

Thoroughly Modern Miller



"This . . . is a Fellini movie," says Nicole Miller, surveying the upstairs room at Cafe Tabac, the chic sanctum for regulars of this East Village restaurant. It's so packed this Friday night that the outcasts waiting on the stairs don't have a prayer. Miller is sitting under a portrait of the Dalai Lama, and her pal for the evening, former skiing champ Suzy Chaffee, is dancing across the room, past Peter Weller and Robbie Robertson. Chaffee's with a long-haired man whom she and Miller met in Aspen over the holidays. The long-haired man's friend is doing party tricks with a martini glass to the delight of a blonde in

a Harley-Davidson T-shirt. It is 11 p.m., appetizers have yet to be served, and the noise, partly from the customers, partly from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, is deafening. But this evening is not about food or conversation. It's about being there—and being seen being there.

Being a nova in New York nightlife means a lot to Nicole Miller. Just a few years ago, she led a relatively quiet life, designing her now-famous ties and moderately priced women's clothing and staying home nights. "I had this boyfriend," she says, "and he always had 6 million other things to do—mostly cheat on me.

**These days, nighttime is the
right time for designer Nicole Miller**

By Aimee Lee Ball

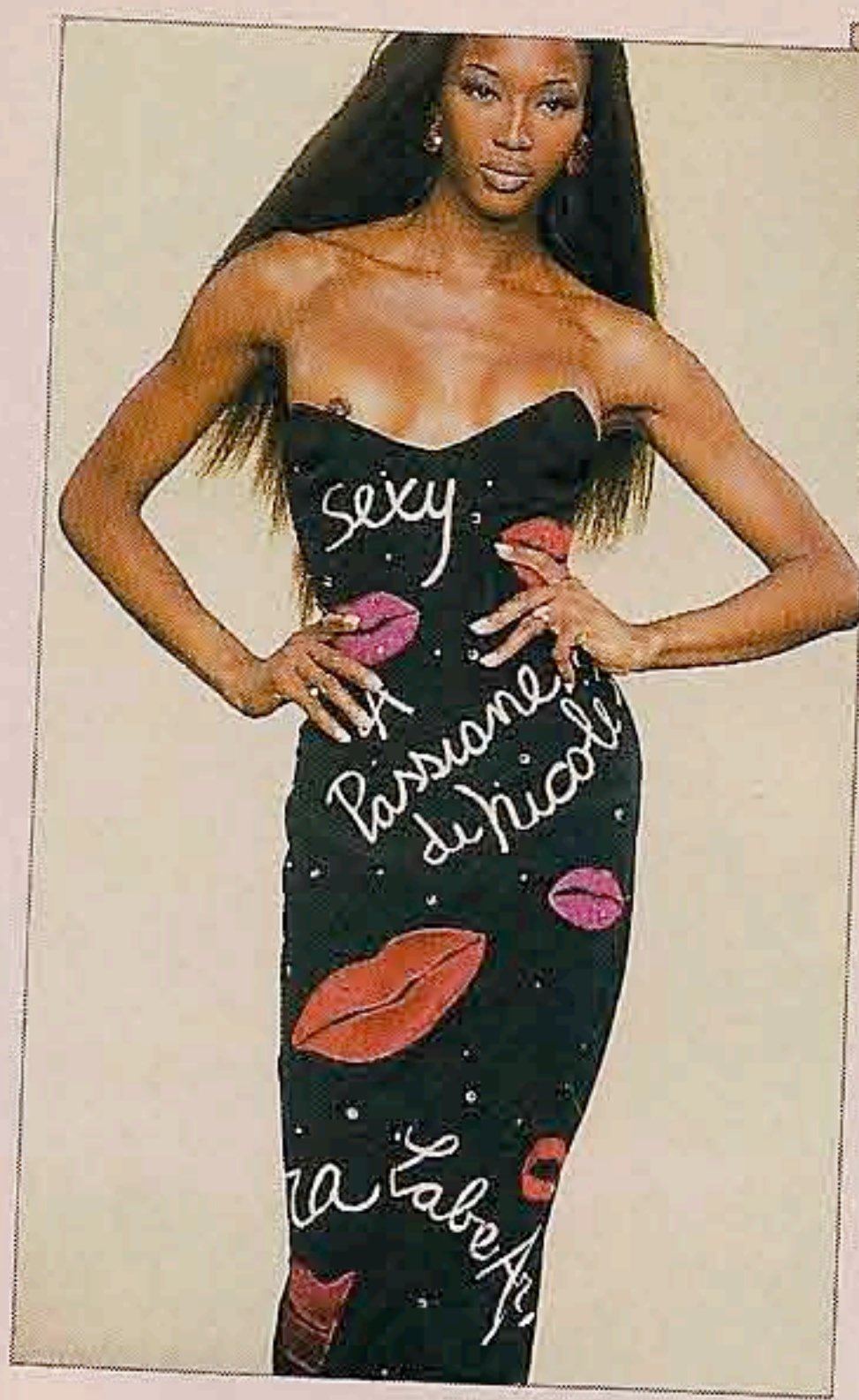
Hair: John Caruso for the Clive Salon; makeup: Duffy for Georgette Klinger.





