## **PROFILES**

## HIGH-HEEL HEAVEN

A visit to the madcap world of Manolo Blahnik.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

The first thing I noticed when I entered the two-hundred-year-old town house in Bath that serves as Manolo Blahnik's weekend retreat was the alligator. About three and a half feet long, with olive-brown skin and black hatch marks flecking its body, it was sprawled imperiously across a Queen Anne table at the end of the foyer. The jaws were parted, and the teeth shimmered in the fading light.

It was a dismal, rainy afternoon, and we had just come from lunch—though Blahnik had been in no mood to eat. He has a bad back, and it was giving him so much trouble that day that he wore a brace. We rushed through the meal and then walked along the cobblestoned streets toward his house, which sits in the middle of one of those Georgian crescents that provided Jane Austen with just the right setting for "Persuasion." He perked up the second we arrived. Opening the door, Blahnik swept into the hallway and cried out, "Honey, I'm home!"Then, with a manic swirl, he tossed his powder-blue cashmere sports jacket across a bust of the eighteenthcentury actor David Garrick, raced toward his alligator, and embraced it. With the stuffed animal nestled in his arms, Blahnik turned, and, in a voice that somehow blends the diction of Winston Churchill with the accent of the Gabor sisters, said, "There is simply no creature on earth that compares to a Louisiana alligator. Not iguana or python or ostrich or anything else you might want to make into a shoe. I suppose saying that makes me an enemy of the people. I'm sorry. I say kill them humanely, with a shot or something. But give us the skins. I mean, can you imagine where I would be today without wonderful babies like this? Cahnn you i-maah-gine?"

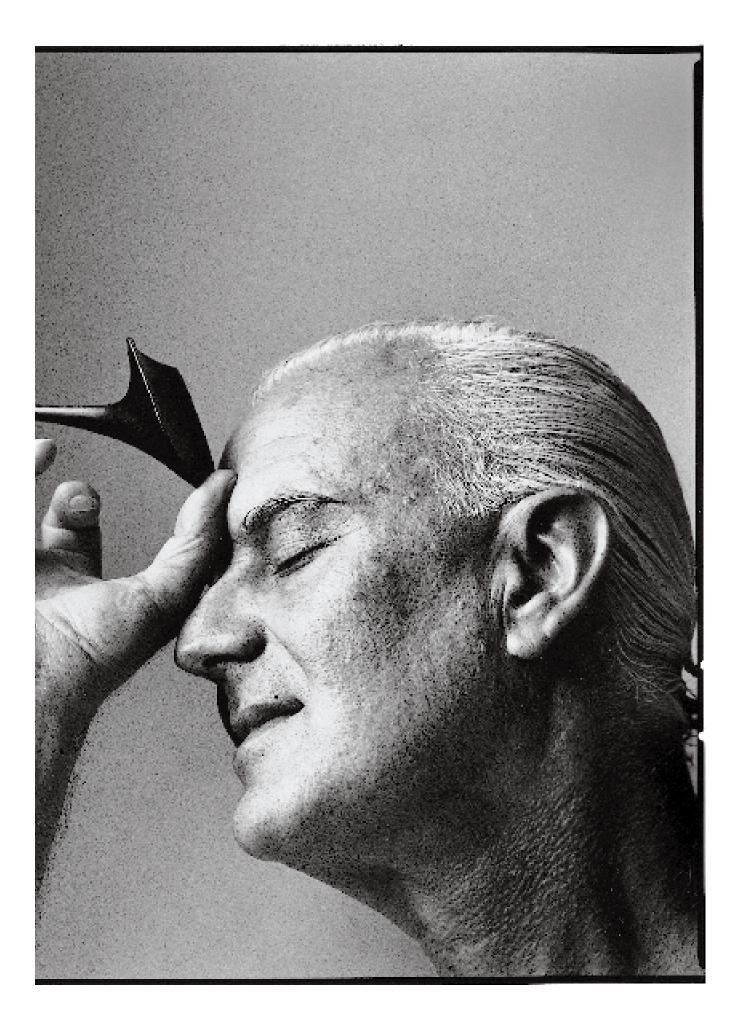
Apart from its symbolic stature—as

something forbidden, luxurious, and astonishingly expensive—alligator skin is no more essential to the shoes of Manolo Blahnik than lesser leathers, or, for that matter, the dozens of other materials he relies on: satins, silks, brocade, crystal, silver lamé, sequins, rhinestones, buckles, bangles, beads, Velcro, pearls, neoprene, rubber, rawhide, chinchilla, lace, mesh, or (for the first time this year, but only for a few of his luckiest and wealthiest customers) diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. They are all just grace notes in the symphony of footwear Manolo Blahnik has composed over the past thirty years.

