



Steele, backstage at his fashion show in Milan, with models wearing clothes from his "industrial luxe" collection for fall, in fibre-optic nylon,

PROFILE

DESIGNER ON THE VERGE

Lawrence Steele has a remarkable talent. Is that enough?

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

It is exactly 2 P.M. on a grim Tuesday at the end of January, and Lawrence Steele is standing in the middle of a busy street in central London, staring furtively at the stoop of a three-story brick town house. Steele, an American fashion designer, is wearing his favorite black Jil Sander suit, chunky Prada shoes, and a slate-gray parka. He is tall, with creamy dark skin and deep-brown eyes; he looks cool, but he's exceptionally nervous. "The man's a god," Steele whispers in hushed explanation. "It's hard to have a two-hour appointment with a god."

Steele has just come from Milan to see Manolo Blahnik, the world's most famous designer of extremely expensive, extremely high-heeled shoes. Blahnik and his sister, Evangeline, have agreed to make the shoes for Steele's fall collection, which he will present in Milan at the beginning of March. Although Steele is not widely known outside the fashion community, he has been gaining attention for the past few years—thanks in part to the support of powerful people like the Blahniks and Anna Wintour, the editor of *American Vogue*. Blahnik rarely collaborates with young designers, and as Steele mounts the town-house stairs he is beside himself with anxiety and excitement.

Much as he sometimes wishes it were not so, Steele, who is thirty-five, black, and a longtime resident of Italy, is inching fatefully toward stardom. The signs are subtle but distinct. For the first time, he has been asked by a leading Italian manufacturer to design a sportswear collection, and, increasingly, fashion editors are calling him, instead of the other way around. Models like Naomi Campbell have volunteered to appear on his runway because they know that he is under the surveillance of the fashion élite, who have come to

appreciate the spare luxury of his understated clothing.

Evangeline Blahnik greets Steele warmly and ushers him into the main salon, asking him about the plans for his show and listening like a concerned mother as he tells her. With severely cut gray hair, half-glasses dangling from her neck, a yellow cashmere sweater, and simple pearl earrings, she looks more like a fashionable lawyer than like someone who produces the world's most impossibly sexy line of shoes. The Blahniks work out of a small suite of rooms decorated in white and cream. Red tulips sit on a large table covered with shoes in various colors, shapes, and materials. There are five-centimetre spikes and nine-centimetre spikes. The drapes are pulled tight against the gray day; industrial lights line the ceiling; assistants dressed in black offer tea, coffee, and mineral water.

Steele begins to thank Evangeline, but she cuts him off in midsentence. "Lawrence, you know we do this only for the people we love," she says. Then she turns to me and adds, "So many people ask us to do their shows. Dozens, really. Most of them we simply turn away. But Lawrence is special." Before I get a chance to ask how, her brother walks in complaining loudly that he has a bad cold, that his hand hurts, and that his hair is messy. "Don't look at me," he says, to no one in particular. "My hair looks like a croissant." It does, sort of. But he is wearing a beautiful gray three-piece suit over a white cashmere pullover; he looks just as you would expect Manolo Blahnik to look. He starts to rant about the horrors of having to make shoes for shows in London, Paris, Milan, and New York. "I couldn't live without Italians," Blahnik says, referring to the people who make his shoes. "But they lie



leather, angora, and a mink-and-wool mix.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL ROBERTS

to me every single day of their lives."

For the next hour, Steele and the Blahniks discuss colors (this season's favorites are anisette, Bengali, champagne, and graphite), fabrics, and shoe heights. They negotiate the aerodynamics of the heel, the angle of the ankle strap, and the calf width of leather boots. Steele is delighted by a shoe with pony hair. ("That is going to be so very, very hot," Blahnik tells him. "It looks like a hoof. It's so up to the minute, even beyond.") A young woman named Samantha (who Blahnik says "has perfect feet," which, in its own way, must be like hearing from Bill Gates that you write nice software) has come from the shop, nearby, to model the shoes. Steele sees a heel he loves, but he would prefer a thinner strap. Blahnik whips out his sketchpad; Steele nods in silence.

