



Ida Johansson's catwalk entry in New York, dancing herself free from her straight jacket.

Photos on this spread: Michael Skoglund



Nicklas Hillberg loves spangles and proudly shows off Frida Jonsved's design.



Emma Örtlund, the film's protagonist, is all smiles, longing for the limelight, if just for a day.

Catwalk

Everybody has the right to shine

Text: Annelie Karlsson

It is completely dark and silent, with an air of expectancy. We are at the Metropolis Studio in Manhattan during New York's Fashion Week and the place is packed. Photographers are priming their cameras and a band is ready to strike up the music. We are about to see a Catwalk with higher ambitions than merely to show off fancy clothes.

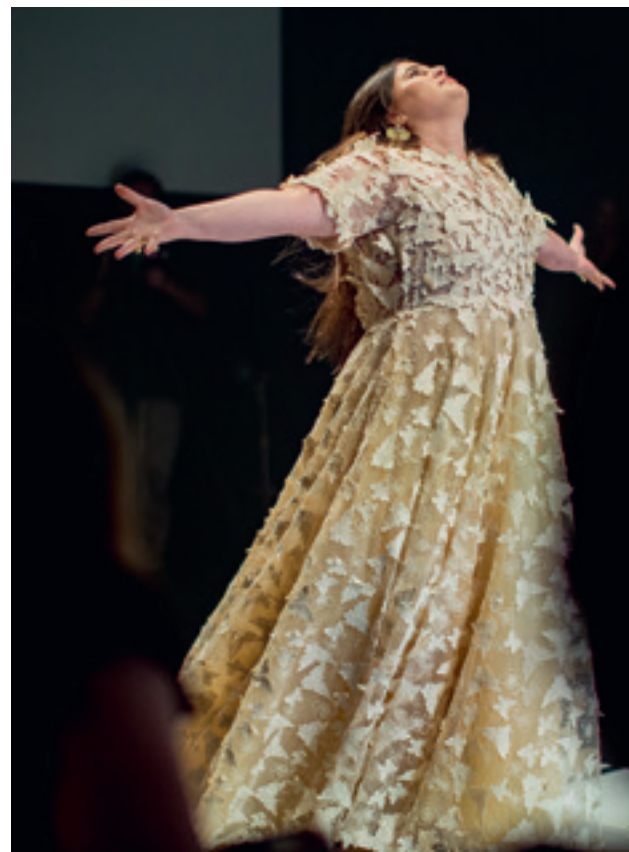
A film starts up on a display screen, telling the story through history of people with disabilities, how they were sequestered

and humiliated. Suddenly, Ida Johansson emerges, wearing a straight jacket she is trying desperately to free herself from. She succeeds and struts down the catwalk. It is a gripping introduction. Its message: everybody has the right to shine.

Emma Örtlund waltzes in, dressed in a glittering dress and smiling her infectious smile. She acknowledges the audience with a gracious wave and sashays through steps she has been practicing for months. Nicklas Hillberg, Alexander Rådlund and Kitty

Kitty Jonsson, the gang's fashionista, sweeps in to a rousing song by Avici.

Alexander Rådlund, the group's de facto leader, wants to project an in-your-face attitude.





The rehearsals for the Glada Hudik gang were held in the old Sundin ski factory in Hudiksvall. Here Frida Jonsved, the designer of the clothes, is helping out with Nicklas' and Kitty's dresses at the dressrehearsal.

Jonsson follow each other with dance steps and a song from Kitty. Their clothes were designed by Frida Jonsved, sitting beside me in the audience.

“Despite all the horrors they have been subjected to, they still have the ability to show love. They are one hundred per cent themselves and lack the camouflage filters of non-disabled people,” says Frida, who faced her own discrimination in youth. Today Frida is one of the most in-demand designers in Sweden.

Catwalk is a success! The audience is on its feet and the applause won't stop. Most eyes are decidedly moist. It takes a while to take everything in. And when, backstage, the participants celebrate, I share their overwhelming joy. They have pulled off what no one believed possible. Every detail had fallen into place: coordination, dance steps and the beat. They had performed with pizzazz. It was a profound moment, transforming my own prejudices; I realise we are all so alike whatever appearances indicate. It was an unbeatable feeling to see the entire gang dazzle, on their own terms. I had been along for the ride: rehearsals, nerves and anxiety mixed with laughter and joy, beginning in a factory building in Hudiksvall and culminating in the show in New York. Here we were – on the last day of filming for the movie, Catwalk.

It all started with a letter from Emma Örtlund to Pär Johansson asking for help in realising her dream – to be a photo model.

“I was moved by Emma's letter and immediately knew I would try to help. I hate injustices – why can't you be a model because you have a disability?” says Pär, founder of the Glada Hudik theatre troupe in Hudiksvall. “And the Catwalk film project was born! Its purpose was to demonstrate that disability

need not imply limitation. The Catwalk project can help reduce our prejudices and we're all involved. This global issue, like bullying and rejection, reminds us how, from an early age, we are expected to act a certain way to be 'normal'. And if we are not like 'everybody else', we can be excluded.”

The Glada Hudik mission is simply to change the whole world's way of thinking about, seeing and relating to disabled people. It started in 1996 when Pär Johansson found employment at the municipal day treatment centre in Hudiksvall. But seeing people with disabilities sent for instruction on how to tie shoelaces frustrated him. Surely there was a better outlet for creativity? Why concentrate on what they don't know rather than building on what they are already good at? Pär bought shoes with velcro fasteners and proposed a theatre project, something always close to his heart. And that's the way it went. The first show was *Tomtar på rymmen* (Christmas Elves on the Run) and was seen by 400 people. By 1998, they had a solid reputation with local audiences and were becoming more professional. A breakthrough came in 1999 with a show entitled *Indianer i djungeln* (Indians in the Jungle). Since then, every year has seen a new production, attracting successively larger audiences.

The Catwalk movie, produced by Storyfire and directed by Johan Skog, premiered in January 2020 and will be shown later in the year as a six-part TV mini-series. The series delves into each of the main characters and will include new material, making it essentially a new product. We get to know Nicklas, Emma, Ida, Kitty and Alexander better.

During the filming of Catwalk, the World Childhood Foundation, founded by Queen Silvia, invited the entire cast and crew,



Photo: Charlie Bennett

Kitty, Nicklas, Emma, Ida and Alexander cheering after the catwalk at the Metropolis Studio in Manhattan, New York.

together with sponsors, press and others to the Foundation's New York headquarters for a press conference. There was strong interest from both American and Swedish media. A support organisation for disabled people in New York told us that the US has much to learn about integration and acceptance of peoples' equal value and that disabled people

face great intolerance on the labour market.

When Hans Vestberg, CEO of Verizon, held a short speech praising the project, Emma Örtlund, her dream finally come true, winked at Princess Madeleine in the first row and commented: “There are two princesses here today!”



The complete Glada Hudik group with founder Pär Johansson, who sees the Catwalk movie as an expression of support for the right of all people to show their stuff – and be seen.

Photo: Jonas Santos