IN HER SEVENTH
AVENUE SHOWROOM.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RONALD C. MODRA



He was very antisocial and never even wanted to have dinner with my friends. I used to skip everything saying, 'I can't go because he's going to call me,' or cooking him dinner. So I had this rather reclusive life for four years, and when I broke up with him, I started going places and answering invitations that I had thrown away, going out and having a really good time."

Being a good-time girl neatly coincided with Miller's decision to go on the runway two and a half years ago as a full-fledged designer. It was time to leave behind the safe but lucrative world of "bridge" clothing (named for the way it "bridges" the price points between moderate and higher-end clothing) and vie image-wise with Calvin and Donna and Ralph (not to mention Giorgio and Isaac and Azzedine). But though Miller's moving into the higher-rent district of Seventh Avenue, she's also trying to stay affordable. "Nicole is competing with the big guns at a completely different price point," says Paul Cavaco, a fashion director of *Harper's Bazaar*. "I don't know if this category exists. She's definitely a designer, but I think we've shortchanged a lot of these talents." The nightlife has given her a Zelig-like image in an industry where a high profile can be an edge. "She knows everyone in the world," says Cavaco. "You can go anywhere, and Nicole will know fifteen people in the room. But you can be everywhere, at every social event, and if the clothes aren't good, guess what? It's not going to happen."

"We're such a weird company in a lot of ways," Miller admits. "I know that the tie business detracts from the dress business because the ties make more noise and a bigger statement than the clothing. But I think my expertise is in cutting a dress. I really wanted to do a show because I was 39 and I thought, Am I going to be the new kid on the block at 50? I just felt it was now or never. If I didn't do it, I'd never have any credibility as a designer."

In her first season, Miller's flirty, body-conscious dresses drew good reviews. But Miller's reputation was made by her splashy and irreverent silk ties for men, an ever-changing collection where almost anything was fodder for a new print: tabloid headlines, Elvis, sushi, chess, Dole pineapple, Absolut Vodka. She even turned the detritus of a dinner party into one pattern, featuring a glass of spilled wine and a credit card. Last year, when her plane was rerouted to Las Vegas because of the Los Angeles riots, Miller spent three days gambling and ended up with a print of dice and playing cards. The ties have developed a celebrity following. Sony's Peter Guber wore one (the archery print) under an Armani suit as he worked the inaugural bus route from Monticello to the Lincoln Memorial in January. Chevy Chase wore another to the Friars Club on the night he was roasted. After Charlton Heston admired a design (the the-

ater-ticket print) that his daughter-in-law had, Miller sent Heston one as well. "I said, 'Chuck, I'll have to get you one of the ties,'" says Miller. "Yes, we call him Chuck."

Miller says she turned down a request from the Inaugural Committee to do a tie for Bill Clinton because she just didn't have the time, and she has no real hope of being the First Lady's designer of choice. "But I can see him wearing my ties before I can see her wearing my dresses," she says. "The other day I was talking to Mary McFadden, and she said, 'It's like winning an Oscar getting to dress Hillary.' I guess it's a really big deal for some people, but it's not the image of my customer. I mean, I'd be flattered, but it's not my goal or my focus. I'm not all that concerned about those things. I'm concerned about what makes the business flow and keeps it energized."