In most seasons, the product of another designer—a perilously highheeled sandal by Jimmy Choo, for example, or a snakeskin sling-back by Christian Louboutin—will become the shoe of the moment. But Blahnik persists, and his creations have become an obsession for thousands of women (and not a few men). With their delicate straps and definitive spikes, Blahnik's shoes are objects of such fanatical devotion that one can easily imagine a fetish known as "the Manolo" retroactively airbrushed onto the pages of "Justine." "Manolo Blahnik's shoes are as good as sex," Madonna has said. "And they last longer." Joan Rivers, who has been an adherent to the cult of Blahnik for many years, and who claims to exercise each day in a pair of his flats, put it more directly. "His shoes are slut pumps," she told me on the phone one day while she was on her treadmill. "You just put on your Manolos and you automatically find yourself saying 'Hi, sailor' to every man that walks by.'

Shoes have always had meaning. The Chinese bound the feet of women, and the Victorians forced them into confining footwear; simple, comfortable shoes emerged during the French Revolution







"Is that your cell phone or are you just glad to see me?"

to go along with the idea of equality. Manolo Blahnik's shoes are about sexbold, even slightly menacing sex. They are erotic and feminine and extravagant without ever quite becoming vulgar. They represent a kind of haughty independence. Joan Crawford would have worn them. So would Dorothy Parker. In the fulsome language of Hollywood trade papers, fuming starlets no longer walk out over the selection of the wrong leading man; they "put their Manolo down." When society women don't get what they want, they "wheel on their Blahniks" and flee, heels clicking. The aura of Blahnik hovers over the television series "Sex and the City," where, as Carrie Bradshaw, Sarah Jessica Parker programs her answering machine to say simply, "It's Carrie. I'm shoe shopping." Parker was a Blahnik fan before she

knew who he was. "You have to learn how to wear his shoes—it doesn't happen overnight," she told me. "But by now I could run a marathon in a pair of Manolo Blahnik heels. I can race out and hail a cab. I can run up Sixth Avenue at full speed. I've destroyed my feet completely, but I don't care. What do you really need your feet for, anyway?"

Blahnik's shoes often cost twice as much as those of his competitors, yet many models sell out overnight. They seem to weigh little more than a fistful of feathers and are always made by hand; dozens of people attend to each shoe before it is finished. Still, I wondered if Blahnik's workmanship was really so different from that of other designers. To the uninitiated eye it can be hard to tell. So I called Cynthia Mar-

cus, who is in charge of ladies' shoes at Neiman Marcus, which sells about thirty thousand pairs of Manolo Blahniks each year (at prices that start at about five hundred dollars), to ask where, exactly, he fits in. There was silence on the line while she took a deep breath to roll the question around in her head. "Honey," she said finally, "how important is Manolo Blahnik? I'll tell you. If he wanted me to change the name of the store to Neiman Blahnik, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

The best shoes in the world are made L in Italy, and Blahnik keeps four factories there working constantly. He sells nearly a hundred thousand pairs of shoes and boots in America every year and could easily double or triple that number, yet he has no desire to expand. You cannot buy Manolo Blahnik shoes in most European countries or in many American stores. Although he is a citizen of Spain, he makes only token efforts to sell shoes there. He has no stores in Italy, relies on a single outlet in France, and works out of the same cramped shop off the King's Road in London that he has used for twenty-seven years. Blahnik has turned away many offers to make him part of the new wave of conglomeration that has consumed the fashion industry. His sister, Evangelina, and his American partner, George D. Malkemus III, run the company. But as a designer Blahnik works alone. He has no deputies, assistants, entourage, or hangers-on. He draws every shoe himself, and in many cases he also stretches the leather, glues the soles in place, and whittles the last—the wooden form used to shape the shoe. When his shoes are ready to ship, he will sometimes stand on the factory loading platform with a lighter in his hand, singeing loose threads.

Blahnik calls his house in Bath "the shoe mausoleum," and he spends as much time there as possible, because he says it's the only place he can truly escape or relax. But Blahnik never escapes, and he never relaxes. He travels constantly between London, where he lives, and Milan, with trips to America and Asia. ("Those little Japanese women are simply mad for me," he said one day, as I watched him sketch shoes for Japanese Vogue. "Can you imagine?") Blahnik,

who is fifty-seven, works incessantly, turning dozens of ideas into richly detailed and provocative drawings for the three hundred styles of shoe he will make each year. "If you don't come see what I have in Bath," he said one day when he invited me to visit, "you cannot possibly understand how strange I really am."

