



CAPE FEAR In Ensemble #5, a black sequined cape, *Radar* reporter Andrew Goldman was afraid he would become the victim of a Chelsea straight-bashing. The pirate shirt underneath [Ensemble #6] drew gasps at the Armani boutique.

Adventures *of an* International Male



For almost 30 years a curious clothing catalog has sold ruffled pirate shirts, pink sleeveless suits, and sequined black capes to a seemingly invisible public. What's it like to go through life in a mesh top? **Andrew Goldman** treks from the stands at Yankee Stadium to the banquettes at the *Four Seasons* to investigate life as the ultimate fashion victim. Photographs by **Leeta Harding**

The International Male catalog was born almost three decades ago, in San Diego, the brainchild of Gene Burkard, a transplanted Wisconsinite who at the time was still fairly new to the apparel field. A few years earlier he'd made use of the savvy he had acquired in the advertising department of the *Milwaukee Journal* to market a satiny, package-gripping pair of underwear he called the Jock Sock. First, Burkard bought ad space in the *Advocate*, which was then a local gay paper in Los Angeles, and later, after his assless skivvies had taken off, in the back pages of straight glossies such as *Playboy*. He hit paydirt with the Jock Sock, and in 1976 he launched International Male, a catalog that introduced a revolutionary new aesthetic for gay men. "Prior to that, gay fashion was more effeminate," says Burkard. "There were lots of caftans and froufrou stuff. We came along and butched up the act." At the time, International Male had a certain resonance in the gay community. "I can't tell you how many thousands of guys I've met over the years who told me how this catalog affected their lives, living on a farm in Iowa or North Dakota," Burkard says. "They wouldn't believe there was someone out there like them." Apparently many of the 1.25 million men who received the catalog in the mid-'80s liked what they saw. "I remember when it came in the mail, you'd take it into the bathroom to have a little fantasy," says Marc

Berkley, a 52-year-old club promoter and cofounder of *Homo Xtra*, Manhattan's premier gay nightlife guide. "They obviously had their models fluff a bit." In 1986, after building International Male into a \$26-million-a-year business with three retail stores in Southern California, Burkard cashed out.

Today, International Male seems on the verge of extinction. "It's such an embarrassment," Burkard says. "It's like a costume catalog. I really don't know who would dress like that. Do you?" Calls to the company, which is now owned by New Jersey outfit Hanover Direct, didn't provide any answers. The parent company, which last February was delisted from the American Stock Exchange, unsuccessfully put the catalog up for sale in 2003. Now, according to an e-mail sent by its new marketing director, Eadie Kelly, International Male intends to "reposition" the brand, and Kelly didn't want to cooperate with any stories until she'd gotten International Male "fashion-right." "We are all acutely aware of what the catalog was in the recent past!" Kelly wrote. "I have no interest in flogging old news."

I have been asking the same question Burkard has about International Male since it started materializing in my mailbox three years ago. Who is this mysterious customer in the market for package-enhancing underwear, black leather "Swashbuckler"

shirts with lace-up fronts, and sleeveless pink suits? I phoned Barneys New York creative director Simon Doonan, who calls himself “the world’s leading authority on bad men’s catalogs.” Doonan, who when he first moved from London to Los Angeles in the ’70s proudly wore square-legged velour leopard swim trunks from International Male around the pool at his apartment complex, sounded legitimately dejected when he heard that the catalog might be rebranding. “Oh, no,” he said. “They’ll probably try to turn it into Banana Republic. That would be a tragedy.” The catalog, he says, is one of the last remaining bastions of the pre-feminist ideal of hypermasculinity: swingerwear, if you will. “The guys are real Hai Karate guys, unapologetically masculine,” he says. “They’re not girly boys. They’re not metrosexuals. They’re real blokes in the tradition of Burt Reynolds and Clint Eastwood. To me the International Males don’t look gay. They look like tough, sleazy, straight men, which is probably why gay men like it. The contemporary ideal of masculinity is actually very girly. Jake Gyllenhaal couldn’t pull off a bloody pirate blouse with a trouser with 16 pleats.”

Though I was having difficulty understanding how wearing a ruffled shirt might be considered any more masculine than, say, owning a Persian cat, I surrendered to Doonan’s counterintuitive premise. I’d always fantasized about being that tough, sleazy, straight man, but I never had the confidence to pull it off. I am at heart a highly insecure, fearful person. I’ve strived for invisibility in my dress, chosen conformity rather than running the risk of standing out and being scrutinized for my noticeable physical attributes: recessed hairline, hirsute paunch, one eye that sits on my face considerably higher than

The roomy pant leg seems to have been designed for a man who travels with large packages taped to his thighs.

the other. But on this, the eve of destruction of the International Male, I resolved that I would repress those feelings for a full week, wear International Male — from the white crochet driving hat down to the tan, strappy gladiator sandals — 24 hours a day, and unleash the inner swinger that’s been hip-thrusting within. It would not be easy.