A cross between Holly Golightly and one of those Cyndi Lauper girls who just wanna have fun, she's here, there, everywhere. With her penchant for younger boyfriends, leopard-print blazers, and chopsticks decorating her hair, Miller hardly seems the chatelaine of a \$45-million-a-year company. But that's what she is. Miller's runway show on March 29 at the New York Public Library will be followed, two days later, by the opening of the Nicole Miller store in Los Angeles. A lot of fashion pros are waiting to see if, after her nearly two decades in the business, it really is Miller time. "It's hard to give up what you were

"I want my own image, my o

known for and try to convince people you've grown," says one top fashion editor in town. "I think she has talent for a lot of things. In terms of being the next big name, I don't know yet. She loves the trendy and the sexy, and that sometimes gets in the way. We're all waiting to see what happens."

WE BLEW IT LAST NIGHT," SAYS MILLER. LAST night, she made a brief appearance at a cocktail party in Ronald Lauder's Upper East Side apartment for an "American Fashion on the Danube" benefit. That scene was a bit too uptown for her, even though *Vanity Fair* recently declared Miller the "uptown Betsey Johnson." She licked the caviar off miniature cornbread puffs (feeding the denuded puffs to a friend) and fended off overtures from rich, overweight men who loved her ties and wanted to visit the showroom. Then it was up Madison Avenue for dinner and Eartha Kitt at the Café Carlyle. Miller chatted with the singer for a few minutes after the show,



DRESSES FROM SEASONS PAST AND A SKETCH FOR FALL '93.

took an order for a tuxedo jacket, and pronounced Kitt "cool"—the ultimate Miller accolade. As Miller's party was leaving, Cher and her entourage arrived for the late show. And that constitutes "blowing it." Who knows? Cher could be to Nicole Miller what Barbra Streisand is to Donna Karan. Miller claims little interest in infiltrating the closets of Blaine Trump or Anne Bass. "That's not what I aspire to," she says. "I would be happier to see Madonna in my clothes than a socialite."

It's been a slow week for Miller. Her picture was in the tabloids only once—for making an entrance at the Council of Fashion Designers awards show. She was wearing a long, tight gown in red Chinese brocade that was decorated with a big red rhinestone AIDS ribbon. Her red hair was held in a knot with chopsticks. "I saw *En Vogue*," she explained, "and I wanted to be just like them, so I sent my assistant to Chinatown for fabric. I'm never wearing black to one of these things again."

In a sea of black, she almost upstaged Elton John with Gianni Versace, Tatum O'Neal with Marc Jacobs, Sandra Bernhard with Mizrahi, and, of course, Barbra Streisand with Donna Karan. Miller was with her business partner, Bud Konheim, who tried in vain to get their limousine driver to provide a little star treatment. "We would like to go right up to the door," he said as they approached the canopy at the State Theater. "I might as well take the subway if I have to walk to the door. And it would be really nice if

saying they've met this great guy, and they never hear from him again.") At the dessert buffet, she introduced her hairdresser as "the only straight one here" and then got herself introduced to Steven Seagal, whose movies she actually claims to like. In the ladies' room, she saw a woman wearing a transparent lace sheath over black bra and garter belt. "You've got balls, honey," Miller said half-admiringly. "Steel balls," replied the woman.

The week's social calendar ground relentlessly on. At one extreme, there was the perfumer's ball at the Plaza. That was more of a command performance, since Miller is about to launch her first fragrance. It was time to meet and greet the industry honchos and their lovely wives. (Several men took the opportunity to pull down their tuxedo waistbands and prove that they were wearing Miller's print boxer shorts.) Earlier that evening, there had been a birthday party for a photographer at Stringfellows, where huge-breasted, scantily clad women did "table dances" in front of dour-faced men who stuck \$20 bills in their garters. Miller was mildly amused by the display of female pulchritude. "It's great inspiration to diet," she said.