Blahnik has a daunting, almost imperial bearing; he was born to wear a cape. A friend once described him as Claus von Blahnik—as played, of course, by Jeremy Irons. He dresses crisply, in bespoke clothing. His silver hair is always gelled and his aquiline nose seems to hover in the air like a small bird. It is impossible not to notice him. The Four Seasons in Milan, which is the preferred billet for the nomadic fashion crowd, is often filled with the most jaded people on earth. Yet, once, as I was waiting in the lobby, I saw a dozen heads turn away from Naomi Campbell to a more distant figure: Manolo had entered the room. And, as soon as he did, Campbell's head turned, too.

Like many of his colleagues at the top of the fashion business, Blahnik is used to getting his way. He can be petulant and eccentric in several languages. In Milan, where he spends nearly three months a year, he must have Room 212 at the Four Seasons. At the St. Regis in New York, it's the tenth floor or nothing. Blahnik will travel to America only on what he calls "the quick plane"—the Concorde. At home, he eats little; on the road, when he can't dine in the hotel, he tries to eat at the same restaurant each night. Blahnik takes three baths a day. ("Are you kidding? When it's hot, I take six.") He calls his eightyfive-year-old mother, in the Canary Islands, almost as often as he bathes. He would never dream of travelling without his version of the nuclear football: a custom-made leather valise full of bonehandled hairbrushes, antique shaving utensils, fifty-year-old Italian linens, and an ample supply of silver mirrors, all of which would have been standard equipment for a gentleman's portmanteau two hundred years ago.

Manolo Blahnik has the attention span of a kitten. He rarely finishes a sentence. One minute he will be talking with passion about Nubian folk music, which he reveres. And the next he is launched on a critique of young designers, who he feels are far too reliant upon MTV and other artifacts of an instant society. ("These little kiddies today, they don't even know what a shoe is. To them design is what they see in magazines. It's not based on human life. They will suddenly scream, 'Oh my God! My collection is going to be so very Anna May Wong,' because they stayed up late one night and saw a movie. Please.") He reads widely in English and French, and fluently enough in Spanish and Italian. ("My life is a torrential river of books," he told me, and then went on to describe, in torrents, the plot of the latest novel by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, who is one of his favorite writers.)

Blahnik appears to have seen every

movie, and he loves discussing casts, crews, and antecedents. Once, I asked whether he had seen the most recent film version of "Romeo and Juliet." He answered, but it is never possible to discuss one film with Blahnik unless you are willing to talk about ten: "Do you mean the Baz Luhrmann 'Romeo and Juliet,' with Claire Danes? I loved it. . . . I loved it. The best 'Romeo and Juliet' in my memory was Renato Castellani in the fifties, early, with what's the name of that girl, I don't even know the name of that girl now, the English girl . . . and Laurence Harvey. Too old, both of them. But a beeeautiful movie. And then I loved also the other version with Zeffirelli. It was cute. The teen-age one. Don't push me to go on, I'll go mad. But I love that new one that was set in California. It was MTV nonstop.



But that's all right. I'm not mad about that child, though. Leonardo. The boy."

For a man who inhabits a world ruled by ephemera, Blahnik despises change. He got so upset when the Spanish company that produced his favorite pomade went bankrupt that he considered trying to buy and revive it. (Not long ago, when we were together in Milan, he saw, in one of the city's most expensive pharmacies, a French hair gel, Tenax, his chosen substitute. After the clerk said that the store had sixtyone tubes in stock, he promptly bought them all.) So when Blahnik told me that I would have to travel to Bath and see his shoe archive to appreciate him in all his strangeness, I was pretty sure he was selling my imagination a bit short. I had no idea.

