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Interview with Ms Theresa Ogallo

(Founder of Styletech by Teshie)



Author: Maria Angela Maina, Chief Research Coordinator-Africa
at The Thinking Watermill Society.



Introduction

Theresa Ogallo has a bubbly personality and strong will that she presents through her clothing enterprise, Styletech by Teshie.

In this interview, The Thinking Watermill Society learns more about the birth of her enterprise and its achievements as a local sustainable brand based in Kenya.



1. What is your educational background and how did it fuel your love for fashion?

I went to an all girls' catholic school in Nairobi, Kenya until high school level. After my final exams, I moved to Cape Town, South Africa where I did my grade 12 at Rosebank Progress College before joining the University of Cape Town to study a Bachelor of Commerce in Information Systems and Computer Science.

When I started grade 12 at Rosebank, I remember feeling so excited about the fact that we would be wearing home clothes to school and not uniform like I had grown accustomed to. This gave me the freedom to really explore and have fun with my style.

Furthermore, Cape Town is also a very trendy city and I found a lot of joy in getting ideas from people around me who were also equally fashionable. It always felt like I was at a fashion event and I totally loved it. That's when I truly fell deep in love with fashion.

Growing up in Kenya, I had always really loved clothes and drew a lot of inspiration from my mum who is such a fashionista! This interest was fueled when I moved to Cape Town.

2. You started off by blogging and this triggered the rise of your enterprise, Styletech by Teshie. What is your brand's mission?

I really want my brand to provide a safe space for people to explore their unique styles freely. Through our bold, classic pieces I would like to inspire my clients to embrace who they truly are through what they wear and encourage them to be more confident in their endeavours.

3. How did your experience in Cape Town shape your perception of fashion?

Cape Town provided an opportunity for me to freely explore my style. I loved that people on the streets were always so fashionable and really embraced the phrase "My Dress, My Choice".

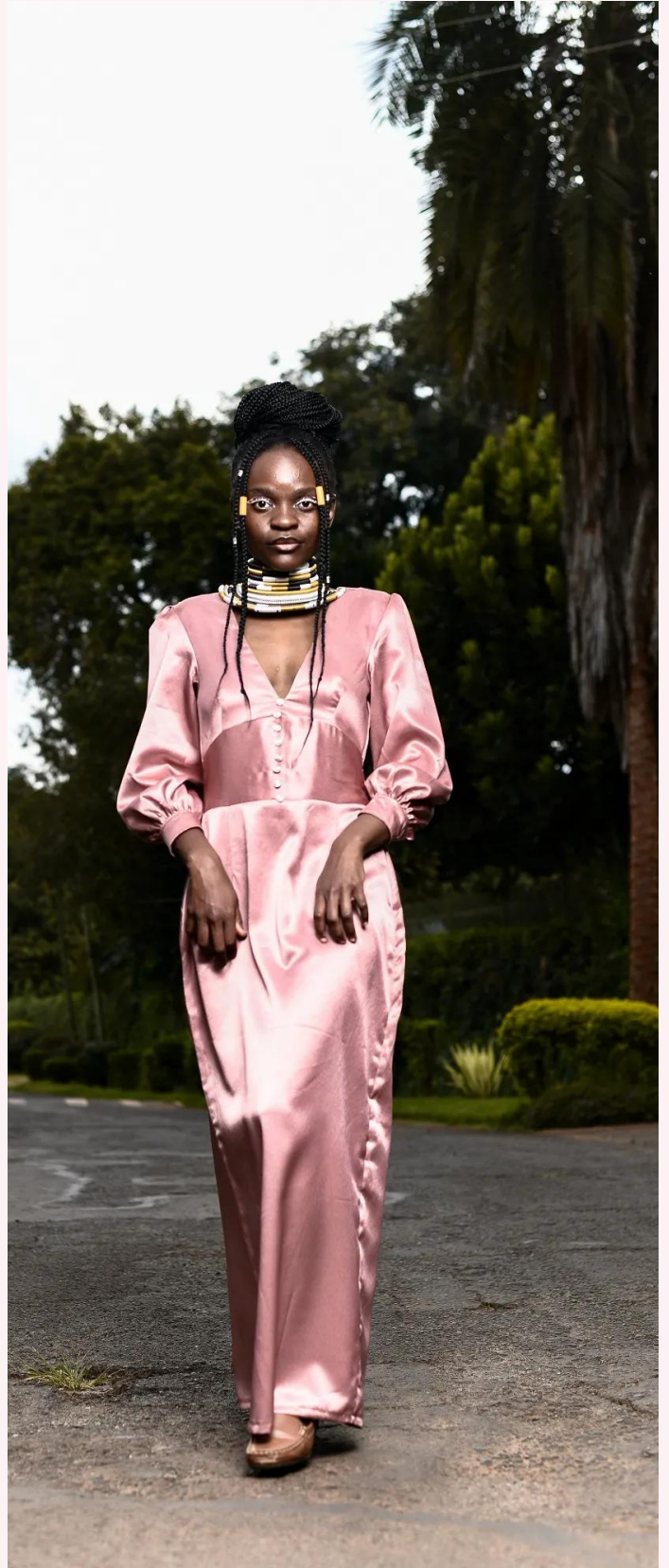
Fashion styles were so varied and interesting. I would describe my personal style during my time in Cape Town as daring, which helped me to truly figure out my fashion sense and also discover what that meant in terms of who I am as a person. Fashion is truly an expression of who you are and Cape Town brought this to light for me. I also realized that there is a lot of money to be made in the fashion industry if you're committed and devoted to work.