Miller often orchestrates these evenings from the back of a cab, using a cellular phone she keeps in her purse. Right now, she's deciding whether to cruise Tatou for a late-night drink with friends or go on to Casa La Femme. And miraculously, the next morning she'll be on the StairMaster at the New York Sports Club by seven and at her office by 9:30.

THE ASTONISHING THING ABOUT Miller's high life is that she works, she plays, but she does not sleep. She doesn't even stay home sick. "I would be too bored," she says. "My joke is that there's no such thing as being sick here—you're at work or you're hung over. The other day when I had the flu, I stayed in bed until eleven o'clock and then came to the office—my two-hour sick day."

Somehow, she also manages to look far younger than her 41 years—a triumph of

own success. I'd rather be different."

you ran around to open the door on that side. I know this is not a stretch, but it would be nice and everybody would look a lot more important." Konheim recognized that the \$900-per-head event was something like a huge fashion-business bar mitzvah—the evening to be a part of. "It's really good taste to go and say nice things to everybody," he said. "It's an old-boy network. And we are the bad boys of the industry, because you're not supposed to be a designer of Nicole's talent and be successful: If it's so good, how come everybody understands it?"

"I just think everybody hates everybody," said Miller with a laugh. "Your best friends don't want to see you successful." But she schmoozed and worked the room as if everyone were a long-lost cousin. During cocktails, she kissed Maria Cuomo and her husband, Kenneth Cole. Miller had used Cole's shoes in her very first runway show, before she started designing her own. During dinner, she sat with Thierry Mugler, who told Miller that he was eating meat for the first time in 30 years. During intermission, she chatted up David Letterman producer Robert Morton. ("My girlfriends talk to Morton at parties," she says, "and call me

bloodlines over department. Miller grew up in Lenox, Massachusetts. Her father was an engineer at General Electric who designed a fire-control system for submarine-launch missiles. He met her mother, who is French, during World War II. "My mother was always clothes-minded," says Miller. "We had French-magazine subscriptions at home. But I have my father's mind. The way you figure out how to make something is engineering. Every Christmas, my father and I still give each other some kind of gadget—the latest high-tech thing. On Christmas day, we're always poring over a calculator manual."

Mme. Miller hated her adopted country, never changed her citizenship, and made sure her children had dual citizenship. She also mortified her daughters by giving them French names, dressing them like little French girls, and—*quel horreur!*—speaking French in public. "It was always 'This is a horrible country, and France is fairyland,'" Miller recalls. "But I didn't go to France until I was 19. My mother is afraid to fly, so we never really went anywhere, except for car vacations; and when I finally went to France, I went on a boat." It was in her sopho-



more year at Rhode Island School of Design (along with art dealer Mary Boone and members of Talking Heads) that she arranged a year in Paris. "I grew up thinking France was going to be the coolest place in the world. I went over there and said, 'Enough of this stuff—I'm American.' So I feel I'm one of the few designers who have no French complex."

But in Paris, she did learn how to cut a dress. "It was an haute couture school, and it was intensive," she says. "I got incredible training in the aesthetics of clothing that I never would have gotten anywhere else. I think the cut of clothes is most important, and it's been instrumental in making my clothes sell. I'm so concerned about proportions and curves and necklines. It's a very subtle thing, and it goes beyond the design. You put on a jacket that's magic, and you put on a jacket that's very similar and it's nothing."

In 1975, barely out of school and designing coats for Rain Cheetahs, Miller answered an ad for head dress designer at P. J. Walsh. Its president, Bud Konheim, had interviewed almost 200 applicants, asking them to pick their favorite fabric from a pile on his desk and sketch something. "Most of them acted like I was asking them to undress," he remembers. "But Nicole knew exactly what she was doing. Then I asked what would be their real measure of satisfaction, and most of them said something about their name on a label. But Nicole said, 'I want to see everybody wearing my clothes.'" That attitude meshed with Konheim's, whose family had been in the business for four generations. "We are not in a fine art," he says. "We're in a commercial art. Our stuff doesn't hang in museums. But I believe great design can be a commercial success." In 1982, Konheim renamed the company Nicole Miller, and the two remain partners—"actress and director," as he calls them—with no backers or outside money, resisting all efforts to take the company public or buy them out.