ENSEMBLE #1: THE SCARLET PIMP

On the sidewalk in front of the Four Seasons, the gold standard of the Manhattan power lunch, I’m hyperventilating in International Male’s flaming scarlet five-button pinstripe suit with nearly knee-length jacket. The only thing distracting me from what shrinks call suicidal ideation is the pain of a pair of black-and-white square-toed lace-ups digging into my ankles. I had some trouble adjusting to a jacket cut to the knees; earlier I dragged the hem through urinal water. The suit’s roomy pant leg seems to have been designed to accommodate a man who customarily travels with large packages taped to his thighs.

“Aren’t you horrified to be seen with me?” I ask my girlfriend,



FEAR AND CLOTHING Ensemble #3 (left) provided ample natural air-conditioning, while Ensemble #4, the Crisco Kid (right), meshed everything up.



who has joined me for lunch. “Look,” Robin says, tugging me toward the entrance, “this is apparently the only way you’ll take me to the Four Seasons.”

Inside the Philip Johnson–designed Grill Room — notable for its austere wood paneling and the fact that every navy suit–clad mogul in the room has a perfect vantage point from which to stare — I notice a slight hush and the craning of necks as we are led to a corner table. “You might want to dab your face with your napkin,” Robin whispers across the table. Before we can even crack open the menu, the flamboyant co-owner, Julian Niccolini, whom I have never met, seizes upon the suit. “You must trade jackets with me!” he shrieks; he then performs a balletic revolution around the dining room in my billowy coat, asking diners at each table if they approve of his new finery. Warner Music chief executive Edgar Bronfman Jr. smiles wanly. Our neighbor, the sugar baron Pepe Fanjul, smirks as he announces, deadpan, that he owns the same suit, but in yellow. Niccolini disappears into the kitchen to show his grotesque find to the staff, while I sit in his perfumed Valentino suit jacket, wiping sweat off my forehead and slugging down the wine that he’s offered us gratis.

Later, slowly trudging through the city hobbled by blisters, I notice that my flashy new threads invite communion with strangers. A middle-aged woman parks next to me on the subway for four stops to recount the hard luck tale of her dog, a Jack Russell–papillon mix; a seasoned grifter in the park who claims he’s locked his keys in his car will send me a check the next day if I give him 10 bucks to get back to Fort Lee, New Jersey; two separate broken English–speaking tourists ask for directions to City Hall, presumably because I’m the consummate flashy New Yorker. And for the first time in my life I am popular among black people I don’t know, from the young man who pokes his head out of a locksmith’s on 23rd Street to yell, “Love that suit, man!” to a vendor hawking gold jewelry on the street who nods approvingly and says, “Mmmm! Nice suit.” In those moments the waves of nausea induced by my superwide shoulder pads are replaced by something that feels like welling pride.

But would the suit fare as well in the professional realm? I decide to find out by making an appointment for an interview at Snelling Personnel Services, a Wall Street temp agency where I submit an application in which I claim to be a lifelong delicatessen manager from



BRIGHT STUFF Ensemble #1, the Scarlet Pimp, encouraged brotherly love.

Maine. In the waiting room a black man sporting a shaved head, an African-print shirt, and a Department of Sanitation badge exclaims, "I love the color of that suit!" on his way to ask the receptionist if he can still get work if he lists his entire criminal record on the application. Rich, the executive recruiter, doesn't think long when I ask if the suit will be acceptable for clerical work. "No," he

says, before explaining that a clean pair of khakis will take me much further in the finance world. I persist. I explain that I bought the suit because my friends in Maine told me that in order to succeed in New York I would need to dress to get noticed. "Maybe they just had old information," I offer. Rich nods and points in the general direction of the World Trade Center. "With these two buildings missing down here, you know, things are a little different," he says solemnly. Then he brightens up. "But you know what? If you haven't done it yet, go to the Village at night. It's crazy up there."

ENSEMBLE #2: THE COTTON CANDY DANDY

If only it didn't cause pedestrians to look at me with sympathetic concern, as though I had just stepped off a boat from Kazakhstan and couldn't be blamed for not knowing any better, I would resolve to spend the rest of my life wearing International Male's rainbow-pinstripe seersucker suit. With the possible exception of the label's gauzy white caftan and turquoise bikini combo (**ENSEMBLE #3**) — which I wore to Central Park for an afternoon of sunbathing and football — this is the most comfortable gear I've ever worn.