4. Your fashion pieces are a blend of high fashion yet everyday-chic outfits. What has been your inspiration behind the different collections?

Wow, thank you! That's definitely the vibe I have always wanted to go for.

Various collections were inspired by various things happening around me and in my life. Initially when I started, I was inspired by the beauty of African fabrics. The bright colours and interesting fabric prints encouraged me to be more daring in my showcase of African fashion. I've also always been drawn to vintage clothing.

I have shopped A LOT in vintage stores and thrift stores in both Cape Town and Nairobi and I always got drawn to the more classic vintage looking pieces. I always wanted to incorporate this in my brand which I did in my last collection called MAHALI.



5. It is quite an achievement for you to have showcased your pieces at some charity fashion shows in Cape Town in 2018 and 2019. How did participation in these events influence your growth as a fashion designer?

Wow! Great question! Taking part in these two events, especially at Africa Fashion Week Nigeria, made me realize how much room there was for improvement in my brand.

I know we should never compare ourselves to others but I remember looking at the other designers' items during fittings at Lagos Continental Hotel and thinking how much room there was for growth in my brand. I was the youngest designer showcasing. My models kept complimenting my work, saying how trendy and chic my approach to African fashion was.

This was the right motivation to maintain my confidence in my work but still work on improving the quality and other aspects of the brand.



6. Do you consider your fashion brand ethical and sustainable? And if so, in what ways do you put this into practice?



Yes I do. We currently work on a made-to-order basis where customers order for our products online and we tailor them specific to their measurements.

This has helped to reduce production wastages that can occur through wholesale production of clothes. We also practise slow fashion which helps to reduce the amount of consumption and waste of clothes.

I definitely want to work on implementing more sustainable practices particularly around the fabrics that we use to manufacture our clothing items.

7. Your growth as an individual and fashion designer is evident in your blog and designs. What major challenges have you faced and how did you overcome them?

Self-doubt is definitely a big challenge I've faced and continue to face till now. I know it may seem like I'm very confident in myself which I am but I also have great feelings of self doubt particularly when it comes to my fashion brand. I am learning to trust in myself and my intuition which has continuously proven to be the right choice for me.

I am also learning to stop comparing myself to others and their brands and instead use them as a source of inspiration to improve what I may not really like in my own brand.

Money has also been a huge challenge. I learned the hard way that the fashion business is one of the most expensive businesses to run. I have had to struggle with low budgets for production and fabric choices until I decided that quality was more important for me.

I took a step back from my business last year to try and think of ways to make my life more financially sustainable. During that time, I started working on growing my writing career. I plan to use a lot of the income I earn from my writing to invest in my fashion business.

8. Your collections are Swahili-themed and have unique designs that give traditional fabrics an edge. What are your thoughts on the protection of cultural knowledge and heritage in the international fashion industry?

Oh thank you so much! I got so bored of seeing traditional wear always associated to African fashion and wanted to change that perspective in the international fashion industry. The reality is that African fashion is growing and it's important for us to see and embrace the various styles of the younger African generation. I believe in the preservation of cultural knowledge which is why I always tell a story about my African culture with every design I make. I take time to think about how my African roots and experiences influenced me to create that specific design and use this to tell a story which I then share on my website and social media pages. I'm naturally a storyteller and so this is usually one of my favourite parts of the design process.



9. Has your brand participated in socially impactful activities that you are proud of?

Yes it has. I got a chance to work with this amazing NGO in 2020 and 2021. It's called Wezesha Binti and it aims to equip girls in rural areas with information, educational resources and physical products to help them in their menstruation and female reproductive health. We collaborated with them to manufacture over 1,000 reusable masks which were included in gift packages given to young girls in rural areas around Kenya.



10. What are your future plans for Styletech by Teshie?

I am currently working on rebranding. With all the information and knowledge I've gathered over the last 4 years of running my business. I am confident that I will be able to create a more sustainable brand that also focuses on high quality.

I'd also like to get a good team. I realized the hard way that I'm really not cut out to do everything by myself. There are so many aspects involved in running a business, some of which I totally hate.

I would love to get a team of maybe 2 people where one person is handling the finances (typically, an accountant) and another is focused on the marketing and customer service aspect. This will give me enough time to focus on the creative aspect, which is what I truly enjoy.

I would also love to be a part of New York Fashion Week in the future. I love the buzz and excitement around fashion weeks, which I've attended numerous in South Africa and also Nigeria. They provide an opportunity for networking and inspiration. New York Fashion Week would be the perfect stepping stone for me to really delve into the international fashion industry.

Thank you for your cooperation on behalf of The Thinking Watermill Society. All the best in your current and future endeavours, Ms Ogallo.

Learn More about Styletech by Teshie

VISIT STYLETECH BY TESHIE





About The Thinking Watermill Society

The Thinking Watermill Society is a non-profit organization. In particular, it promotes the debate and exchange of ideas among its members regarding the changes underway in the economic, cultural and social landscape, together with the analysis of the consequences that said changes entail, so as to identify the possible opportunities of economic, cultural and social growth related to said changes.

Our headquarters are in Rome, Italy.

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