



Indecent Exposure

For fans of sky-high hemlines or layers of frothy tulle, it's standing room only.

Illustration by MATT COLLINS

On her international press tour to promote this past spring's *Iron Man*, a radiant and lithe Gwyneth Paltrow donned a veritable parade of dresses, all with hemlines that hovered precariously around the top of her thighs. From a lacy black Balmain number to a sparkly Sonia Rykiel, Paltrow's mini endeavors showcased her hard-earned gams and sexy-mom attitude. More important, the frocks managed to stay put across miles of red-carpet strolls. (Lindsay Lohan and her visible-to-all Spanx may wish to take note.)

But as any fashion lover will tell you, a dress that fits perfectly while worn standing can become a weapon of massive humiliation as soon as its owner takes a seat. And such incidents are not limited to short looks that leave little to the imagination. Tightly corseted bodices morph into death traps; huge ballskirts expand to look like housing for a family of four; and delicate fabrics and sequins pull a disintegration act.

Paltrow was lucky to have enlisted stylist

Maria Serra for the European leg of her premiere trail. As Serra tells it, she and the actress put those leg-baring choices through a boot camp of possible scenarios: "She walked around the house, walked up some stairs, sat on a chair," explains the stylist of their pre-photo op ritual. For an appearance on Britain's *Friday Night With Jonathan Ross* TV show, they even considered camera angles: "What's the height of the chair or the sofa you'll be sitting on? Some people are quite happy if their modesty is compromised. But Gwyneth doesn't really like that."

Neither does Julie Macklowe, a retail/consumer portfolio manager for Sigma Capital Management. And so, lacking the time and styling assistance afforded an A-list celebrity, Macklowe once found herself at a Calvin Klein Fashion Week party declining multiple barstool offers despite her aching feet. "My turtleneck dress was so short that I literally could not sit the whole night. It would have been obscene," she recalls. It was an unusual situation for Macklowe, a self-described ballgown devotee more accustomed to the woes inherent to such large garments. At the last Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute gala, for example, she wore a voluminous tulle Dolce & Gabbana confection that nearly caused a waiter pileup near her table.

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From left: Julie Macklowe, Gwyneth Paltrow, Samantha Rosen and Nina Griscom, all sporting their tricky frocks.

But nothing tops the Oscar de la Renta ballskirt she bought for a Whitney Museum gala a few years back. Upon heading to the loo, she found her getup too large for the facility's toilets. "My husband came to find me, and the skirt was sitting in the middle of the Whitney corridor, right outside the bathroom, because I just couldn't fit through the stall doors," says Macklowe, whose hubby then stood guard outside.

At least her dress stayed intact. Not so for a short sequined Bill Blass sheath Nina Griscom wore 10 years ago. "I sat down, and the chair had some caning on it. And when I got up, the dress was bald on the butt," she says, laughing. "I had it resequined, but it was never the same."

Designer Lisa Perry just barely avoided a similar mishap with a vintage Paco Rabanne chain dress made of delicate, dentable square paillettes. "I bought it with every intention of wearing it," she recalls. "I put it on, and my husband said, 'Honey, how are you going to sit in that?' And I sat down to test it and gasped. It's such a collector's item that I didn't want to ruin it or bend it."

Unfortunately, she didn't perform such a trial run with a look she created for the Paul Poiret-theme Met gala two years ago. Inspired by the fashion legend, Perry wore a black and white minidress with a stiff wire lampshade hem—so stiff, in fact, that she stayed vertical for the entire car ride there. "I had to kind of crouch in the back, holding on to the front seat," she says, laughing. This strategy didn't save her during dinner, however: "When I sat down [the skirt] popped up, and you could see straight up my dress." Thankfully the table blocked the view from her companions.

Such predicaments are certainly not new. "These are contemporary manifestations of a very old problem," says Phyllis Magidson, curator of costumes and textiles at the Museum of the City of New York. Indeed, between crinolines, bustles, panniers and hoopskirts, women from previous centuries had a host of details with which to contend. "Much of your training as a lady who would be wearing fine things involved maneuvering gracefully in them, anticipating the fact that there were clothes that you would not sit down in," continues Magidson, referring to such looks as Elizabethan garments encrusted with pearls, glass stones and mirrors.

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That said, Magidson points out that many of the obstacles that modern women might deem insurmountable were actually manageable for those schooled in dealing with them. "Bustles you could move to the side. Panniers in the 18th century would generally collapse," she says.

And even some more recent couturiers have realized the challenges of sitting in a dress. "We have in our own collection a Worth ballgown from 1897, which is probably the most elaborate dress we have," Magidson says of a piece that was made for a mother of the bride. "It's embroidered in glass pearls, however not at the back of the skirt, because Jean-Philippe Worth was well aware that it would have been totally preposterous and counterproductive."

Historically, fashionable women were not expected to accomplish much while in their garments, but their present-day counterparts live in a fast-paced society that would seem to render non-seat-friendly concoctions anachronistic. Are contemporary designers any more thoughtful?

Lanvin's Alber Elbaz has seemingly mastered the art of nocturnal looks that provide beauty without strain. Like Worth, he considers the dinner-table comfort factor; for his spring 2008 collection he presented a white dress whose feathered embellishment was limited to the front. "Everything is about ease for the woman," said Elbaz at the time.

Laura Mulleavy of Rodarte, whose creations have included all manner of highly constructed skirts, admits that pragmatism is not always a top priority. "I don't think we ever go into designing with any thought except, Oh, let's create something. And practicality is usually our last concern," she says of the process she shares with sister Kate. "We've done seasons with really crazy interiors...definitely not something you're gonna want to sit in. But I wouldn't expect to make a million of them."

Conversely, Zac Posen puts his ready-to-wear through a rigorous procedure to ensure its wearability. "With our fit model, we do seated and standing tests," he says. "How does a dress ride up when you sit? Giving enough room is a big consideration." Still, that doesn't preclude him from making a special piece that throws reason to the wind. "When we dressed Kristin Davis in *Sex and the City*, the movie, as a bridesmaid, she wore a pure showpiece of ours. I'm all about comfort in dressing, but I think as a creator and an artist it's okay to build those pieces as well."

Samantha Rosen has managed to evade disasters by test-driving everything before she leaves the house. But following a Tim Gunn-like decree of "Make it work!" she lets nothing—not an enormous red Oscar de la Renta frock or a Rochas that "could have children crawling out from under it"—deter her if she is drawn to its beauty. "I'm not going to just wear something because it's convenient and functional," Rosen declares. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

—VANESSA LAWRENCE

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