anolo Blahnik only has eyes for **▲**feet. He says that he simply cannot stand the thought of a naked body. When he stops by the Prado, the Louvre, or the British Museum, as he does often, he can talk about the sculptures with great sophistication and in precise detail as long as you ignore the torso. He can distinguish the work of Praxiteles from the Aphrodite of Doidalses with a glance at their chiselled toes. He will talk about the feet of fishermen for hours. (They are ideal, Blahnik says, because a life spent barefoot on the sand "rubs them to perfection.") He also has opinions about arches (the higher the better) and the proper alignment of a woman's toes (the second toe should be slightly longer than the big one). Slovenliness appalls him, and the words "clean" and "groomed," when applied to a human being, are the highest accolades he has to offer. ("Jennifer Aniston came into the store last year. She's a cute little girl, groomed to perfection, and, my God, is she clean.") Blahnik cannot abide bright shades of nail polish, or even the newer, more fashionable muddy dark shades; he finds them all vulgar. ("You should use crimson or a nude color," he says, sternly. "Or clear varnish. And that is all.") He can stare at heels all day, and then go home and draw them all night. "I'm simply mad for extremities," he said. "I always have been. The rest of the body seems so dull to me."

Thinking about shoes seems to give

Blahnik the energy of a switched-on teen-ager. At lunch, he had been sour and in pain. By the time we arrived at his house, which is shrouded in wisteria, his mood had changed completely. Blahnik likes to work there; the ground floor has an airy study with a large drafting table and a mesmerizing picture of James Dean. "I don't like beautiful boys in general," he said when he saw me staring at the photo. "But he was so much the most beautiful boy." In his bedroom, Blahnik has a Horst photograph that his sister and her daughter gave him; it's of a pair of disembodied legs and feet. He told me that Horst, whom he admired greatly, died in November because "he couldn't bear to confront the new century." When Blahnik talks about artists whose aesthetic vision he admires, his voice soars an octave. And it soars often. "Manolo lives for beauty," André Leon Talley, an editor at Vogue and one of Blahnik's oldest American friends, told me. "He is the Proust of shoes. Ugliness makes him bleed." There are books lying everywhere in the house, essays mostly, and biographies, but also great piles of art books, on subjects ranging from medieval churches to nineteenth-century stonemasonry. There are also dozens of videos-everything from "Alphaville" to "Pleasantville" to "Z."

By the time we climbed the great stone staircase to the third floor-which is where the shoes begin—Blahnik was practically vibrating. He told me that the house, which offers sweeping views of the pale tiles and red rooftops of Bath, had once been occupied by the actress Helen Mirren. She should see it now. The drawing rooms were built for tea dances and whist. Now every room has cupboards that stretch from the floor to the ceiling, and each shelf is filled with shoes. Imelda Marcos wouldn't believe this place! Pumps! Sling-backs! Sandals! Mules! Shoes in the bathroom and the attic and the closets and the halls. Shoes stuffed into boxes and packed under beds. Shoes have taken over the guest rooms, the bedrooms, the studies. There is only one from each pair, but there are thousands, and they represent almost everything Manolo Blahnik has ever made. "Look at this place," he said with real pride as we reached the landing. "There

are shoes here to make you vomit."

When Blahnik opened the first of the cupboard doors on the third floor, it was as if he had stumbled into a children's fable, something he had never seen before. He gasped. "Look. Look at these shoes. Look. This is what I love," he said, picking up a shoe that would seem, to most eyes, the antithesis of his style. It was flat, dark, heavily brocaded. A court shoe with almost no heel. "These are the things that people don't want from me. The people want high heels. They want sex. They want danger. That's the disease. I'm so incredibly bored with sex. I don't want to hear about it ever again."

Blahnik was whipping through his collection now. He grabbed a satin mule, the shoe he is perhaps most famous for-the decadent backless bedroom slipper that he reinvented as a bawdy street shoe. It is a style that has been copied by every other designer. "Here it is. The mule. It's horrible! What was I thinking? If a shoe fetishist saw this, he would go nuts." Then he grimaced. "I have one, you know . . . a shoe fetishist. He is in prison somewhere in America. He writes me letters. Sends them by express mail. He is a madman. He says"—and now he slipped into a perfect imitation of Hannibal Lecter—"'The only thing that will get me through the day is seeing a pair of Manolo Blahnik heels.' Do you have any idea how much that freaks me out?"

This seemed a bit odd coming from the man who took stiletto heels from the world of prostitutes and introduced them into society. Didn't you create it all, I asked? What was the point of the Absolut Blahnik advertisement, for example, the one with the model drifting on a raft in the moat of the Vittskövle Castle, wearing only a bathing suit and a pair of Blahnik's shiny, spiked, black leather boots, which crept up above her knee—boots that would have sent Leopold von Sacher-Masoch into an uncontrollable frenzy? It's not as if the sexual power of the high heel were unknown. High heels change a woman's posture and her gait. They accentuate the length and contour of the ankle and leg while curving the foot, making it seem smaller. High heels are an erotic pedestal. They tilt the breasts ₹



 $From \ the \ Blahnik \ archives, shoes \ embellished \ with \ beads, feathers, silk \ embroidery, silver \ mesh, \ wolf fur, \ and \ chinchilla.$ 

forward, pull the stomach in, and push the rear out. And that's before you take a single teetering, contorted step. As William A. Rossi observed in his bizarre 1976 book, "The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe," "Women have always had an affinity for fragile foundations and willowy walking, and men have always responded erotically to the sight of it."