The look is, in fact, so sporty that I decide to go to the Bronx with my friend Jed to catch the Yankees playing the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. "How's it going?" I ask my neighbor at the stadium, who's moping because the Yankees are down by five runs. "We're getting hammered," he mutters, barely looking up from the game. Two rows over, a cornrowed Cracker Jack vendor shouts, "That suit is sharp! That thing linen?" My new kinship with the brothers remains intact, but apart from that, nobody responds to my pretty new pastels. Jed, on the other hand, gets called a faggot near the snack bar, but, really, what did he expect, wearing a Red Sox cap?

After the game, Jed — now hatless — and I wait outside the stadium, to see if anyone has saved just one little epithet for me. "Let's just stand out here until I get murdered," I say. "That'll make a good story." Just then, a pack of bleary-eyed roughnecks trundles by. "I guess that's where the gay bar is," one of them shouts. "Close enough," I say, and pack it in.

ENSEMBLE #4: THE CRISCO KID

"Look, the red suit was one thing, but Jesus, look at my tits in this thing," I say to my friend Danielle. "I can't do this." We're standing outside a bar, waiting to go into a HurryDate speed-dating event for Jewish singles, me wearing a skintight sleeveless wide-mesh black top and tight white cotton pants with black leather trim and zippers. The snug fit of the shirt accentuates the contours of my pectoral fat all too honestly, and my wiry carpet of salt-and-pepper chest hair sticks out through the mesh. "They'll love you," Danielle says, pushing me inside.

The four-minute dates with the 13 women go by so quickly I find myself forgetting about my outfit and trying to win over these largely unappealing women. I'm polite. I'm self-effacing. I tell them that I consider myself very "downtown" and "alternative." An engineer talks to me about the drainage ditches she has designed on the Long Island Expressway. I tell her I'm familiar with her work. It kills. Just when I start to feel as if I might be the most popular man in this pretty dismal field, I'm sucked back to earth by a wary social-work grad student who mutters, "Good luck with the mesh," as I'm getting up after our date. "There's something about you that looks very artistic," says a mountainous bachelorette who has taken an hourlong train ride in from Long Island but says she'd travel all the way to Africa if it meant finding the right man. "What is it about me?" I ask her, standing up and spreading my arms so she can take in the

SPORT OF QUEENS The pastel seersucker of Ensemble # 2, the Cotton Candy Dandy, received a mixed reception at Yankee Stadium.



whole zippered gestalt. She narrows her eyes, considers me, and finally nods. "It's the glasses," she says.

Afterward Danielle hauls me to the crowded roof bar of Sutton Place, a midtown post-college meat market. The men are in suits; the girls are pretty, and they're not forced to sit with me. It doesn't look like the kind of crowd where a man in pointy-toed high-heeled black leather slip-ons and padded-crotch thong will score.

I've been standing at the bar less than a minute when a burly bartender rushes toward me with the kind of haste you might imagine would be reserved for when one patron hacks up another with a machete. "You got another shirt, with sleeves?" he demands. "You gotta put it on, or get out. Now!" Before I can do anything a tank of a bouncer with an earpiece intercepts me from the rear, repeating the directions. Bar rules, he says, stipulate that men need to wear shirts with sleeves. Suddenly I am the troublemaker, and everybody around the bar is looking to see what bold Mr. Mesh plans to do. I sweat. I try to take deep breaths. "Fuck that guy, man," says a tipsy girl propped at the bar. "What's his problem? Fuck him! You should just take off your shirt. If you take it off, I'll take off mine." As much as I wouldn't mind seeing her chest, I put my jacket on, grab Danielle, and slink out.

Danielle drags me a few blocks to the Turtle Bay Grill & Lounge, where within five minutes a bouncer hustles over to tell me to cover up. "Hygiene," he explains, which seems odd, because nearby two sleazy trader types in suits are grinding their crotches against both ends of the same very unhygienic-looking woman. The next day I go online and learn that four minutes with me was enough for 11 of the 13 speed-daters. Apparently my friend from Long Island doesn't dig artistic types.

