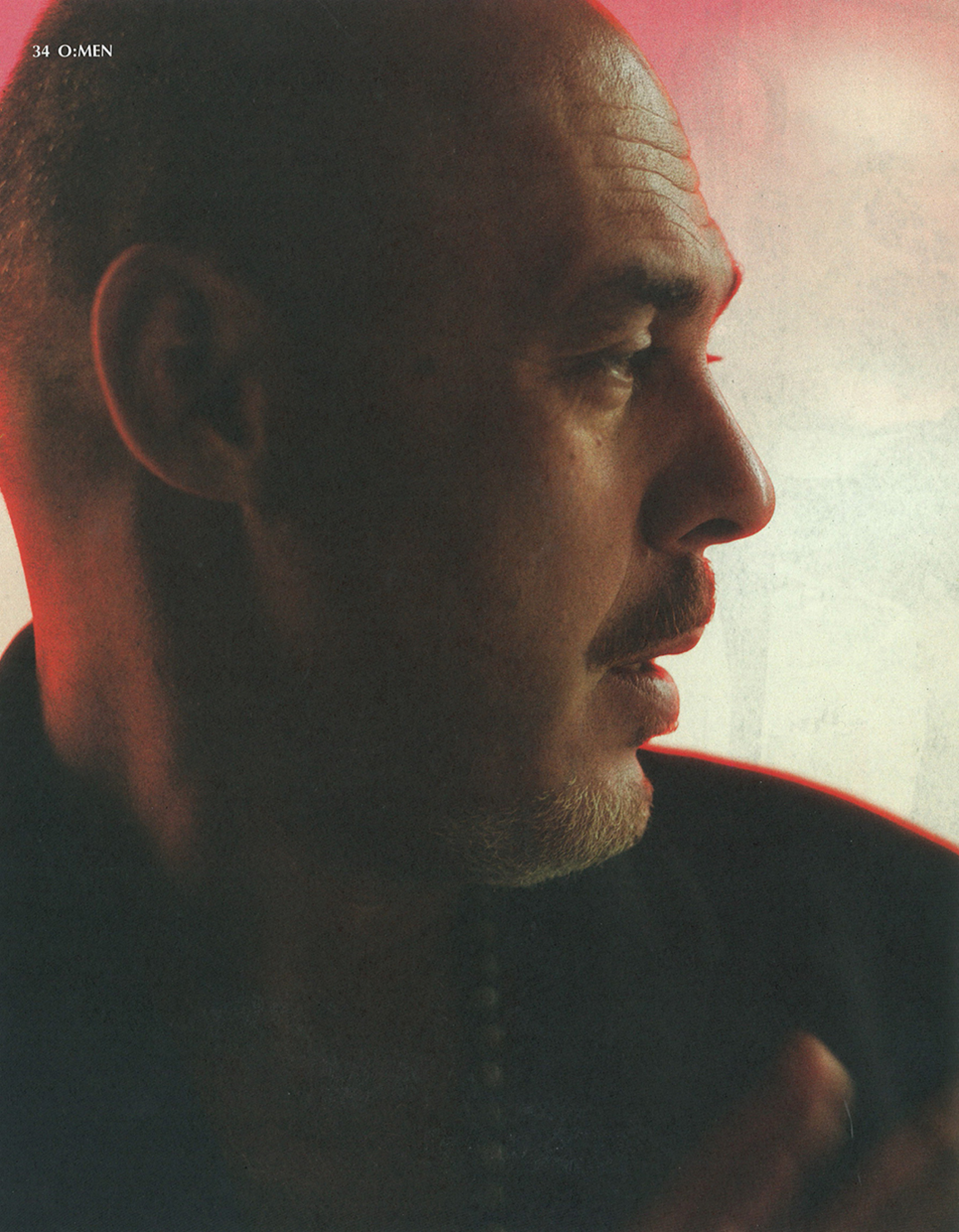

THIERRY DREYFUS

THE LIGHTING DESIGNER

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TEXT BY HYWEL DAVIES
PORTRAIT BY MARIE DROUIN

Designer and hairy giant Walter Van Beirendonck once made a passing comment to Thierry Dreyfus that was to shape the latter's career. "First, a fashion show is a collection," Beirendonck said. "Second, it's the spirit of the designer. And third, it's the emotion you feel."

Dreyfus, whose career in the fashion world was just beginning, decided he could express that ethos through light. It is largely through his skill with spot, filter, shade and effect that fashion houses from Helmut Lang and Calvin Klein to Comme des Garçons, Jil Sander and Louis Vuitton have brought additional drama to their shows.

Over a quarter of a century, Dreyfus, now 49, has turned a technical skill into what is now widely regarded as an art form. He also makes highly collectable lighting objects, which lay unabashed claim to artistic status – one recently appeared in a London exhibition about the interface of art and design. Ask him to explain his lighting choices and he concedes that it is "altogether an emotional feeling – it's almost like a chemical reaction. For the fashion-industry work, I match the collection and highlight it through the set and the light scenography. But I aim to create a vibration..."

In the early 1980s, Dreyfus started out assisting the lighting designer at the Strasbourg Opera, and in 1985 he was commissioned to light his first fashion show, for the late American designer Patrick Kelly. Dreyfus grins at the suggestion that the world of opera would have been an ideal introduction to fashion's histrionics and clashing egos. "But in that challenge lies creativity," he explains. "Otherwise I would not continue to work with them. Maybe 'challenging' is not the word. It has to do with emotional connections, sensibility and the need to share. I'm working for someone, the artist, to whom I must dedicate my own imagination, to express their vision, while respecting a budget."

Presenting himself as a mere contractor has not deprived him of high-profile jobs: in 2001, he was given carte blanche to light Yves Saint Laurent's retrospective farewell show in the Centre Pompidou, and in 2005, he lit Paris' Grand Palais for its reopening. Starwood Hotels commissioned him to create light installations for the façades of Le Méridien in Shanghai and San Francisco, where he deployed red beams and coloured panels across their exteriors.

And he has enjoyed complete creative freedom with his acclaimed installations. He staged a lighting of Versailles' water basins in 2006, while for the 2000 Lyon Biennial, he suspended a screen between buildings onto which were projected real-time images of a sunny sky. As night fell, a small patch of blue with scudding clouds remained stuck in another place and time.

"There are no average days – I simply express myself," says Dreyfus, who, when not with his family in Paris, has plenty of time to study the play of light through aircraft windows between assignments. "Light does not speak intellectually. Light doesn't have words – it is all about emotion."