



The 2011 Daffodil Ball was titled Russian Romance. This year, the 20th anniversary, will feature a Great Gatsby theme.

# The woman behind the daffodils

ALISON SILCOFF moves mountains in her fundraising for the Canadian Cancer Society. Her baby, the Daffodil Ball, has netted \$24M and won a dozen international prizes

JENNIFER CAMPBELL  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

In less than three weeks (April 18 to be exact), the 20th annual Daffodil Ball benefiting the Canadian Cancer Society will take the city by storm. This anniversary edition boasts a timely Great Gatsby theme (the much-anticipated film by Baz Luhrmann starring Leonardo DiCaprio comes out in May). In the works is a display of a vintage daffodil yellow Rolls-Royce not unlike the one driven by Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's historic tome, along with the deployment of 30,000 daffodils (official floral of the society). The ball, to be held at Windsor Station (home base for the last 11 years), will no doubt be every bit as spectacular as its internationally award-winning predecessors, which generally sell out in less than two months. It's no small feat for any event, let alone one with tickets starting at \$1,800 each.

The ball's enduring and high-profile international success is no accident. It is thanks to Alison Silcoff, whom I have long referred to as the "woman behind the daffodils."

Over the past decade, Silcoff's company, Alison Silcoff Events, has garnered 12 international Special Events Gala Awards — the "Oscars" of the international events industry — more than any other company in Canada. And almost all have been for the Daffodil, for everything from décor and entertainment to fundraising. More than \$24 million net has been raised since 1994.

It started in 1993, when Silcoff won the Canadian Cancer Society's 1993 mandate to propose a fundraiser highlighting the society's cause and aimed at generating revenue in the corporate sector. A year later, in 1994, she organized the inaugural ball atop the Chalet du Mont-Royal, which was attended by 450 and brought a tally of \$86,000. From there, the event began a meteoric rise.

How does Silcoff explain the Daffodil's success?

"It definitively has something to do with my obsessive-compulsive perfectionism and bordering-on-fanatical attention to detail," she said with an easy laugh. "Along with dedicated co-chairs to spearhead the fundraising, the best possible committee anyone could ask for (many have been on board for more than 10 years) and an invaluable corps of volunteers, I strive to make the Daffodil outstandingly different from other fundraising events," she said.



Award-winning event planner Alison Silcoff, at her home in Montreal, says the Daffodil Ball benefits from dedicated co-chairs, a great board and a tireless corps of volunteers.

Some of her staples on this front include masterminding original, of-the-moment themes and execution (Silcoff travels extensively and keeps her finger on the pulse of all things cultural, pop and otherwise), making fun a priority (no long speeches!), securing never-seen-before entertainment, and maintaining the evening's sophisticated style and high-glamour quotient.

Silcoff has experience in leadership positions in the corporate world. After graduating from Cambridge with degrees in mathematics and law, she worked as an account executive at London's JWT ad agency, as marketing director of Régine's Montreal club during the heyday of disco and as head of Bank of Montreal's corporate sponsorship program.

She runs the Daffodil Ball like a bona fide corporation. "We go out of our way

to give every sponsor, donor and guest plenty of value and top-notch service," she said, "and work tirelessly to ensure the accuracy of every name and logo in all event-related publicity. We also dedicate considerable time and energy to securing many donated goods and services to keep expenses low, and work diligently to optimize each year's sponsorship opportunities, carefully pairing canvassers with prospects based on business connections. It's one fabulous, glamorous night, but 364 stress-filled days of hard work!" she said with a laugh.

Every event she organizes is driven by an intensity. "Each event is like giving birth, and each ball is my baby," she reflected. "There's no question that I take the experience personally and live and breathe every detail of the event's planning and coordination from start to finish."

Silcoff has also taken up the reins for high-profile clients that include: 357c, Ameriprise Financial, Cartier, Chase Manhattan Bank, McGill University, Merck, the National Gallery of Canada and Young Presidents' Organization, planning signature Silcoff events against such exotic backdrops as Paris, London, Zurich, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Helsinki, St. Petersburg and Stockholm as well as across the U.S. and Canada. She also recently added another feather to her fashionable cap as the only Canadian company to win the top Gala Award for best event organized for a corporation (budget over \$500,000).

As for the future? Silcoff is immersed in plans for a large international conference in Montreal this fall. When asked about Daffodil 2014, she smiled demurely and would only say, "I'll see you there."

# Is the Internet the saviour of retail?

Farfetch.com links real-world stores

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Word reaches this desk that a three-part documentary about the history of shopping is in the making. Yes, shopping, until recently derided as the opiate of fluffy airheads, is now commanding the attention of serious reporters.

