The fashion industry bade farewell on Tuesday night to Alber Elbaz in exactly the way he would have wanted, with a legendary runway show.

Not just a few, but 45 of his fellow designers created homages to the late great Elbaz, bringing down the curtain on Paris Fashion Week as its last show this season.

“Alber would have been incredibly honored to have been surrounded by his peers, colleagues, collaborators, friends and family. It would have brought him tears of joy and happiness,” said his long-time partner Alex Koo.

The idea of the show came from the Théâtre de la Mode, when 60 French couturiers and artists in 1945 sent doll-sized mannequins – made during the war – on a world tour, to help provide funds for WW2 survivors.

Entitled ‘Love Brings Love’, the joint show was staged inside the Carreau du Temple, with bus stops nearby all featuring posters for the event. Underlining the respect in which he was held both France’s First Lady Brigitte Macron and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo – who recently announced her candidacy to run for president against Emmanuel Macron next year – both sat front row, amid two score of designers.
And almost as many CEOs – François-Henri Pinault; Diego della Valle; Sidney Toledano; Marc and Manuel Puig; Philippe Fortunato of the fashion division of Richemont, which bankrolled Elbaz’ indie fashion house AZ Factory; and Ralph Toledano, the chairman of Victoria Beckham, and the man who discovered Elbaz, and gave him his first job as creative director of Guy Laroche. Close by, Koo sat with Demi Moore and daughter Scout Willis, alongside several of Elbaz’ sisters.

After a long series of embraces and greetings, where many designers got to meet each other for the first time, this unique show began one-hour late.

Riccardo Tisci, whose fluid silk column evoked Elbaz’ mastery of draping, while Pierpaolo Piccioli of Valentino with a giant purple faille gown recalled Alber’s love of grandeur.

“He was the most unselfish human being that I have ever met and his generosity was also part of the way he approached fashion,” wrote Piccioli, in a finely illustrated book featuring all of the sketches of outfits in this show.

Many referenced Elbaz’ ever-present bow-ties; most handsomely Thom Browne, who reinvented his gray suit with enormous bows, while Simone Rocha’s look was one giant bow-tie gown.

When he died in April, there was an overpowering expression of loss from the fashion industry, when Elbaz’ generous spirit was much admired. Jean-Paul Gaultier's cocktail dresses was a series of hearts, with fabric pouring out of each one almost in tears.

Others to have participated included Pieter Mulier, Sarah Burton, Daniel Lee, Charaf Tajer, Gabriela Hearst, Christopher John Rogers, Dries Van Noten, Guo Pei, Nàdège Vanhée-Cybulski, Iris Van Herpen, Rosie Assoulin, Chitose Abe, Daniel Roseberry, Simone Rocha, Stella McCartney, Thebe Magugu, Tomo Koizumi, Donatella Versace, Guram Gvasalia, Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren, Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler, Grace Wales Bonner and Glenn Martens.
After the collective show, the studio of AZ Factory presented an homage collection to Alber, which was in many ways the key moment. Precisely because this collection was so strong and coherent, there was an immediate sense that Elbaz’ brand does have a future without him.

As the last AZ Factory model appeared, the giant backdrop was illuminated on three levels, the entire cast danced to Elbaz’ signature finale song, ’Love Train’ by the O’Jays.

“[I recall] Ralph (Toledano) calling me back in the 90s and explaining he had found this great young designer for Guy Laroche from Casablanca. Which is where he and I are from. And in those days, designers from Morocco didn’t get to run famous Paris fashion houses. But Alber did and immediately he was great,” recalled Sidney Toledano.

After a stint at Saint Laurent, Elbaz would go on to achieve his greatest success at Lanvin. Where after a decade and a half he was fired unceremoniously in 2015. However, Alber, always known for his huge heart, would surely have been pleased to see his eventual successor at Lanvin, Bruno Sialelli contributing so elegantly to this farewell.
With a beautiful white gown whose elongated train featured a giant photo of Elbaz floating like sailing boat across the space in moving pools of light.

Gone, but never to be forgotten among those who love fashion, and a brave spirit.

By Godfrey Deeny