ENSEMBLE #5: THE CAPED QUEERSADER

I think I'd feel more comfortable wearing a sparkly black cape in public if it didn't fit so poorly. But it comes in only one size — Too Large, apparently — and, frankly, being able to hide under a sequined teepee beats going nearly topless again. At the launch party for Cumming, Alan Cumming's new men's fragrance, I'm dismayed to find myself distinctly less fabulous than most in the largely gay crowd at the Chelsea nightclub Crobar. "You are *so* outdone," says Alex, a gay friend, as he scans a 300-pound, six-foot-tall drag queen in a rainbow fright wig. He's right. Cumming, whom I've met a few times while wearing a conservative suit, comes over and offers a polite hello without acknowledging that I've altered my look somewhat. Even his simple kilt and leotardlike top shame me.

Later I head over to the Eagle, a Chelsea leather bar for men who seem to pride themselves on their resemblance to straight firefighters and cops. The wearing of cologne, I am told, is frowned upon here, and apparently so are capes. Up on the roof deck, pressed against clammy man flesh, I feel hostile eyes burning holes in my sparkly shroud. A shirtless guy who reminds me of the kid who beat me up in middle school taps me on the shoulder. "Hey," he says, "give me a little room. You keep backing into me." I fear that my sequins may have been chafing untold numbers of bare chests around me and that if I don't watch the fabric I may be the first recorded victim of a Chelsea straight-bashing. I am, however, grateful that I don't need to pee. "You gotta lose that thing," says a large black guy with a shaved head who says he's from Queens. "I don't see your face, or anything else. All I'm seeing is that cape." He points at it but doesn't touch it, as though I'm swathed in several yards of cold sore.

ENSEMBLE #6: COUNT FUCKULA

All the love that I have felt from the brothers evaporates as soon as I don my poet shirt and tight black lace-up pants. A couple of days ago I was the white Big Daddy Kane; now there are air-conditioning repairmen standing by their truck, slapping one another on the arm and pointing at me. With a huge knot in the pit of my stomach I steel myself and walk through the doors of Giorgio Armani's Madison Avenue store. From a back corner a mysterious hooting wail pierces the sleek Italian silence. I adopt the bearing of the count I am dressed as, hold my head high, and rush upstairs to the men's department. Soon Arthur, a sweet, gregarious salesman, is slipping jacket after jacket on me while recounting the plot points of the entire puffy shirt episode of *Seinfeld*. "See, Jerry was supposed to wear the shirt on the *Today* show, okay, so he was PO'd because he didn't hear the woman ask him to wear it. See, she was a low-talker. So he was pissed, because he wore it on there and Bryant Gumbel started harassing him." Arthur did a convincing impression of Gumbel's on-air pirate "Arrgh!" "Huh," I say numbly, pretending that I don't have the slightest idea what he's talking about. "So I guess what you're saying is that if I ever go on the *Today* show I shouldn't wear this shirt," I say.

I walk into the Armani store. A hooting wail pierces the sleek Italian silence.

I've grown fond of Arthur in our short time together. I confide in him that I've got a cape at home that goes with this outfit, but I wonder: Does he think it might make me look gay? "What color is it?" he asks. "Black, with sequins," I tell him. "Oh, you're fine," he assures me. "If it's, you know, purple or pink, yes, it might be a gay cape. Not that there's anything wrong with that," he adds. "Hey, that's another *Seinfeld* episode!"

Amazingly, I find that in every boutique I enter on the Upper East Side I am given the kind of service I have never once received wearing my civilian clothes. "It would be perfect," Cady, a lithe West African saleswoman at Dolce & Gabbana, tells me when I ask how she thinks the ruffled shirt, combined with her \$700 gold-labeled white jacket, will be received at an upcoming opera date. I prance around the racks, like Mozart. "So, you got any capes?" I ask, and she looks honestly regretful when she tells me she does not.

At Calvin Klein, handsome little Gino so convincingly tells me he loves my shirt with an \$850 velvet blazer that, as I'm fluffing the folds of my ruffles through the front of the jacket in the mirror, I begin to see a courtly beauty in the ensemble. Four days of anxiety is seeping out through those ruffles, and a preening giddiness takes over. I'm not kidding when I tell Gino that the ensemble makes me look a little like English royalty. He nods approvingly. The jacket's a little rich for my taste, but as I'm walking toward the exit a ponytailed salesman named David looks up from a rack. "Hey," he says, "you're all dressed up. Don't you want to try on something else?" From the tone of his voice I sense he's mocking me, but I follow him around the sale racks. Soon he has sold me an iridescent green cotton suit, on sale for \$450, something I never would have considered purchasing before. My Andrew self recedes; the International Male takes over. If only the International Male had \$2,700 in his pocket he surely would have bought the Nehru-collared knee-length cashmere coat David put on me. But I have to say I look pretty good in that green suit. The pants really accentuate my package. ❧