bad about Malcolm at all, but Gary has something deeper to offer me.'

Gary Ness would not be interviewed. Despite sporting a name straight from a Martin Amis pastiche ('He had the essence of Gary… a certain Garyness'), Mr Ness's tastes in reading are on an altogether higher plane: Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, the great French thinkers. His influence comes at you from unusual angles. I asked Westwood what makes her laugh. She said, 'I was thinking that I didn't laugh out loud very much. People tell jokes and some people crack up laughing, but I don't, because I usually don't get the joke. When did I last nearly die laughing? I expect some of Huxley's novels… they give me one of those excruciatingly pleasant pains in my stomach.'

She says she would rather read Huxley ten times than read contemporary authors ('Not that I have – I've only read some of his books twice.') Occasionally she hears something on the radio, and takes to her chamber: 'Women's Hour – they should do something about their serials! They did Madame Bovary, and that was brilliant and they were so chuffed about that, but the awful other things that they do – God knows what they are.'

Strangely for one who has helped fashion in the late 20th century, Westwood strikes out at popular culture whenever she can. Modern cinema bores her, although she did like the costumes in *Dangerous Liaisons*. She will occasionally take a chance on classical music at the Royal Festival Hall, but only finds a programme to suit her once every six months. 'Otherwise it's Elgar, Beethoven,' she complains. 'Beethoven's not bad, but he's rather kitsch for me.' The best thing she saw recently was Ravel's Daphnis et Chloe. 'And I do tell you that if you take any kid from whatever rave club they go to and put them in front of Daphnis and Chloe they'd have to admit that they'd never had anything so thrilling in their lives.'

I asked about the Pistols reunion of 1996. She frowned. 'I won't say any of the obvious things about people having nothing better to do after all that time, but what's the word I'm searching for really…' I think she said, under her breath, that the world was 'pathetic', but then she added that she didn't want to say anything nasty about them, because guitarist Steve Jones is still an enthusiastic customer.

Westwood stopped designing exclusively for young people around 1985, the year she met another prominent man in her life, her Italian business manager. Carlo D'Amario is 52, a squat, shades-indoors type of guy, responsible for turning the Westwood name into a little empire. 'I make the creative, the dream, become the business,' he says in his office at the Westwood warehouse just off Battersea Bridge. 'The more the designer is avant-garde, the more the structure must be strong,' he explains, which only the mean-spirited would translate as 'The Queen of Bonkerswear heeds not the balance sheet'. D'Amario shifted the manufacturing base to Italy, and is responsible for the huge expansion of her lines: there are now four distinct labels – demi-couture, prêt-a-porter, menswear and Anglomania - as well as numerous licence deals and the new perfume, the marketing of which will secure a much higher presence in the glossy magazines.

There are now over 100 people in Westwood's employ. D'Amario claims distribution in 550 shops in 30 countries, and an increase in turnover in the last five years from £2 million to £30 million, all without selling out to a multinational. Westwood remains her own chief executive, her own shareholder. Or as D'Amario has it, 'With Vivienne there is only Vivienne'.

D'Amario shares his office with Andreas Kronthaler, 32, Austrian, Westwood's design co-ordinator and, since 1992, also her husband. Kronthaler met Westwood when she was teaching in Vienna; he had never heard anyone talk so lucidly about dress. Kronthaler had a broad, swashbuckling frame, and on our meeting wore yet another unexpected Westwood accessory – a monogrammed neckerchief. He calls her his Queen of Awkwardness. 'I've never met anyone so unconventional,' he says. 'She looks at everything differently every day. She is so interested in ideas, as she calls them, by which I think she means creativity.' I wondered what annoyed

him about her. 'There were things in the beginning which I won't tell you, but I love them now. I can't be without them.'

Some age-gap, of course. Westwood seems a little sad when she says, 'There is an affinity there that makes me feel totally secure. So secure that I only want him to do what makes him happy. So I am not at all jealous, I don't mind what he does.' Jealous? 'There is a Chinese proverb: if a horse is yours it will come back whatever it does. Not that he goes away, he just has a few nights out every now and again, but that's it.' Westwood married him so that he could stay in the country, and because it is 'convenient to refer to him as Husband rather than Partner, because you might think it's a business partner.' But it is clear that he now does indeed have a significant creative partnership with his wife. 'I'm very keen to promote him,' she says, 'but I'm not sure it's very good for business. People might get confused if there's not one public face at the head of the company.'

Which brings us once more to Westwood's image, the priceless iconography that has always meant more than just the promise of a finely-tailored garment. When you buy Westwood, you buy something along her historical axis: something anti or ante-, something infused with her reading or gallery-going, something painstakingly wrought. Her reputation has changed drastically,' says the designer Helen Storey. 'She was perceived as a rebel, and is now establishment. She has become Coca Cola in a sense, but her own Coca Cola.'

Storey admires Westwood's professional longevity, and her ability to expand without diluting her reputation. She observes that one should no longer expect any great change in direction from Westwood, but rather the perfection of work that has been gone before. 'It's as if Vivienne is trying to get down to the purest form of Vivienne she can get. And it takes immense strength of personality not to give in to the pressure of constantly having to come up with the next trick, which is what the impulse of the fashion business always is.'

Peter Howarth, editor of Esquire, believes that 'Vivienne is not a performance. Clearly there is an element to her that is truly belligerent – making all these unique clothes in the face of what she must see walking down the streets of London every day of her life. But she thinks that people should really be running into her shops and wearing her clothes all the time – which is why she is psychologically fascinating.'

'The press does like me to be shocking,' Westwood concludes. 'Even the Queen liked it, oh no, nevermind.' She is referring, against her better judgement, to the time when she picked up her OBE in no underwear. 'It's all about my knickers again. I hope he doesn't get the sack, but a man from the Queen's press office was talking to me in a bookshop about how they all loved that investiture so much.'

Westwood has previously commented favourably on the Queen's own dress sense, noting that her purposeful disregard for trends had rendered her practically avant-garde. But she professes to have no time for the Queen any more. 'I was interested in her as a symbol of hypocrisy. You know, shaking hands with the Argentine ambassador, or the Chilean ambassador. My opinion on the royal family is that if only there were an elite family, if only they would have done what the Stuarts had done, supporting arts and culture. High culture that's imposed on people is the only thing that changes things.' And she thinks that Diana did not die in an accident, but was killed because she was getting too powerful. 'The alibi of the paparazzi killing her was so apt,

it's just totally like a police-frame-up.' Anti-landmines, she says. 'Because who runs the world – arms dealers and drug-dealers. You see?'

In the future, Westwood says she would like to spend more time reading, often in bed, or perhaps, 'really properly and sitting at the table.' She says that three months ago she simply decided to do less fashion and more books. She also says, and heralds it as the most important statement she has made throughout our meeting, that if mothers would only read to their children, the world would be a different place.

Clearly, her ambitions now extend beyond tailoring. She wants to develop an intellectual salon, an idea she first mentioned six years ago, and believes Paris to be the ideal venue. She hopes this will lead to her own publishing imprint, and to a theatre. She will not design the costumes – 'I'll get Andreas to do that' – but she will dramatize ideas. 'We simply must be more civilised,' she concludes. 'We need more time for self-cultivation.' Something like that.