Miller and Konheim say they were not shocked when Perry Ellis Sportswear recently closed, particularly after their own near-collapse in 1987. "I had a horrible boyfriend, and my designing was off" is how

money on advertising and insists on flying coach. "We have responsibilities to the people who work for us to be legitimate," he says. "They certainly don't want to see Nicole and me putting coke up our noses and driving around in Rolls-Royces."

Miller has her own take on company finances. "We'll say entirely different things," she says. "It's gotten to be this joke. But we don't lie as much as everybody else. There are too many egos in this business. The clothing business is hard because the public is so fickle. Even if I keep doing the basic things people love, like my little black dresses, I'm always experimenting and testing and trying."

In 1986, Miller was preparing to open her first shop, on Madison Avenue near 67th Street, and she needed to fill the space with accessories. "I sent a bunch of old prints from the dresses to Korea, reprinted them on silk, and had them turned into scarves," she says, "and Bud said, 'Make me some ties.' We put them in the showroom, and before we knew it, we ran out. We weren't trying to be in the tie business, but everybody was begging for more. The security guard at the door of our store moonlighted at the Met, and he went to their gift shop one day wearing his theater-ticket tie, and they were one of our first customers."

The ties begot boxer shorts, which led to a wildly successful line of men's wear, introduced in a controversial show that featured models drinking, smoking cigarettes, and chasing women. A friend of Miller's was walking down a Manhattan street when she heard a man behind her say, "Great butt," and turned around and it was Bill Murray in a Miller shirt. "I ran into him at a party and told him the story," says Miller, "and he said, 'Nicole, your clothes gave me the courage.'"



Should she cruise Tatou tonight o

Miller explains the problems. But she does admit that she made a wrong call on hem lengths and began lopping off inches in a desperate attempt to move the line. She's since become a lot sharper. "I know more about the actual businesses, probably things I can't say," she says. "There are certain businesses that are very high profile but are all an illusion and lose a lot of money. A lot of businesses are invested in because people think they'll sign all these licensing deals and make tens of millions of dollars. Everybody sees so-and-so's name on suitcases and pillowcases and this and that. It's not as easy as it would seem, and the royalties are not as big as anybody would think. I don't have any complex about somebody stealing the limelight from me one season, because I've been doing this for seventeen years, and all the people who used to be the competition are gone. We're a very tightly run business."

She and Konheim claim they had more than \$45 million in sales last year, not including licensing agreements on products like shoes, handbags, hosiery, men's formal wear, and paper goods. Konheim is famously thrifty—he doesn't believe in spending any

Jeremy Irons keeps his Miller shorts under wraps. "I did a fashion show at the St. James's Club in Antigua, and we learned scuba diving together," she explains. "So I gave him boxer shorts, and the next day on the beach, he was wearing something else. He said, 'Nicole, I was going to wear yours, but they showed absolutely everything.'"

IN HER ECLECTICALLY DECORATED TRIBECA LOFT, MILLER IS directing traffic for a birthday party, and since she's friends with so many restaurateurs, there is quite a spread. "I don't hang out that much in the fashion world," she says. "Everybody's nice to everybody on the surface, but I don't think it's particularly friendly." Tonight's smorgasbord includes antipasti from Rocco of Boom; cheese crackers from Miller's sister Michèle, who owns the Boiler Room Café in Massachusetts; and leftover Mexican food from two friends in Texas who cooked for last week's going-away party for Kerry Simon, who used to be the chef at the Plaza. Since the guest of honor



THE GOOD-TIME GIRL WITH CHRISTY TURLINGTON AT THE CFDA AWARDS (FAR LEFT), OUT WITH FRIENDS, PARTYING WITH TOMMY HILFIGER AND DAVID LEE ROTH, AND SIDE BY SIDE WITH PAULINE TRIGÈRE.

doesn't eat red meat, the birthday cake is trompe l'oeil, decorated to look like a slab of raw roast beef with a center bone and white fat on the outside. "It'll be brilliant," Miller says. Miller choreographs most of her parties. "With a French mother, I always used to cook," she says, "but I don't have the time anymore. My mother, my sister, and I used to make pies. It was the one Americanism my mother developed. I can do them like that," she says with a snap of the fingers.