Samantha slips on a black stiletto. "Oh, please, God, Samantha, get it off," Blahnik screams, as if somebody had just plunged a molten rod into his eye. "I hate that shoe. It is so ugly, so hideously ugly, I can't believe I ever made it. Stop." Then she puts on a green leather sling-back. "Walk, Samantha, walk," he tells her. "When you walk in those shoes, it makes the sex sound." He makes a slow, regular clicking with his tongue. "I love that sound." After a while, Blahnik asks Steele if he can see some drawings he has brought with him. Blahnik stretches out on the floor and begins to study them as Steele watches nervously.

"Look at this!" Blahnik shrieks, after examining a sketch for a fetishistically tight black leather jacket. "This is divine, it's brilliant. It's like a fencing jacket or something from the street. My God, I love it. But it must be zipped. Zipped tight." Steele is too overwhelmed to speak. But Blahnik is in rapture. "And this!" he shouts. "These half gloves are

so incredible. I'm dying. This is your best collection yet, Lawrence."

Evangeline, who has waited patiently while her brother descended into this fugue state, interrupts softly: "Mano, we have to let them leave if we want to get his shoes made. What do you want to call that new one you drew for Lawrence?"

"I want to call it the Lawrencia," Blahnik replies. "What else?" Steele



In his workroom, Steele and several assistants fit skintight ski pants.

blinks slowly and says nothing. The show is only a month away.

"I'll FedEx a model to you tomorrow," Evangeline says. "Stay strong. It's going to be fine."

A heavy rain had started to fall while we were indoors. Steele didn't care. He walked right into the middle of the Kings Road. Then he turned around to look at the town house. "Manolo Blahnik named a shoe after me," he said, dreamily. "Now I can go home and die."

IN 1994, with support from Casor, the family firm in Bologna that manufactures his clothes, Steele produced his first collection. He had ap-

prenticed with two of the most famous designers in Italy. For five years, he worked as an assistant to Franco Moschino. In 1990, he signed on with Miuccia Prada, just as she transformed her family's line of classic leather goods into one of the most important clothing empires of the nineties. It was a priceless education: Moschino taught Steele to stop trying to guess what women wanted and start telling them.

Working with Prada was like taking a graduate course in fabrics, textures, and the minimalist approach to design which has dominated fashion for a decade. "She makes the dress, the shoes, the coat you have to have *now*," Steele said when I asked about his old boss. "You are going to be the life of the party in Prada for exactly six months. Then that piece is over, and unless you get a new piece so are you."

Steele says that he makes his clothing to fit women, "not transvestites or mannequins," as he puts it, "but women you might actually encounter on planet Earth. I'm not part of the school of androgyny. Every designer has an ideal. Armani's vision of a woman is lean and long and architectural. For him, breasts just get in the way. My vision

is different. It's glamorous, sensuous, and a little dangerous. And it includes breasts."

With fashion's traditional crucible, the spring shows, rapidly approaching, Steele was in Milan, and the scrutiny had become intense. "As much as I detest it, the show is the biggest and most terrifying thing in my life," he told me one morning over brunch at a Tex-Mex place near his atelier. He had just returned from visiting his parents, in Illinois. His father is a retired jazz musician who spent his professional life playing saxophone for the Air Force; for Christmas, his mother gave Steele the latest self-help book,

"Don't Sweat the Small Stuff at Work."

"When I get back to Milan in early January, it's like I hear a gong go off," he said. "I start waking up in the middle of the night sweating and filled with fear. Sometimes I have to admit to myself how ridiculous this whole business is. I happen to love to make clothes, but that's not what this is about," he went on, his soft voice rising. "It's twenty minutes of girls on a runway. And what happens on that runway in twenty minutes is who you are. It defines you completely, and that just scares me to death."