U.K. media seem to carry reports on the desolate state of retail shops and areas every other day. Almost everyone agrees that e-tailing is slaughtering retailing. But what if the Internet could help preserve Main Street? That's the vision of Jose Neves, a 38-year-old Portuguese geek-meets-chic entrepreneur who set up farfetch.com, a virtual marketplace for upmarket boutiques across the world.

The idea — that a customer can type in key generic words such as grey trousers, or, more specifically "Stella McCartney white waistcoat" — and instantly access their heart's desire from a small independent retailer in Antwerp, or a large established emporium in Sao Paulo — is an idea of dazzling, why-didn't-anyone-do-this-before simplicity.

The logistics however, are more complex. To service the 240 stores that currently sell on Farfetch, the company employs more than 100 people just to work in the 25 photographic studios in Lisbon, Sao Paulo and L.A. where 80,000 pieces are shot each season.

Then there are the eight

*"We're there to support these shops."*

JAMES BILEFIELD

full-timers who monitor card fraud, the 4 million euros (\$5.2 million) it spends annually on shipping and the search-engine optimizers that ensure when you type in "Vanessa Bruno black jackets" the first name that pops up isn't always Net-a-porter.

There's also a team that monitors stores to check they're sufficiently chi-chi and that the Alaia and Balenciaga they say they stock isn't 4 years old.

Although Farfetch's swat squad visits boutiques incognito, there's nothing sinister afoot, according to Susanne Tide-Frater, brand and strategy director for farfetch.

"We're there to support these shops. Some have a dark, moody and battered aesthetic, others are super-cult — and that's great. We're there to help them understand what's unique about their offer, because there's a lot of sameness on other e-tailer sites."

A competition Farfetch ran last year to find the youngest, coolest boutique, awarded the winner, Voo in Berlin, six months free "rent" on the site.

The single uniformity is service. Purchases are dispatched directly from each shop to customers in a Farfetch box, inside which is the store's personalized wrapping with, perhaps, a postcard from the city or a free gift.

"What's amazing," Tide-Frater says, "is how much customers care about where their purchase comes from. They really like finding that hard-to-get piece from a small shop in Finland."

"An amazing number of retailers don't have any kind of Internet presence," Neves says. "You can set up a site for less than 2,000 pounds (\$3,100) but there are a billion of them. How do you get noticed?"

"How do you organize a reliable delivery service if you're a small player? How do you sell to a country like Brazil where consumers are used to paying in instalments and in local currency?"

"Some shops we represent have tried e-tailing and didn't have the resources to make it work. Or they're old family businesses who felt alienated by the whole concept. Or they're just looking for an international client base."

The idea came to Neves during Paris Fashion Week in 2007 when he was wholesaling a brand he'd developed to other retailers.

"Dozens of boutique owners had been through our doors and what they were saying was really sobering," Neves says. "Business was bad, they couldn't rely on local customers any more but they didn't have the experience to do e-tailing either. They had amazing taste levels but they were having to play it increasingly safe."

Farfetch's revenues, \$172.1 million so far this year, are commission-based from the boutiques. In turn, shops accepted onto Farfetch's site increase their annual turnover, on average, says Neves, by 30 per cent.

It seems to be win-win-win, for consumer, retailer and e-tailer. Condé Nast liked the business model so much that it invested more money in Farfetch than it has in any other e-commerce venture outside the U.S.

"It's not that publishing isn't viable," says James Bilefield, president of Condé Nast Digital, "but it's clear the future lies in making the experience of reading content and shopping more seamless. We're coming at this from the opposite side of Net-a-porter (the e-tailer now publishes a weekly magazine)."

Unlike other marketplaces such as Amazon, the emphasis at Farfetch isn't on driving down prices or competing with bricks-and-mortar stores. On the contrary, retailers have to have a shop to be part of it.

Listening to Neves, who was once a boutique owner (he launched B Store, a niche shop selling up-and-coming designers on Savile Row in 2001), it's clear that the store is really a love letter to the old-fashioned virtues of independent retailers.

If retailers have any sense, they'll write back.



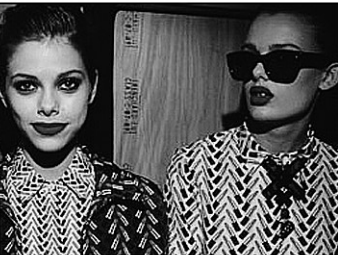
SUIT UP



ON THE WATERFRONT: A'MAREE'S



FARFETCH X LONDON SHOW ROOMS



FARFETCH.COM

Farfetch.com is a virtual marketplace for upmarket boutiques in cities around the world.