Blahnik knows this well. "I understand that some people associate high heels with sex," he conceded. "To me, there is so much more. I happen to love artifice in a woman. Without that, there is no mystery. High heels create artifice. It's the way you walk. You create a motion, a space, it's sinuous. You become a living sculpture. Even if it's not successful sometimes. It's so exciting. It's the transformation that I live for. The sexual part means nothing."

This kind of talk drives George Malkemus crazy. Malkemus, who has run the American end of the business for nearly twenty years, is a pleasant, compact fellow with a good head for numbers and an uncanny ability to endure Blahnik's tectonic shifts in mood. "I have heard it a thousand times," he told me. "All I can say is that when Manolo sees the shoe, just when he sees it, it's orgasmic. For him, that shoe isn't really about sex. The shoe is sex."

Obsessives stalk Blahnik. On the train from Bath to London one day, a woman recognized him and started talking about shoes. After a few minutes, he stood up and said, "Madam, I am sorry to say that I am visiting my niece, who lives in Swindon. I must now leave the train," and he fled. One terribly famous movie star used to wander frequently into his New York store and sit for hours, watching women try on shoes. Blahnik appears each year in America with his new collections for Neiman Marcus, and women swoon when he shows up. "When Manolo goes out to our Beverly Hills store, it's an absolute mania," Cynthia Marcus told me. "You cannot believe what happens. We will do two or three hundred thousand dollars' worth of business in a couple of days. In one store. The women fall all over him. They bring him bags full of shoes to sign. They are insane.'

Blahnik autographs all the shoes,

high on the arch, so his signature won't wear away. It is a peculiar fact about Blahnik that women feel they can tell him anything. Customers will describe the most intimate details of their sex lives—and the effect his shoes have had on them. There are times when their comments leave him gasping for air. "Sometimes I just have to say, 'Madam, please, I must ask you to refrain,' " he told me in Bath as we worked our way through his shoes. "Honestly, where were these people raised?"

In June, a book about Blahnik and his **⊥**work will appear in England, and, with the help of his twenty-six-yearold niece, an architect who recently graduated from Cambridge, he has spent a good deal of time cataloguing and organizing his shoes. The book is written by a British journalist, and Blahnik has no connection with the project, although he was granted the right to approve the pictures. He views the book mostly as a way to put his designs into some coherent order. But Blahnik wants me to see that, while he loves his work, he doesn't take it all that seriously. He pulled out a classic hiking boot made in Corinthian leather and a construction boot with a threeinch heel. ("Isn't this faaab?") "This is called the Prairies," he said of another. "Look, it's an Indian moccasin in high heels. And this is quite funny, and what about the L. L. Bean look over here. And look, look! There are work-boot high heels. Isn't that camp? And these are high-heeled gardening shoes. Very practical."

He means that, by the way. Blahnik says he loves it when women wear his shoes in the mud. He may be obsessed with cleanliness, but he likes his shoes to get a workout. "Best of all would be in stables," he told me. "I want them to be dirty." Blahnik remembers the genesis of every sandal or sling-back that lines the wall. "Look at this—isn't that sick?—it's for a wedding in Africa, where the girls have to walk in high-heeled boots." He held out an elaborate and beautifully made ankle boot, fashioned from pony skin, with open toes and lots of eyelets.

I asked what he meant about a wedding in Africa. "I don't know. I made it up. It's not normal. You wouldn't wear it

in England. It has to be hot. In Africa you can wear this. Not here. In Africa." He raked through dozens of shoes at great speed. "This one is Kate Moss's favorite shoe. Absolutely. She has about a million pairs." Next, he grabbed a feathery mule that he said would have been perfect for Marilyn Monroe. He went on to cite her famous remark about not knowing who invented the high heel but that "all girls everywhere owe him a lot." He talked about her for a while, so I asked whether he had heard Elizabeth Hurley's recent comment that she would have to kill herself if she ever became as fat as Monroe. Blahnik froze. "Marilyn Monroe fat?" he shrieked. "How daaarrre the bitch? How dare she talk that way about Marilyn Monroe, the woman who marked the century?"

