

Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's is a luxury moviegoers can afford

Documentary guides viewers through the opulent Manhattan department store

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 18, 2013 2:07 PM



Montrealer Iris Wagner, an executive producer of *Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's*, doesn't consider herself a fashionista. "My involvement was to bring some of the legacy pieces to the production," she says, "the parts relating to the family business history."

Photograph by: Pierre Obendrauf, The Gazette

MONTREAL - The documentary begins with a declaration from the ageless and acerbic Joan Rivers: "People who take fashion seriously are idiots." Perhaps, but even Rivers makes one exception. Count her among those who worship at the altar of Bergdorf Goodman, the fabled Manhattan department store considered to be the trendsetter for well-heeled fashionistas.

Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's — playing at the Cinéma du Parc — is an homage to the 114-year-old megastore. Its title comes from a 1990 *New Yorker* cartoon by Victoria Roberts, and the sentiment still resonates with countless customers, designers and store employees. They pretty much all gush in describing Bergdorf's place in the pantheon of the world's greatest shops.

Jean Doumanian, who produced many of Woody Allen's films, relates shopping at Bergdorf's to attaining the American dream. Designer Isaac Mizrahi bluntly states: "If your clothes are not at that

place, they have no future.”

This statement no doubt explains how the documentary’s director, Matthew Miele, was able to prevail upon world-class designers like Mizrahi, Giorgio Armani, Karl Lagerfeld, Oscar de la Renta, Vera Wang and Marc Jacobs, among dozens more, to marvel at the store’s importance. Actresses Candice Bergen and Susan Lucci are equally effusive with praise.

Miele points out that U.S. First Ladies have been outfitted there prior to their husbands’ inaugurations, that John Lennon spent more than \$400,000 snapping up 70 fur coats there, that Barbra Streisand did an entire TV concert special from there.

But what’s most fascinating about the doc is not the celebrity endorsements. Rather, it’s the peek at the place’s history, which, while mostly a story of riches, also touches on how the Bernie Madoff financial scandal hurt Bergdorf’s for a spell when many of its free-spending customers got caught in the crunch and vanished from its vaunted aisles.

Also revealing is a glimpse behind the scenes of the ginormous 5th Ave. department store, featuring interviews with Bergdorf’s fashion director, Linda Fargo, considered to be as powerful as famed Vogue editor Anna Wintour, but a whole lot warmer; octogenarian personal shopper Betty Halbreich, who instructs celebs on what to wear and is the subject of a coming HBO show by Girls creator Lena Dunham; and David Hoey, who designs Bergdorf’s spectacular window displays — accessible to those who can’t afford the store’s \$6,000 shoes and \$30,000 coats.

The film also has a local connection: one of its executive producers is Montrealer Iris Wagner, a documentary filmmaker.

Wagner doesn’t consider herself a fashionista by any stretch. And, frankly, she is ambivalent about the idea of having her ashes scattered at Bergdorf’s. Her involvement in the project, apart from a financial investment, is her background in biopics and family-legacy productions. For the last 12 years, she has run Memoirs Productions, which made the acclaimed doc *The Louis Rubenstein Story*, about the 19th-century Montreal figure-skating champ.

A few years back, Wagner connected with producer Steve McCarthy in New York. “He knew me as a legacy documentary producer and invited me to be on the team for *Scatter My Ashes*,” Wagner recalls. “I accepted and I also invested some of my money in the project, because I believe Bergdorf’s to be an iconic business that has lasted over 100 years and should be applauded for its accomplishments.

“My involvement was to bring some of the legacy pieces to the production, the parts relating to the family business history and the Goodman family background.”

Founded by French immigrant Herman Bergdorf in 1899 and later owned and managed by Edwin Goodman and then his son Andrew, the store is no longer run by the Goodman family, but is now part of the Neiman Marcus Group.

Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's is already making a splash. Wagner and her fellow exec producers recently returned from the Cannes Film Festival, where she reports distribution deals were struck with 22 countries, including Japan, China, Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and several in the Middle East.

"Many of those regions couldn't be any further away from New York, and yet there were bidding wars among some distributors in those countries. Like the quote from the movie, it's as if the American dream is epitomized by Bergdorf Goodman."

Wagner confesses that she inhabits a different fashion world from the one depicted in the doc. "I'm not a big shopper. I'm not a shopper at Bergdorf's. But I do believe in preserving family history and family values."

While viewers could be taken aback by Lennon's considerable purchase of furs on a snowy Christmas Eve, Wagner points out that there were 10 similar tales of impulse big-buying that had to be left on the cutting-room floor.

"We had stories of Elizabeth Taylor walking in to buy hundreds of pairs of earmuffs for Christmas gifts," Wagner says. "The old-timers at the store regaled us with so many stories of the whims of the rich and famous who made pilgrimages and shopped there. Some were beyond belief."

Even Bergdorf Goodman probably couldn't buy this kind of publicity. "And they didn't buy it," Wagner stresses.

"The film was put together by private investors. The only thing Bergdorf did was offer us access to their store, their staff and to their designers, in writing 50 letters to their top designers telling them about our project. Within less than 48 hours, we had 125 responses. They all wanted to be involved. A lot of those designers got to be where they are because they got into Bergdorf's."

While many concur that Bergdorf Goodman and perhaps Harrods are the most exclusive department stores in the world, Wagner says many of the A-list designers interviewed for the film also had kind words for another retail giant: "I saw and heard them say that the only other store like Bergdorf's is Holt Renfrew in Canada."

Scatter My Ashes at Bergdorf's is now screening at *Cinéma du Parc*, 3575 du Parc Ave. Call 514-281-1900 or visit cinemaduparc.com.

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