Miller seems satisfied as she surveys the room. "Lots of cute guys here tonight, don't you think?" Among friends, she is known to have a fondness for younger men, although she insists it was just that *one*. . . . In the background tonight (and for most of the past year) is a fledgling filmmaker named Ricky Phillips, who shies away from Miller's limelight. "We staged a cocktail party at 4:30 in the afternoon for *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*," she reports. "They had to retape it so many times because I cracked up every time he walked through the door. Then he went home for a Jewish holiday, and his mother and grandmother were watching it, rewinding and fast-forwarding. He said he was so mortified."

"Cute" John F. Kennedy Jr. has been a Miller party guest, and Harvey Keitel came for Halloween one year with his chil-

dren. In her own version of *Rear Window*, Miller kept an eye on Keitel and his then-wife, Lorraine Bracco, throughout their relationship. "I watched him making out with Lorraine, watched her be pregnant, watched them come home with the baby," she says. She did not actually witness Bracco getting pregnant. "Close," she says. "They had some pretty hot embraces over there. And no blinds."

The only living creatures now sharing her home with Miller are two pet chameleons. "People always say successful women intimidate men," she says. "I've never scared anybody in my life. But I don't think my focus was ever to find a husband and have the wedding dress. If it was my focus, I would have gone after it and done it. I feel all relationships are boring after three years anyway. Maybe three and a half. . . ."

On a recent Saturday night, she was supposed to have seen a friend from her Rhode Island days, who is going through a divorce ("I made his wife's bridesmaids' dresses," she reminisces). In typical Miller style, the small, intimate evening turns into a Thai dinner at Kin Khao for ten, including one

guest of a guest who can barely speak in complete sentences. Miller loves to dish. "Do we love her or what?" she asks, before heading on to Indochine for the joint birthday party of *Daily News* gossip columnist Richard Johnson and hotelier André Balazs.

At Indochine, the crowd's beginning to clamor for food and complain about the cigarette smoke. But Miller is happy, greeting people at the door and pointing out Robert De Niro, Ronald Perelman, Robert Maxwell's daughter, Norman Mailer's son, and an older man recently charged with insider trading. ("He says he's innocent," says Miller loyally.)

"It seems to me that the designers who make the greatest impact are out and about," says Kalman Rottenstein, Bloomingdale's fashion director, whose store recently gave Miller her very own boutique area. "Nicole is one of the smartest designers we work with," Rottenstein says. "She's on the town, she knows how sophisticated city women want to dress, and she knows how to produce these clothes at a price. A lot of customers are just discovering who she is. I think she will grow in her prestige and acceptability."

"She likes to have a fun time, and that kind of energy shows in her clothes," says *Vogue's* Susi Billingsley, who's followed Miller's progress. "The energy comes from the street scene, the club scene. Any designer is out there, hungry for visual forms of information. She has a lot of ideas, and sometimes she's all over the place, but she keeps coming up with stuff."

Billingsley argues that it's much harder to become "a big fish" if you have a ceiling on prices. "I can make beautiful pants for \$800," she says. "That's easy. But do those same pants in a fabric made in Korea." Pricing wasn't always a criterion for great designers, according to Caroline Rennolds Milbank, who wrote *New York Fashion*. "In the history of American fashion, you didn't have to be expensive to be a good designer," she insists. "As a historian particularly interested in American design, it really bothers me that now we are only reverent about people whose clothes cost a lot of money. Calvin and Ralph and Geoffrey and every other name you want to mention used to be very affordable designers, and

er go on to Casa La Femme?

how much more expensive their clothes have become has almost nothing to do with inflation. In the eighties, they went from using not particularly good fabrics to using the best, from not particularly good workmanship to couture. But if you look at clothes from the seventies by these designers, they're cheap clothes."

Milbank also thinks Miller's decision to do a runway show is interesting. "If your point of view is that she's using the runway to move herself up the escalator from the fourth to fifth floor," she says, "I would just point out that other people are considering disbanding with the shows, that this is a time when everyone is investigating whether or not the runway means anything. Other people are realizing that runway clothes are kind of a fiction created for the press machine. Geoffrey Beene did a show with mannequins upholstered in his dress fabrics, so it was like a museum exhibition. And everybody copies Geoffrey Beene eventually."