Although Steele is popular in Italy, Germany, and Japan, he is almost unknown in America. But many of the shops that matter to people willing to spend a thousand dollars or more on a little black dress, like Fred Segal, in Los Angeles, and Jane, in New York, carry his clothes. And stars like Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, and Minnie Driver have called to ask where they can buy them. "All these people are great," Steele said, wearily, of the eternal effort to get celebrities into a designer's clothing. "I am proud they want my clothes, and I am sure they are lovely people. But on another level, I mean, who really gives a shit?

They are women who wear clothes for a living. Frankly, if I thought she really cared about the piece and wanted it I would rather see a waitress in my clothing."

THese days, American designers are nearly worshipped in Europe, where people have fallen for their simple, clean lines. Fashion culture abroad is still nourished by boutiques, which makes it easy for a young designer to display his clothes. Things haven't been as cheerful at home, though, where corporate giants like Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein dominate the industry, and retailers are more demanding and less willing to take chances. Isaac Miz-

rahi was only the best-known and most promising designer to close his doors last year. Todd Oldham, facing anemic sales for his line of ready-to-wear, gave it up to make jeans. Adrienne Vittadini left her business, and a number of other designers did the same. Yet many of the finest young American designers—led by Tom Ford's huge success in remaking Gucci, Marc Jacobs's leadership of Louis Vuitton, and newer trans-

in a Milan restaurant favored by the fashion mob. As we entered, heads turned. Why, I asked Steele. "Because I'm a famous fashion designer," he said, more as a question, and a hopeful one at that, than as an answer. Steele's business has grown by nearly twenty per cent in each of the last three years, but he employs only ten people, and he sells no more than fifteen million dollars' worth of clothes each year. (That figure is less than Mizrahi earned last year; it's also less than Giorgio Armani makes on underwear alone.)

Steele's business manager, his friends, and even his competitors tell him that this is the moment to expand. Steele isn't so sure. "It's like if my name isn't on the side of every bus that goes by I'm a loser," he told me one day. "What is the rush? People want me to be the great black hope. Blacks want me to make it as a black man. Whites like to look at me and say, 'Hey, here is a black man who knows how to move in our society.' All I want to be is what I am, a black man with some white blood and some Jewish blood who is gay. You know, your basic, average American living in Italy."

Steele's heroes are classic designers like Madeline Vionnet, Cristobal

plants like Steele's friend and most obvious competitor Narciso Rodriguez, who quickly became a legend after designing the gown Carolyn Bessette wore when she married John F. Kennedy, Jr.—are succeeding in Europe. Steele is part of that trend—but there is something that sets him apart, something he hates to discuss. There hasn't been a black designer of international importance since Willi Smith, who died in 1987, and Patrick Kelly, who died three years later. Many people believe that Steele, who was raised as a Baptist and sang in his church choir, is the likeliest man to assume their mantle.

One night, we went for a late supper

Balenciaga, Coco Chanel, and, above all, Charles James, who, he notes approvingly, "would rip a sleeve out of a jacket fifty times if it didn't seem right to him." Sketches by all of them line the wall-board and the easels of his atelier. The offices—which were once part of the Indian consulate—have intricately carved wooden ceilings and track lighting. Dog-eared copies of *Vogue* from every country where the magazine is published lie along the floor, on every desk, and on shelves. I noticed some pictures by Helmut Lang and Jil Sander and asked Steele what he thought of those designers. "Helmut Lang is the Armani of the new millennium," he replied. "And



Fragile leather boots by Manolo Blahnik wait to be assigned an outfit.

Jil Sander's clothes are the best. She will give you a piece you will wear for ten years, and when you are done you are going to wrap it up and save it for your daughter."

Steele is so reserved that it is often difficult to tell what he thinks of his own work. But, when I asked him where he would be in ten years, he answered without hesitation. "It will be just as I imagine," he said. "Like Armani or Versace. There will be a giant machine pumping out these seamless collections, and I will be exactly the same, stressed beyond belief, wanting to make things better, and completely in agony over everything I am doing." Then he added, "That is, if I can bring myself to do it at all."