Blahnik claims that he wants his shoes to be comfortable. He noted that while Roger Vivier—who is often credited with inventing the stiletto heelwas a brilliant designer, "it must also be said that he nearly crippled an entire generation of women." A surprising number of Blahnik's customers did tell me that his shoes are relatively easy to wear. I heard from quite a few others, however, including some of his fans, who said that they were among the most highly refined torture chambers ever invented. One friend bombarded me with E-mail calling him a misogynist and a psychopath. "There are lots of women who think high heels are an evil conspiracy to cripple women by men who didn't like their mothers," Valerie Steele told me. Steele is the chief curator of the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology and the author of "Shoes: A Lexicon of Style." "It's all really kind of silly." Still, walking around in three-inch heels can't be as pleasant as sinking your feet into a pair of anatomically correct Birkenstocks (a word, by the way, that Blahnik can't bring himself to utter). I asked if he ever felt sorry for all those women teetering through their lives on the spikiest of high-heeled

"Oh, my God, they love it," he said. "How could I feel sorry for them? Sorry. Sorry for who?"

By now, we had made it to the fourth floor, and Blahnik's enthusiasm showed no sign of flagging. "Oh, this is Madonna's shoe from the 'Evita' première. I love Madonna, you have to admire her. She hides her lack of talent so well."

On a wall nearby, there is a picture of Blahnik from 1971, when he lived in Notting Hill. A mop of hair is piled on top of his head. With bangs. He looks mod, swingerish, almost cool. He is much more distinguished-looking now.

"Some kind of bitter ones say the doctor orders them to stop wearing my shoes," he continued. "They say, 'I can't wear this and I can't wear that.' I say, 'Madam, buy flat shoes.' It is not my understanding that anybody anywhere makes a person buy an expensive highheeled shoe. There are women who like the shoes I make. For other women, there are other shoes." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "My mother cannot even walk in flats. She doesn't know how."

We reached the final set of cabinets near the back of the house-his fantasy collection, full of pastels and flowers. "This is the Escher," Blahnik said, pulling out a psychotropic pump. "This was for Marianne Faithfull when she did drugs. Look at the lime-green sandal. It's the C. Z. Guest look. I did this one for Bianca. Look at the little foot. She has such tiny, tiny feet. Look. That was my first shoe. My very first shoe-1971. How embarrassing." It's a giant platform heel in turquoise and yellow. He hates platforms and never made another. "They are hideous. Simply hideous. Anything to do with the current rage makes me sick. Did you ever watch the fashion channel? If you look at it for ten minutes then you realize how horrible and stupid this business is. How shameful and pretentious."

There was just an attic left, and it could be reached only by a dangerous-looking ladder. I passed. "Nothing there but shoes," he cackled. "Shoes. Shoes. Shoes. It is so sick. Isn't this just the sickest thing you have ever seen in your life? Come on, be honest."

Before I could say a word, though, Blahnik let out a long, deep sigh. "Oh, God, I'm in Heaven."

Manolo Blahnik was born in 1942, in the Canary Islands. He remembers it as a "paradise" of Renaissance buildings, colonial houses, and spare, empty churches. Blahnik's father, who died in 1986, was originally from Czechoslovakia, and his mother







From top: Manolo Blahnik at his factory in Milan; the designer sculpting his new heel for spring/summer, 2000; the finished product in his Manhattan boutique. Photographs by Michael Roberts.

is Spanish. They ran a banana plantation there because, as Blahnik put it, "on the Canary Islands before the war there was nothing but bananas and me and my sister and my parents." His mother, who still lives in Santa Cruz de la Palma, was a soignée sophisticate who travelled to Paris and Monte Carlo and Madrid to shop. At home, she used to whittle clogs because she wasn't impressed with the workmanship of the town cobbler. "As a boy, I got attracted to peasant shoes," Blahnik told me. "My mother would make Catalan espadrilles with a black ribbon in the middle. I thought that they were so exciting. I still do."

It was often a lonely childhood, though Blahnik says he never minded. For fun, he would capture lizards and make shoes for them out of tinfoil that his mother saved from cartons of Camel cigarettes. Blahnik also made shoesof ribbon or lace—for dogs, cats, birds, and anything else he could get his hands on. "I lived a complete fantasy as a child. There was nothing there but what came out of our brains." Even after the war ended, Blahnik said, the Canary Islands remained isolated. "We went years without publications from Europe or the Iberian Peninsula. We got everything by boat from Argentina. My mother had Vogue, of course, and Bazaar, and my father took Time and Life. We would wait every Friday for the boats to dock with all those packages of magazines. I can still see them wrapped up so neatly and tied in bundles. And that was my life. Can you imagine?"

