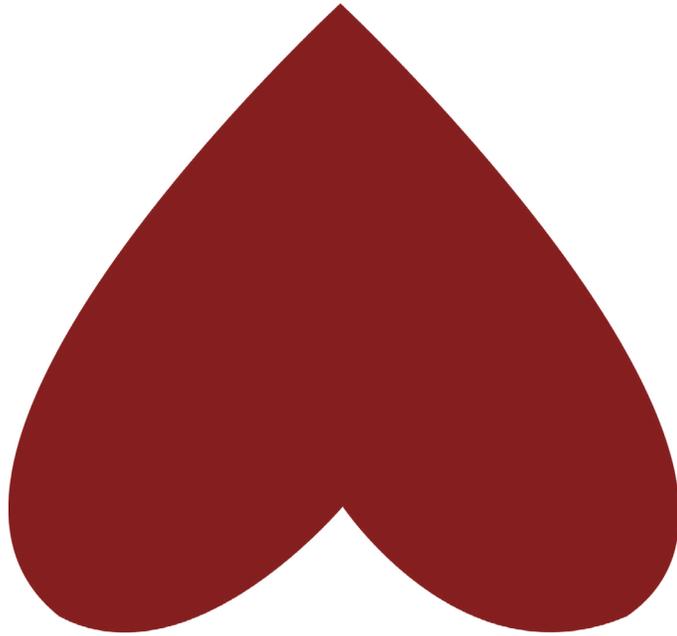


MY KINGDOM FOR MCQUEEN

WORDS BY THOMAS DUNCKLEY



When one thinks of the late British fashion designer, Alexander McQueen, perfume is not the art nor craft that instantly springs to mind. As a constant provocateur and courter of controversy, McQueen presented exceptionally tailored couture that celebrated both the beauty and the depravity of life. He never shied away from all that was visceral and shocking, famously showing an early collection entitled “Highland Rape”, in which models stumbled down the catwalk in strategically torn clothing, vulnerably exposing parts of their

body. McQueen's work spoke of violence, romance and history, and it always felt new, exciting and beautifully pieced together. He was a showman who quickly became the enfant terrible of British fashion and one of the most important designers on the planet.

McQueen's foray into the world of perfume was expectedly daring, but the results were arguably less successful than his exploits in fashion, with his olfactory designs not receiving the commercial, nor critical acclaim that they ultimately deserved. Kingdom, McQueen's debut fragrance was distinct, aggressive and sexual in more ways than the average consumer could handle, resulting in a fragrance that should have been celebrated and appreciated, but was instead maligned as a pariah amongst its contemporaries on the department store shelves. This is a familiar story that can be applied to so many of the truly great fragrances to have graced this good and green Earth.

2003 was the year that Kingdom launched. It was also the year that I became a fragrance nerd. The two events are inextricably linked, as it was Kingdom that served as the catalyst for my personal perfume obsession. Sniffing the fragrance in a crowded department store was a revelation to me, and my nose simply wasn't prepared to learn the things it discovered that day. Who knew that perfume didn't have to smell fresh and clean? That it didn't need to be grounded in gender politics, and more importantly, that it didn't even need to smell pleasant. I didn't buy Kingdom that day – I was too scared and under confident in my abilities to rock something so utterly transgressive – but I came back, and boy did I fall in love.

Kingdom was created by perfumer Jacques Cavallier (Jean Paul Gaultier Classique, L'Eau d'Issey and YSL's Nu) to encapsulate the glamour, brutality, eroticism and beauty of McQueen's fashion. Housed within a ruby-coloured heart flacon and shrouded in a cold metallic shell, Kingdom was as much as objet d'art as it was a functioning fragrance, with each item in the collection bearing a line from a poem written by American poet, Jorie Graham, whispering instructions to the wearer and softly saying; "pierce my heart again", "flame will have its way" and "step into the burning rain". Kingdom was an immersive experience that combined olfactory shock tactics with impeccable design and a subtle narrative straight out of one of McQueen's catwalk shows. This was Spring/Summer 2003 – the season of shock value.

That's a lot of fluff about the concept of Kingdom, but how did it actually smell? What made it so unique and so shocking? The answer is simple: cumin, and lots of it. There was pepper, bergamot, rose and sandalwood too, but they came later in the fragrance's development. In the initial stages, Kingdom was all about the spicy and almost armpit-like funk of cumin, evoking the smell of a thousand naked bodies writhing in carnal ecstasy. The cumin is ever present throughout the entire life of the fragrance but as it settles to a warm, spicy hue, almost like the dying embers of a fire,

the floral notes come through and this is where Kingdom becomes truly beautiful.

The rose peeks through in the heart and adds a sourness, creating an effect that many have likened to the smell of sensitive lady parts – trust me when I say that one cannot read reviews of Kingdom online without coming across at least one person screaming that it "smells like pussy". Now, being the homosexual gentleman that I am, I simply have no frame of reference to confirm or deny these claims, instead I shall say that the fragrance conjures up a human warmth extended by the creaminess of rich sandalwood, that is comforting, erotic, and more that just a bit disturbing.

But there is always beauty in the depraved, and Kingdom was no exception. For each detractor that couldn't stand the fragrance's animalic nuances and wrote it off as putrid funk, there was one who felt perfectly at home within the wanton arms of a fragrance that was not afraid to be divisive. The best perfumes they say, are those that divide opinion and for those people that appreciate the darkness in McQueen's work there was beauty to be found lurking under the belly of the beast. If one is able to revel in all that is dark and dangerous, then Kingdom was nothing short of a hedonistic experience.

With his sudden and untimely death in 2010, McQueen left a huge void in the face of the fashion industry – British fashion simply will never be the same. His legacy however, lives on and the fragrances he offered to the world are but a small part of a body of work that will forever have the ability to beguile and shock in equal measure. He speaks to us through this work, saying that to be exceptional, one needs to be fearless, and if Kingdom was anything, it was a fragrance born with no fear, no shame and no apologies.

Kingdom now survives only as a memory for those who are not lucky enough to have hoarded a stash. It is a fragrance that leaves a lasting impression, not only in the sense that it has a tenacious olfactory signature, but also because it shows that a fragrance can be challenging as well as beautiful. I feel thankful that it spurred in me, an interest that will last for a lifetime, and whilst I seldom reach for Kingdom now, I will always come back to it, relishing with just one sniff that very moment when my life changed and the doors to a more fragrant world were opened.

Aka, The Candy Perfume Boy, Thomas is a self-proclaimed perfume nerd and a Jasmine Award winning writer. He has written pieces for venerable sites; Basenotes, The Perfume Society and Escentual.com of which he writes a weekly "Perfume Expert" column. You can find him at www.thecandyperfumeboy.com