The issue may be resolved sooner than he would like, because the half-life of a young designer can be measured in months. In the fashion business, either you catch the wave or it drowns you. Anna Wintour senses the tension and ambivalence in Steele. "Lawrence is really on the edge right now," she told me on the telephone one day from her office in New York, taking pains to point out that she was wearing one of Steele's creations, an eighteen-hundred-dollar stretch-cashmere jacket trimmed in silver fox. "He makes beautiful, beautiful clothes. But he does need to want it. I'd have to say that if there is anything that

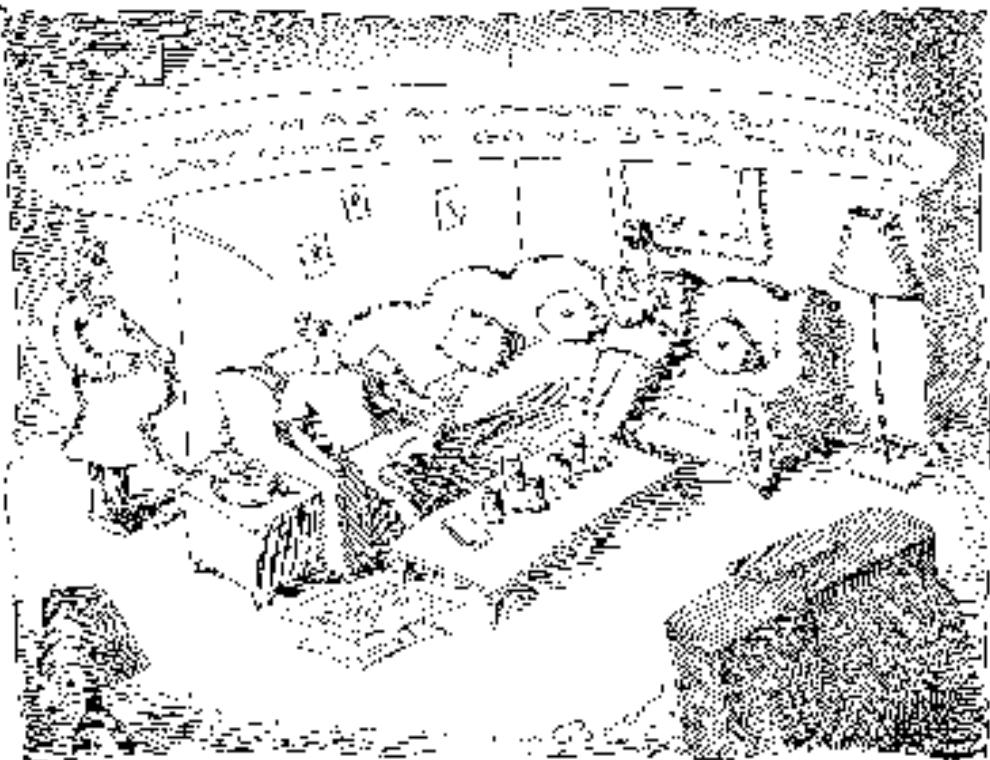
will hold him back from becoming a huge and famous designer, it is Lawrence himself." Another editor, also an admirer of Steele's, put it more sharply: "I have to be honest. Lawrence is very, very talented. He is sincere and honest and genuinely thoughtful. But this is Milan. Extremely major people in this business are nasty and pushy and grabby. Lawrence doesn't qualify."

ON my third day in Milan, I met Steele at sunrise on the vast marble steps of Mussolini's Stazione Centrale. It is one of Italy's most depressing Fascist structures, built not long after the movement was founded, in 1919. The station is so oppressively huge that nearly everyone who enters looks defeated. Steele held his own, though. Wearing gray pants, a black sweater, and one of the many dark, oversized parkas he tends to favor, he emerged from the metro in a driving rain, right on time for the train ride to Bologna, where his women's-wear line is manufactured. Steele travels to Bologna at least once a week—always on the train—to visit Casor, a firm known for its high standards if not exactly for its hipness. When he worked for Franco Moschino, Casor made some of the clothes. A few years later, when Steele was at Prada, the matriarch of the fam-

ily, Gianna Cassoli, called to tell him that if he ever wanted to strike out on his own Casor would help make it happen. "That call was all the push I needed," he said, as the clouds broke over the rich, green countryside of Emilia-Romagna. "I had *no* idea what I was getting myself into. None. But I always had this vision: Lawrence Steele, designer. My middle name is Dion, and I can remember, when I was fifteen, learning about Dior. In my mind I knew then there was Dior but that one day there would be me, Dion.