By the time he was twelve, Blahnik and his sister, Evangelina, who is a year younger, were as inundated with culture as two children living on a remote Spanish island could be—piano lessons, ballet, instruction in several languages, even Swedish gymnastics. "We tried everything," he recalled. "We had this magical setting for our youth. I live there still in my memory." Blahnik remains close to his sister, who runs the European part of the business from their office in London. Evangelina has the same silver hair as Manolo and the same aristocratic bearing, yet she is as reserved as her brother is flamboyant.

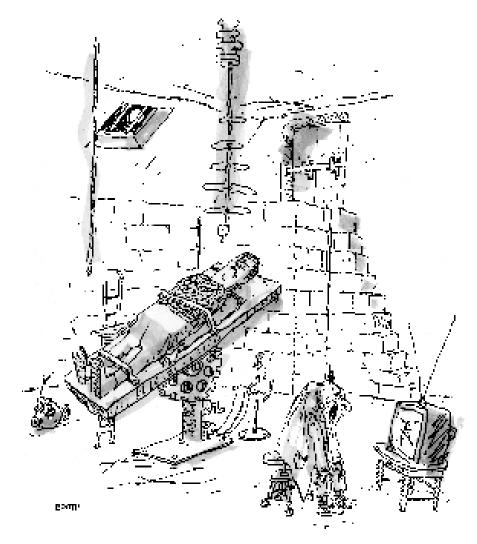
Blahnik's father had hoped he would become a diplomat. ("Can you imagine?

Me? Patiently dealing with the fate of nations?") After studying politics and law at the University of Geneva, he quickly moved into literature and architecture. From there, he went to Paris before settling in London at the end of the sixties. For a while, Blahnik thought he wanted to design stage sets. With a friend, the photographer Eric Boman, he travelled to New York in 1971, because "that was where you went to make it."

"When you are young, you don't have a clue," he told me. "You just think you can do it if you try." Paloma Picasso, who is a lifelong friend, arranged for Blahnik to show his drawings to Diana Vreeland, then the editor of *Vogue*. "My God, how I was terrified. I am still terrified thinking about it. She looked at my drawings," he went on, "and then she started to scream." At this point, Blahnik broke into what I can only

imagine is a pretty fair Vreeland imitation: "'How amuuusing. Amusing.' That is all she kept saying. 'Amusing.' She asked me how long I was in New York, and she said, 'You can do accessories very well. Why don't you do that? Go make shoes. Your shoes in these drawings are so amusing.' I did what she told me. It was like a commandment from God."

Blahnik went home and got to work. He started small, needed little money, and succeeded at once. But he didn't really know what he was doing. "It took many years to realize how to do shoes, learn how to make them lovely and arty and technically perfect." In fact, his first collection was infamous. "I forgot to put in heels that would support the shoe," he told me. "When it got hot, the heels started to wobble. It was like walking on quicksand." Blahnik remains in Lon-



"She did only twenty-eight of the thirty-two fouettés in the 'Black Swan' pas de deux . . . or are my eyes deceiving me?"

don for convenience. "It's like an airport to me," he said. "Though I do like certain things about the English. The madness, the eccentricity. London is like a multi-multi whatever. It's fusion. It's everything. But I sometimes wonder if I should have stayed in America. I worship the American women, after all. They are as tough as nails, and they have these incredible minds. They scare me. I love that."

I caught up with Blahnik and George Malkemus around Christmas, in Milan. Spending time with them when they are together is a bit like being thrust into the cast of "What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?" ("This is my idea, George, and they are my shoes. Can I talk?" Blahnik blurted out at dinner one night, when Malkemus was describing a plan to make limited editions of shoes that will cost as much as fifteen thousand dollars a pair. "I swear, George, if you interrupt one more time I will stab you.")