Some fashion pros might question Miller's approach to going about her business—moving from a mass-market enterprise to a more exclusive arena, rather than broadening from a small collection. "I don't know if it's ass-backwards or very smart," says Cavaco, who was at Keeble Cavaco & Duka—the Seventh Avenue public-relations firm—when Miller hired the firm to promote her first runway show. That collection reflected Miller's nostalgia for the sixties and for the days when she shopped at Paraphernalia. It was Mary Quant reconstituted with nineties sex. "Fashion is completely subjective," says Cavaco. "Some seasons I'll wonder, What was she thinking? And the next season it's *the* thing. She's innovative. But sometimes the right thing at the wrong time is the wrong thing."

Miller is fretting. She's attacking a hook-and-eye problem on one of her new designs ("You need to be married or living with somebody to get into that dress," she says) and trying to decide on the hippest restaurant for the post-collection party (last season, she picked Ariel & Michael). "I'm frustrated about the fashion show," she says, "and it puts me in a bad mood." Evening clothes are long, daywear is short—same old same old—and the pressure is on to dazzle. "I feel I do things by formula sometimes, and I want to change my patterns," she says. "I want my own image, my own kind of success, and I'd rather be different than the norm. I don't think designers are really creating fashion, a new look anymore. It's not the runway going to the streets—the streets are going to the runway." She is quite convinced that the grunge look originated with Wasps who let their classic clothes get comfortably ratty, and says the rage for all things sheer this spring came from California. "I've been looking at this long, soft, chifony look for three years now," she says. "It's totally Venice Beach. The New York and European designers are just bringing it to a more expensive market."

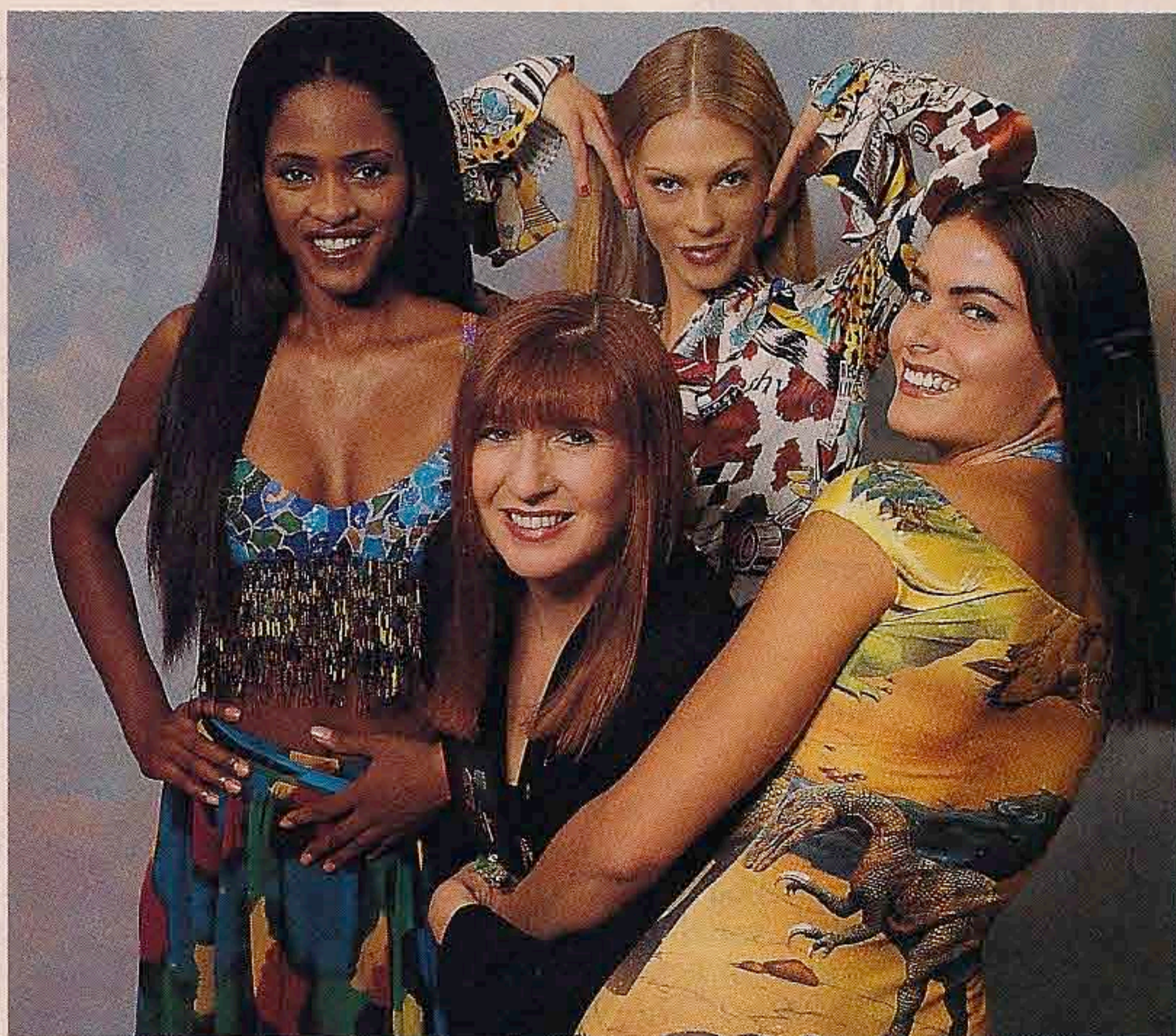
Miller won't be leaving her desk until she finishes the collection. The offices, at 38th Street and Seventh Avenue, have a private gym and a chef who cooks two meals for the staff every day: one real and one diet (stark-naked scallops and broccoli). "I have to fight for good design time," she says, "but most of my inspiration comes from outside the office."