"It was around then that I saw 'Mahogany,'" he said, apologizing for even mentioning the 1975 movie starring Diana Ross which convinced him that a life filled with champagne, fast cars, and an endless loop of travel between Paris and Rome was worth contemplating. "I know how aggressively uncool and stupid it sounds. But it changed my life completely. She was black. She was from Chicago, and in the movie she went to the Art Institute of Chicago," which Steele also would attend. "Around that time, there was a girl I knew who entered beauty pageants. I drew a dress, really just to make fun of her—it was completely a joke. But she had the dress made. Damn. It was panne velvet and long. I was just shocked, numb. It was like, whoa! You can draw a dress and somebody is going to make the goddam thing. Then she won the pageant. At that moment, I was hooked for life.

"Who knows where I would be if she had never had that thing made," he went on. "Maybe I would have a gas station in Rantoul"—the Illinois town where his parents now live. Instead, Steele graduated from the art institute, in 1985. Because his father was in the Air Force, he had spent much of his youth on bases in Europe, so leaving the United States didn't seem strange or difficult. "America is a planet," Steele said. "Calvin Klein is like Microsoft or I.B.M. If you are young and you want to make clothes, you have a few choices: you can be like him, you can work for him, or you can do your own thing and be a



New York downtown phenomenon, favored by a hundred and fifty incredibly cool people, and known by no one."

He moved, briefly, to Japan and then to Italy, because nobody produces higher-quality tailoring than the Italians. Steele has now lived in Milan for thirteen years; his Italian is fluent; and he owns a beautiful, spare penthouse apartment, which he has shared for several years with his Italian boyfriend.

I asked him if he ever felt racism in Italy. "When I got here, I was sometimes treated a little strangely," he said. "Nothing I wasn't used to, but people would look at me and say, 'Oh, wow, can we see you dance, man?' I was a curio. Then the immigration situation changed, and suddenly Africans—Moroccans and Tunisians, especially—started to arrive by the score. And people just realized I was what I was."

For a while after he arrived, Steele tried to live the dream that he had concocted for himself after watching "Mahogany." "There were times when I got a little lost, I would have to admit," he said, smiling fondly. "Even now I sometimes meet people who come up to me and say, 'Hey, I met you a few years ago in that club everyone used to go to. You were the one with no pants on.'"

Three years ago, Steele was included in a list published by *Harper's Bazaar* of twenty-one designers whom the editors had identified as "the next hotshots." A few, like the British eccentric Alexander McQueen, who designs for the house of Givenchy, and the Cypriot designer Hussein Chalayan, have flourished. Most, however, are out of business. "It's a funny thing how one designer will make it and another one will not, despite the talent," Dawn Mello, the president of Bergdorf Goodman, told me. "None of us really understand it. It's more than talent that is necessary. You need to be on fire."

When Steele described one of the most harrowing days of his professional life—and his biggest break by far—he started to tremble. "It was two years ago," he said. "Through a friend we convinced Anna Wintour to come see my clothes. She had about ten minutes between shows. I arrived late—not a wise career move. I was sweating profusely, and I was ripping the clothes off the model, just literally tearing them



"My goodness, Marion. Our dishes are so spotless I can see deep within my hollow, tormented soul!"

right off her back, so that she could get out there and show Anna more of what I had. Anna said nothing. I was in anguish, literally wanting to die. Then she sort of smiled and left."

