

# The Maestro

When Asma told me over Summer that she had booked as a surprise for me on our 5th Anniversary, some tickets to Roja Dove's next lecture at the V&A, I was touched. I had been a visitor to his Haute Parfumerie in Harrods for several years, even before she came in to my life.

I went when the Haute Parfumerie was a hidden attic on the fifth floor, with creaking floorboards and black chandeliers; and I go now that she has been reborn as the Salon de Parfums, whenever we visit London. It is a sweeping, sleek, stunning space on the 6th floor accessible by an escalator only on one side of the Harrods building.

A few years before I met Asma, I had an awakening of sorts. I had always known that I liked fragrance, but I didn't realise quite how much it meant to me until a seminal moment in my life when I stumbled across an article about a man I had never, up until that point, heard of before.

That man was Mr Roja Dove. A man who I learned had spent much of his life with the fragrance and cosmetics powerhouse, Guerlain, and who was soon to embark on an adventure of his own, using all of his skills and knowledge to launch his own eponymous House. I say a seminal moment in my life, because the words I read when Mr Dove spoke about fragrance came to life and slapped me across the face. They resonated with me and struck a chord. What he said and the way he described his passion, were what I, quite unknowingly, had felt about fragrance my entire life.

Since that point, I have followed his career from afar and have witnessed him turn what started off as a relatively small but luxurious niche line, into arguably the world's most sought after line of fragrances. His career is that of a modern perfumer's dream.

So, back to the story. Asma had booked this lecture. Amazing, great! Our day off work was booked and train tickets sorted. Not so fast - the lecture was cancelled last minute. We were sad, I was sad. My meeting with somebody I had admired was not meant to be, but I was OK with that. Sometimes, admiration should be best carried out from afar. 'Why shatter the illusion?' I told myself.

We still went to London of course, as everything was by now arranged, but somehow, the week before we had arrived and unbeknownst to me, Asma in her wisdom had been in touch with Mr Dove's team over social media and explained that the lecture had been booked as an anniversary gift for me. His team and Asma worked behind the scenes to get my Roja Dove booked delivered to his offices in London for him to sign and as I walked into the Salon de Parfums that day, I was presented with the signed book and given a free fragrance consultation with one of Mr Dove's team members. I was blown away. As an added bonus, the lecture was luckily rescheduled!

As I write this, I am returning from London after the rescheduled lecture and I return on an absolute high. The lecture was incredible. The topic: The History of Haute Parfumerie – a discussion on how couturiers of the 20th century helped to revolutionise the perfume industry into what it is today.

We arrived at the V&A in plenty of time to get some great seats having walked through the sections of the museum carrying permanent exhibitions. I always forget what a staggeringly beautiful place the V&A is, even more so when empty and by night.

I wanted to be front of house so as not to miss a word. As well as being a Maitre Parfumeur, Mr Dove is the world's only Professeur de Parfum, so I knew we were in for a treat. No sooner had Head of Adult Learning at this iconic museum introduced him, that he was stood in front of me; my olfactory soul mate; dressed in a shimmering black blazer, adorned in Cartier diamonds and bejewelled Louboutin loafers. The reason his

fragrances are considered to be the most unapologetically luxurious in the world, is because this man lives and breathes luxury. His line could never have been anything else.

For over an hour the audience sat enthralled and in silence, hanging on his every word. I was astounded by not only the depth of his incredible and expansive knowledge of perfume, but also his knowledge of art and couture in general. And this was only the tip of the iceberg!

His words came pouring out so effortlessly, we could have listened for hours. He spoke about perfumes of times gone by as though he was talking about friends that he had known intimately. And of course he did know many of them intimately as he treated us all to samples of perfumes that have been out of circulation for almost 100 years. Samples, I must add, from his own private collection. These included Arlequinade by Les Parfums de Rosine, Zut by Schiapparelli and Coeur Joie, a sensationally delicate floral by the House of Nina Ricci.

The evening was made all the more special when he took out his bottle of Chanel No. 46 - a fragrance so rare that it has gone down in fragrance legend. Some people do not even believe that it ever existed! Well, I can confirm it did exist. I have seen the bottle and now, thanks to Mr Dove, I have had the immense pleasure of having smelled the juice. A stunning, soft, aldehydic floral. Chanel would make a fortune if this marvel were to be re-released today... however, that's a conversation for another time. Mr Dove spoke about the relationship between 20th century couturiers and perfume and how perfume became something that couturiers would sell alongside their gowns.

We heard anecdotes, such as how Elsa Schiaparelli was snubbed by the perfume industry selling her creations in the First Class cabins of Air France flights but how that very act of defiance has led to the modern day, duty free air sales that we all enjoy today.

The night culminated with a section of the lecture dedicated to the late, great couturier, Mr Alexander McQueen. The moment was very poignant as Mr Dove spoke about the fleeting life of fragrance as an analogy to the fleeting life of Mr McQueen. At this point, he told us that he had created a fragrance for the evening as a complete one-off and thrown away the recipe. Something that he never does. He wanted this to be a reminder to us of the fleeting nature of fragrance. He explained that what he had created was intended to have a beautiful base with jagged top notes. When Asma and I received the blotters impregnated by this special and incredible creation, we both closed our eyes for a moment and inhaled deep. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and she looked up at me and said, 'this is you.'

It almost brought a tear to my eye. That moment captured the night perfectly. I had the great fortune of meeting Mr Dove after the talk, very briefly though as there was a queue of friends, fans and industry people all waiting for their own moments. I probably babbled at him through my nerves.

They say you should never meet your heroes because you'll only feel let down. Well, I met one of mine and not only has the experience buoyed me, it has motivated me; for this is a man who has found his true passion and his calling and he has answered it by creating something of beauty in this world. And despite all the glitz and glamour, the diamonds and sparkles, my olfactory hero was truly humble and sincere. He radiated warmth and spoke to me as he would a friend.

There will be those who say, 'how can he justify charging the prices that he does?', or 'how could anyone agree to spend that much money on perfume?' To those people I say this, the world is full of enough doom and enough gloom. Wars are plentiful and misery and devastation are unfortunately, endemic. Where is the harm done to mankind if one chooses to take oneself away from all of that for a brief, fleeting moment? Some will do it through song; others through art or sculpture; and some will do it through fragrance.

Nobody should be forced to apologise for their passion if that passion does not cause harm to anybody else. Mr Dove's fragrances are all, in their individuality, a benchmark of olfactory excellence.

They are masterclasses in the most personal and intimate of art forms and this is when judged alongside historic and modern day creations. His creations have an ability to drag you out of any moment and to throw you into a sea of celestial nectar; to transport you to a land where everything is beautiful, serene and sumptuous. They are

quite simply, timeless. Just one whiff and you are given a moment or two where the worries of everyday life just don't seem to matter, or even exist.

In closing, I recall reading an article some time ago where Mr Dove was explaining that he had never met anybody whom he felt he could train as his apprentice. This saddens me. In a diluted world where such true artistry is rare to find, who will be new the standard bearers of such ephemeral romanticism, such fleeting fantasy for our forthcoming generations? I don't know. But then lucky for me to be able to say that I lived in the time of Mr Roja Dova.

Thank you to the V&A and the entire Roja Dove team for putting on such a fantastic lecture; thank you to Mr Dove for giving me a few moment of his time – a moment I will never forget; but most importantly, thank you to my wife. I am indebted to her for giving me the chance to meet one of my greatest living inspirations.