What kind of stimulus do you get at home? You'd have to rent movies or go through all your old books." On a ski trip to Idaho last year, she stayed at the Sun Valley Lodge and leafed through its collection of old movie-star photos. "So I did this whole group in my show—Sun Valley in the forties—and nobody got it. That was one inspiration I could have skipped."

STILL, MILLER SEEMS TO HAVE ACHIEVED A KIND OF BALANCE between work and play. Last year, she made a "baseball dress"—white with curved red stitching like the lines on a ball—and wore it herself, as did Martha Stewart, to opening day at Yankee Stadium. Geena Davis loved it so much she wore the dress to the opening of *A League of Their Own*. Recently Miller took up ice-skating at Sky Rink after she designed an outfit for Kristi Yamaguchi. "I get to do all this cool stuff that's so unrelated to fashion," she says. "It's made my life so interesting and diverse."

Miller tends to outfit the world wherever she goes. Her ties are worn by the waiters at her favorite restaurants—Da Silvano, Coco Pazzo, Arcadia, '21, and Can. The elevator operators in her office building get a new Miller-print tie every few months. Last year, she was a co-chairwoman of Seventh on Sale in San Francisco and a benefit for New York City Ballet called Dance with the Dancers. This year, it's Citymeals-on-Wheels. "All these things end up being like P.R., whatever goodwill tour I'm on, whatever place I go," she says. "Everything is an extension of my life, and if my life is interesting, the product stays interesting."

She's also taken a stash of invitations and tossed them onto the reject pile. "I have 'choice fatigue,'" she admits. Today she's just taking the "girls" in the office to lunch, since they



WITH A FEW OF HER FAVORITE DRESSES.

worked so hard for a magazine spread of her clothes photographed in places named "Oscar," timed for the Academy Awards. Women are always "girls" in Miller-speak. "I think I'm a girl," she says. "Can't change how I feel. I cringe when anybody calls me Mrs."

She insists she has modified the ambition that got her the job—wanting to see everyone in her clothes. "I'm not such a megalomaniac," she says. "I don't need to be the hugest. We have a lot of success without a lot of hype. If I can increase my business another 20 percent every year and keep the profit margin where it is, I don't see how anything could be better." ■