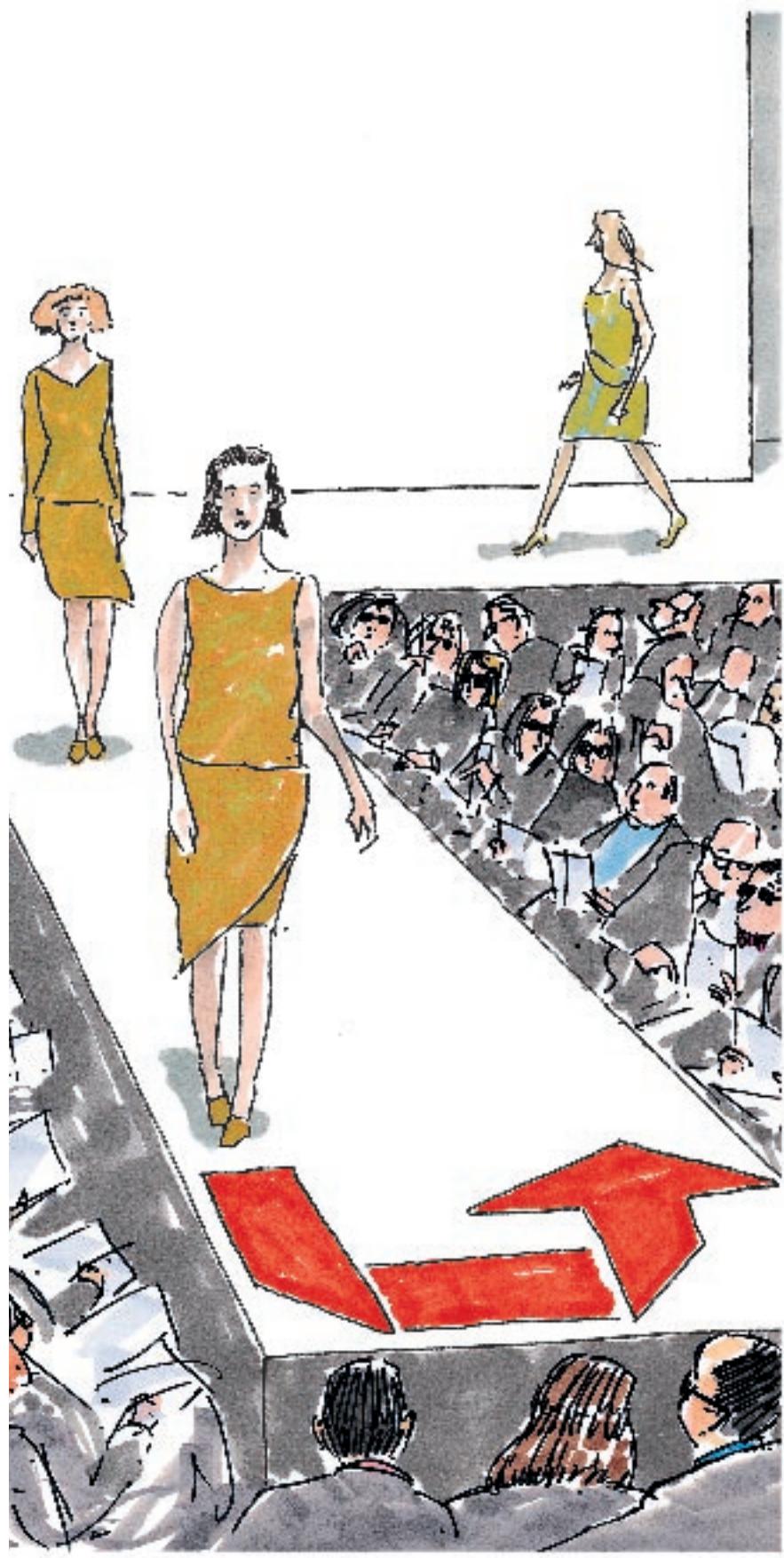
The next year, Wintour attended Steele's show—and she has stayed in touch with him, offering advice and support. I asked if there were other women he would particularly like to dress. "I would just die if Jodie Foster would get into my clothes," he said. "I have had a crush on her since I was six. Everything she does is so sophisticated, she has such integrity and intelligence." Then he quickly added, "But would I ever call her up and give her my clothes to advertise them, particularly in public at some event? My God, never."