When Malkemus is in Milan, they spend most of their time at the factories, making sure that Blahnik's vision will translate into enough shoes-and the right shoes—to satisfy their customers. ("I could care less whether a shoe I make sells," Blahnik told me more than once. "That's what I have George for.") Malkemus agrees, sort of. When I visited him at Blahnik's boutique in Manhattan, he showed me a pair of sling-backs called the Carolyne, named for the New York socialite Carolyne Roehm. It is Blahnik's most successful shoe. "This is beauty and sex and what every woman wants to have on her foot," Malkemus said. "Now, look at this shoe"—he pointed to a sandal with fringed leather running in various directions down the foot. Malkemus squirmed when he touched it, as if it had fleas. "Manolo adores this. Will we have this shoe in the shop? Of course. Will we sell more than ten pairs? Never."

Blahnik's favorite factory is run by a family with whom he has worked for twenty-five years, but, on our way there, he asked me not to mention their names. "There are only a few things that can really get me going," he said. "Industrial espionage is one of them." Malkemus turned from the front of the Mercedes to tell Blahnik that, for the third time in as many weeks, a fairly well-known competitor had asked this factory to make his shoes.

"I can't take it anymore," Blahnik shouted as we pulled up to a tidy suburban building that looked more like a school than a factory. "It's not right. It's not ethical. I don't go to people's homes, to where they have been for twenty-five years, and steal from them. 'I want your shoes. I want your factory.' How demeaning. How vile. How can he even face himself?"

A handsome woman named Nadia walked us through the factory to the office. It is not unusual for other successful designers to fax their drawings to Italy and then to check in from time to time. Blahnik would make every pair of shoes himself if he could. I watched as he cut patterns—just as a dressmaker would—and shaped the fabric to fit the last. He then laid strips of masking tape across the shoe so that he could glue on pearls, sequins, or beads.

"So opulent. So modern. Madame Vreeland would have gone mad for these." Blahnik was looking at a new baby-blue-and-lavender crocodile shoe with jewels set into the heel. "I can hear her now," and he put his high-dame voice back on—"'Give me opulence. Give me opulence. Nothing less will do' "-before slipping back into himself. "These could be for the Queen of Naples Ball. Maybe. Or for a tryst. Yes. A trysting shoe. But these shoes are so ridiculous. Who has the money to spend four thousand dollars on a crocodile shoe? What am I doing, George? Have I completely lost my mind?" I watched as he scraped an almost invisible drop of glue from the side of a thousand-dollar stiletto.

"What will happen to your brand when you stop?" I asked. The question surprised him. "Well, I'm not going to turn myself into McDonald's, if that's what you mean. They're just shoes. I'll make as many as I can, and when I die I suspect the world will survive."

Lunch had been spread out along the worktables, but when a secretary announced that the man who makes their finest lasts had arrived Blahnik was out of his seat in five seconds. He dove across his desk, narrowly missing a plate of mozzarella. He grabbed a dozen drawings. "My God, George, get the



"Im sorry you're having a hard time, Roy. Please forgive my Schadenfreude."

others. We must hide the drawings."
"What's going on?" I asked when

"What's going on?" I asked, when the sheaf of papers had been temporarily deposited in the trash basket.

Blahnik looked at me darkly. "That man is very talented," he told me. "There are not many like him left. But I don't trust him. He talks to Prada. I know it. He talks to Gucci, he talks to everyone."

A fter returning from the factory, we decided to take advantage of the late shopping hours. The warm weather and Christmas season had conspired to fill the stores along the Via della Spiga with half the population of Milan. It was hard just to make our way down the old stone streets.

We passed a billboard that displayed a vintage 1960 ad for Moët & Chandon, which featured a picture of Cary Grant and Kim Novak. "Oh, Kimmy, Kimmy, Kimmy!" Blahnik shouted, loud enough to turn heads. Then he ran up to the ad and kissed the Plexiglas that covered her face. "I adore you. Just

adore you. I always have." We looked at the Christmas decorations in a few windows, but soon it was time to make our way back to the hotel. Before we did, though, I asked Blahnik if there was a "right woman" to wear his shoes, a muse. "Not at all," he said. "They don't have to be glamorous. I don't care who wears them. After I make them, the rest doesn't matter." Malkemus rolled his eyes and whispered, "Bullshit." Then he pointed to an elegant young Indian woman. She was dressed in a plain sari and a cashmere shawl. She moved as if there were a cushion of air between her and the ground. "Manolo," Malkemus said mischievously. "Look at that." Blahnik turned, but said nothing as she strode by. Then he let out a kind of yelp.

"Did you see that, George!" he shouted, completely beside himself. "She was wearing my clear heel. She was wearing it, George, and it looked perfect. It was made for her. My God, George, what a joy. Wasn't she beautiful? Wasn't she absolutely beautiful?" •