

PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN

BRINSLEY MATTHEWS

BY DALE KING AND JULIA HEBERT

Some may say this success story of Ireland-born Brinsley Matthews is self-fulfilled prophecy. You see, his mother named him after *Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, the famous Irish playwright, poet, long-time owner of the London Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and a former Whig member of the British House of Commons who now rests in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey since 1817. Fast-forward some two centuries, and you'll find his namesake Brinsley Matthews, also a poet and man of the arts, adding even further to a Renaissance man's impressive credentials.



'Portrait of a Gentleman'; Richard Brinsley Sheridan, painted by John Hoppner.

Just 20 years ago, you'd find Brinsley embracing hairpin turns in a sleek, one-seated, roofless Formula V speedster, racing toward a top-five finish at Mondello race track in Ireland or Pembrey in the UK. It isn't typically the place to find a Sotheby's-pedigreed, highly educated gentleman with diverse feathers in his cap — like classic fabric and wallpaper designer, antiques appraiser, poet and filmmaker.

In the 1990s, Matthews decided to follow the likes of race legends Jackie Stewart and Michael Schumacher. "Like every red-blooded male, after studying and seeing the world a bit, it's time to knuckle down and figure out what you want to do. I was in Hong Kong at the time, looking out at Kowloon Bay, when I said, 'I'd really love to be a race car driver.' I had to create a business to fund racing, because no one would sponsor an unknown." He competed for a handful of years, always finishing in the top five. But "I started thinking of other aspirations. And after finishing second in a most prestigious race at Phoenix Park,



Dublin, I hung up my boots" and moved on. His mind kept wandering to other influences. "I grew up with two delightful parents and in a hotel," Brinsley said. "I was visually entertained everyday. It was a country house hotel on a beautiful lake. Gentlemen would fly fish in their Harris tweeds. Weddings by day and dinner dances by night. Guests from far and wide all looking smart. From the time I could sit up, I took notice of everything and everyone! My mother studied art, my aunt was an architect. My mother had great flair and was very resourceful; aunt Millicent was very disciplined in design. Obviously I noticed that. Millicent used what was once our gatehouse as a holiday house, and every time she visited I dashed up there to discover another world, a more linear world, no antiques for her (my mother and I loved antiques). For her, everything was to be practical and space saving. But with an odd internal wooden wall varnished and another wall white-washed, upholstery of large plaid and a heavy arts-and-crafts rocking chair with a toile fabric seat and back, one has a great look going on. At home lots of color, chintz, art and antiques of every period and genre, it was not staid by any means — my mother knew how to work it."





Brinsley Matthews in the Palm Beach workroom where he designs fabrics.

MAN OF MANY TALENTS

The master artisan has co-owned a resort hotel in Ireland, designed and sold furnishings, accessories and handbags, and earned praise for his career at Sotheby's. Softly spoken, with a charming Irish accent and infectious laugh, Brinsley declines to brag, though he certainly has much to boast about.

It was serendipity, perhaps, that drew Brinsley to Carleton Varney, president of Dorothy Draper & Co. of New York. "I met him in an antiques store in London," said Brinsley. "I just happened to be in the store, too." They quickly found that "what I had done and what Carleton had done were a perfect match." Today, as director of design and operations, he is forever immersed in

his creativity and was much involved in the design of *The Greenbrier*, WV, *The Grand Hotel*, MI, *The Colony Hotel*, Palm Beach and *The Stoneleigh Hotel* and *Ritz Towers* in Dallas. To Brinsley, color is key. "Colors should always bring a freshness, for mood, offering harmony or contrast to give each other recognition. Colors are like human personalities, they have to have depth, a brightness, or be subtle to be interesting. When I'm creating a wallpaper or fabric, the art of storytelling develops. Yes, no man is an island, and nothing should float alone. For me, work is a joy," said Matthews. The Varney-Matthews duo attend to every detail when remodeling a hotel "from the menus to the buttons on the uniforms to the matchbox covers."

Brinsley's works speak for themselves, from the restored Royal Palace in Lithuania to the lavish 2008 Academy Awards: Designed and decorated the Green Room.

THE POET

Richard Brinsley Sheridan would be proud to know that his namesake is also a published poet. Brinsley Matthews' book, called "Lands Shared," includes a foreword by Desmond Guinness, founder of the Irish Georgian Society. Critics rave that Matthews' poetry is uplifting for all.



A Weekend 'About Town' bag for him.



Millicent is a double bamboo handled model in a mandarin color of full grain leather, which is undoubtedly a sophisticated handbag whose timeless beauty and unsurpassed elegance will catch attention at a glance. The interior is very roomy with a full red suede lining plus a wall zippered pocket and smartphone pocket.

THE FASHION DESIGNER

"Art has no bounds, an eye does not stop - how could it? Like history, there are many reasons which lead up to the event. Fashion is a part of life and of home. It's how we choose to live, there are daring sides to soulful sides," said Brinsley, who also designs luxury handbags when he's not designing fabric or wallpaper. "It's not about nailing it - it's about expression, the cut and texture of a garment are of equal importance. Fuss has no place in fashion, simplicity is key. A touch of flair adds gaiety, however simplicity speaks louder."

THE FILMMAKER

With a curriculum vitae with such diverse accomplishments as Formula V race car driver, Sotheby's collectibles expert, resort owner, fashion, fabric and wallpaper designer, and poet, one might think it humanly impossible to add anything more. But, then again, Brinsley Matthews is no ordinary man. In 2015, he added yet another genre to his repertoire - documentary filmmaker. In Ireland, he directed "Under An Irish Sky." The film high-

lights "the art of the person and their environment. Five people, from age 10 to 70, are interviewed: A schoolboy from a broken home wants to be a jockey, a new boarding school girl discovers she has 32 sisters, a choir boy realizes he'll never sing again, an Italian grandmother is proud of her life, a monk offers an oasis. A common theme became transparent in the documentary - hard work. It takes work to make grades, plant a garden or build a comfortable home to share and experience," he says. "Each person has a true identity and is a positive, natural example of a successful life. Even though it was filmed in the depths of winter, magical backgrounds just seemed to present themselves - choppy waves, moss-covered stones, tall dead grass, crisp skies and full moons."

With all he has attained, Brinsley still harbors a love for race car driving. "When I wind down a little more, in the later years," he promises, "I shall race again - in the Monte Carlo Classic Car Rally." 🟡



The Christmas Children's Hunt at Lady Dunraven's in County Limerick during filming of "Under An Irish Sky."



A scene in "Under An Irish Sky": A boyhood life by Lough Sheelin.