BY the time we arrived at the Casor factory, Steele was tense. He had just been informed that his show was scheduled for noon on the first of March, the beginning of Fashion Week.

It's the slot he wanted, but it gave him less than five weeks to design dozens of outfits, and choose and order fabrics. Then he'd have to match the colors, make certain the fabrics worked the way he intended them to, supervise the tailoring, select the shoes (and the models) to go with them all, choose music to drive what is essentially a theatrical performance, find out the true (as opposed to the public) sizes of the models, and, most important, keep a close eye on the manufacturing process, to insure that the clothing was made exactly according to his designs.

Steele also had about a month to turn out his first sportswear collection—for the highly successful Italian manufacturer Alberto Aspesi, who has also asked him to design uniforms for a new airline. Steele's knitwear, which has grown rapidly in sales over the past two years and is now sold at Bendel's, also needed immediate attention. But what worried Steele most was Casor. Al-

SKETCHBOOK BY MICHAEL CRAWFORD



though the Cassolis are great tailors and have always treated him like a member of the family, Steele felt that something was missing. "They are not moving with me," he conceded. "They still see me as that bright young assistant at Prada. When I take a two-hundred-dollar-a-metre sequinned fabric from a French company and cut it with scissors, and sew it onto a dress and just leave it sort of hanging there, it drives them nuts. They want to finish it; they want it neat. That is their view of the world. But it is not mine."

A car was waiting at the Bologna station to take us to the Casor factory. The building, on the outskirts of the city, is architecturally unusual, with oversized windows and a glass-roofed atrium. Birds are constantly killing themselves by flying into the windows and roof. Inside, it is filled with modern art: Warhols and Hockneys from the family's extensive collection.

Steele, holding a book of fabric swatches, strode into his workroom, with two assistants. A model was sitting around in tights and a T-shirt; she would spend the day trying on a variety of partially made outfits and half-formed ideas. Steele and his assistants sat at a long table with a pile of fabrics, and they tried to draw what they want the firm to make. "The seam won't hold," Kookseo Koo, his first assistant designer, told him, after Steele offered a swatch of gray cashmere that he wanted to turn into an egg-shaped coat. "It needs to be tighter." Steele grunted and asked the model to try on a tapered pair of gray pants. "Classic," Koo said, in a better mood. "An absolute hit."

Steele's success has helped the factory, which employs forty-five people, through a rough patch. Casor has other clients, but Steele is clearly its greatest hope for the future. "We have watched Lawrence grow from the beginning," Stefano Cassoli, the firm's young managing director, told me. "Each season, his collections get better. His potential is obvious." Last year, Steele accounted for about ten million dollars in sales—more than forty per cent of Casor's revenues. "We count on him," Cassoli said. "And I think he counts on us."

For lunch, we all trooped off to a giant Bolognese restaurant, where

Steele had to beg the Cassolis to hold the meal to two courses. As we ate, a television displayed the men's fashion shows from Milan. Naomi Campbell could be seen parading at the head of a line of men on the runway during the Versace presentation. "He knew how to cut a garment, and not everyone does," Steele said of Versace, shaking his head mournfully. "But it is just so gross when a designer is that present in the clothes. I have no respect for it. You should be able to look at something and say, 'Oh, what a pretty dress.' Period."

I had asked earlier, after hearing from so many people that Steele was gifted but perhaps a bit unfocussed, if he thought he had the spine necessary to make it as a major figure in the fashion world. His eyes turned to ice. He said that he would prefer to be nice, and that being nice had got him pretty far in the business. But, he said, "I am not an idiot. And I am not working twenty-four hours a day for nothing. I can be just as vicious and cutthroat as I need to be. Just because I don't enjoy it doesn't mean I won't do it.

"It would be a tragedy if I left Casor," he said, mumbling half to himself. "People could lose their jobs, the factory would be endangered. But I am beginning to think if I don't move soon I'll never move."

