Snow is falling on a grey Milanese morning on December 2, but lights are sparkling inside Palazzo Labus, the lavish 19th century building in central Corso Venezia owned by Dolce & Gabbana. On the first floor, in a huge salon illuminated by rows of chandeliers and huge mirrors, six women sit, chatting and laughing, on red velvet sofas. Clad in long black lace dresses and silk jumpsuits, wrapped up in lavish embroidered or fur-lined coats and adorned with fine jewels, their white or silvery hair pinned by crowns and tiaras, they look as though they have been plucked right out of the famous ball scene in Luchino Visconti's 1960s film 'The Leopard'.

This throw-back to the film's statement scene in which the Sicilian aristocracy flaunts its decadent opulence is abruptly interrupted as Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana enter the set, and start conversing with their mature models, the most senior of whom gleams with lofty, 83-year-old beauty. To put them at their ease, Dolce asks for drinks to be brought in. “These ladies need a tonic, let's have some champagne,” he says, whispering as an aside “they’re sublime.”

Soon it is time for the ladies to start filming - some of them aren’t professional models, and this is their fashion debut. The tension is palpable, but it quickly dissolves in the good-natured atmosphere pervading the set, evident in the muffled laughter and whispered conversation drifting out of the adjoining room, where a string of younger women are waiting to be called in to dance and sway to an electro beat in front of the camera.

Sporting a series of coloured wigs - in yellow, pink, sky blue and mauve - they are wearing long, airy tulle dresses or skimpier, tutu-style outfits sprinkled with silver stars. Their looks are clearly more extravagant than those of their putative grannies, veering almost into streetwear, for example the fitted top and mini-shorts glimpsed under a maxi overcoat made of red feathers.
While Europe is still in the grip of the Covid-19 epidemic’s second wave, the Italian luxury label has chosen to unveil - for the first time - its haute couture collections via three short films to be broadcast in the coming days. The fine jewellery video will be released on December 7, the women’s Alta Moda film on December 8, and the men’s Alta Sartoria film on December 9.

Dolce & Gabbana first introduced a haute couture line in 2012, away from the Parisian couture week’s limelight, deciding to present the collections in Italy. It picked a series of iconic venues, from Venice to Palermo, Agrigento and then Florence last September, showcasing luxurious collections emphasising the expertise and craftsmanship of the Italian tailoring tradition. In July 2014, Dolce & Gabbana added the menswear Alta Sartoria counterpart to the women’s Alta Moda collection.

For their latest winter haute couture, the designer duo decided to celebrate family, a theme that is dear to them, hence the choice of a mixed cast of characters, between younger and more mature models. “There are grandmothers, aunts, nieces and cousins. The idea is to recreate the kind of intermingling that exists within families, where diversity reigns. And in diversity there is love, and beauty. Of course, younger women are more rebellious, but once they become adult, they revert to tradition,” said Dolce, moved by one of the models’ long silvery plait of hair falling down her back, making him think so much of his mother.

“We wanted to bring together in the same collection a mix of different generations. On the one hand, mature women with a classic, more traditional style, and on the other a series of younger women wearing more creative looks inspired by the new world we’re living in, where everything happens on social media. In the 1980s, young
looks, influenced by the new world we're living in, where everything happens on social media. In the 1980s, young people went for a sort of uniform. Nowadays, there's much more freedom,” said Stefano Gabbana.

The 71-look collection consists of unique items, whose pictures and full technical fabrication details will be sent to some 400 hand-picked Dolce & Gabbana customers worldwide, from the USA to China, Japan, Europe, Russia, Brazil, Mexico and the Middle East. A selection of customers now to be joined by their daughters. “For the majority of them,” said Gabbana, “we already have manikins made in their measurements. New customers will be able to visit our boutiques around the world, because this time we couldn’t invite them to a physical show.”

While filming continues in the palazzo's various salons, on the ground-floor's covered courtyard an army of make-up artists and hairdressers are getting the male models ready for the afternoon shoot. A young man sporting assorted body art and piercings pops outside a door. He is pianist and composer Davide Locatelli, a stand-out name in crossover music in Italy, whose job is to fashion the film's soundtrack. “I've reinterpreted a set of classic piano melodies with a contemporary orchestration,” he told FashionNetwork.com with a wide grin, without explaining further.

Meanwhile, video technicians and camera operators flit busily in and out of the various room in a clockwork ballet, in which the models glide past, criss-crossing each other only in small groups. They are dressed like princesses, like the one wearing a cream-coloured tulle train gown highlighted by silk scarves, whose printed motifs reproduce performance posters from La Scala, Milan's iconic opera house.
There are plenty of references to the city of Milan in the collection, from La Scala to the Duomo, the famous cathedral whose outline is sketched on a white satin dress. “A part of the collection is centred around the notion of traditional ‘sartoria’ [couture], inspired by baroque decorations, like the patterns in this brocade tapestry fabric we replicated on an astrakhan and beaver fur coat,” said Dolce, pointing to the tapestry on the salon walls.

The sculpted, gilded panelling above the window frames instead crops up on a woollen houndstooth dress. “These decorations are reminiscent of the past, of the baroque era, of distant memories. Like the dress celebrating La Scala [and opera], which we are missing so much this year,” said Dolce, before going back to check on the details for every one of his models.

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