WHEN Giorgio Armani puts on a fashion show, he does it on a private catwalk that looks like a Noh amphitheatre, built beneath his palazzo, in the center of Milan. Lawrence Steele lives in a different world: he spends about a hundred thousand dollars to present his collection on a rented runway in Milan's convention center; he shows it when he is told to, and if people have to wait too long they leave.

Still, in early February Steele didn't have much to worry about. His show was scheduled for his favorite hour, at the start of the fall collections. And there was even better news: Madonna's stylist called. Madonna was about to make a cosmetics ad and she seemed interested in appearing in Steele's clothes.

The mood soon changed. Steele learned that his friend Narciso Rodriguez, the person with whom he is most often compared, was scheduled to show immediately after him, at

1 P.M. That meant many things, all of them bad. A model can't possibly appear in shows scheduled next to each other—it takes too long to get ready. Since both designers like to use the same girls, and Rodriguez, who has a powerful backer, was able to pay more, Steele lost every one of his favorite models. But there were greater dangers. If his show started late—which is common—buyers and the press would have to decide whether to abandon Steele and race across town in order to make it to Rodriguez instead. Worse, Steele realized that if the press did write about him reporters would inevitably compare the two young expatriates. Two weeks before the show, with all this in mind, Steele said, "The pressure really got to me. And then this thing with Narciso. I just sort of crumpled." Five days before the show, he had not received a single piece of clothing from the factory; the shoes from Blahnik were beautiful, but he still wasn't sure they would match properly. He was used to working close to the edge, but this time he felt as if he were about to tumble over it.

Finally, on Friday night, the clothes appeared, along with a team of ten emergency seamstresses, who deployed their sewing machines on his desk and throughout his atelier. By this point, Steele was essentially living in the studio, watching models try on clothes, bouncing endlessly back and forth across the giant room in a wheeled desk chair. He spent the days trying to choose the right clothing to illustrate his theme of "industrial luxe"—lots of futuristic combinations, like leather bonded to cashmere, silk mixed with metal-based fabrics, neoprene and satin. There were zippers everywhere and hooded fur cowls and graphite leather gloves. "Boots," he barked at an assistant on Sunday, after she selected for a model a pair of slingbacks to go with pants. "Boots with pants. It's a law. Like 'i' before 'e,' except after 'c.'" When I asked him if he was making a little black dress, he took one off the rack and told me it was supposed to be like

"a piece of scrap metal," although it costs about as much as a bridge. He left most of his delicate and feminine creations out of the show. "This event is not about clothes," he said, sternly. "This is about fashion."

On Sunday night, disaster struck: the zippers on Blahnik's boots started to shred. One of Steele's employees had insisted that they be made of metal instead of Teflon, and it didn't work, as Blahnik had tried to tell the person. By midnight, the Blahniks had dispatched a workman to a factory near Milan to labor through the night to save the boots—and the show. "What kind of human being does this for a living?" Steele asked, backstage, five minutes before his show began. He was exhausted but relaxed, because it seemed that there was nothing left to go wrong. But as soon as he sent the first model into the floodlights the backstage video system failed, and, as he put it, "We lost all contact with the planet." At that point, after six months of planning, the labor of scores of people, a few dozen strategy sessions, and tens of thousands of dollars' worth of research, Lawrence Steele started to count—each time he got to fifteen he pushed another model onto the stage and hoped that it would look like a fashion show.

Somehow, it did. When he finally took his turn on the runway, walking hand in hand with Jacquetta Wheeler—one of the year's more prominent new faces, who was wearing a silver chain-mail dress and who takes every step as if she were just learning to walk—the applause was genuine and prolonged. As Steele feared, he received almost no press coverage, but early orders from buyers have been stronger than ever. Editors visiting his showroom have been pleased, too. "It's a step forward," one of them told me after examining the collection. "Not a great leap forward. But a solid step. It's impressive, but the question remains: When is he going to get more aggressive?" The night of the show, Steele celebrated at a new Thai restaurant on the desolate edge of the city, surrounded by empty buildings and silent motorways. "I am going to go home and sleep for a week," he said after dinner. "Then I am going to get up and become a fashion designer. And this time I mean it." ♦

