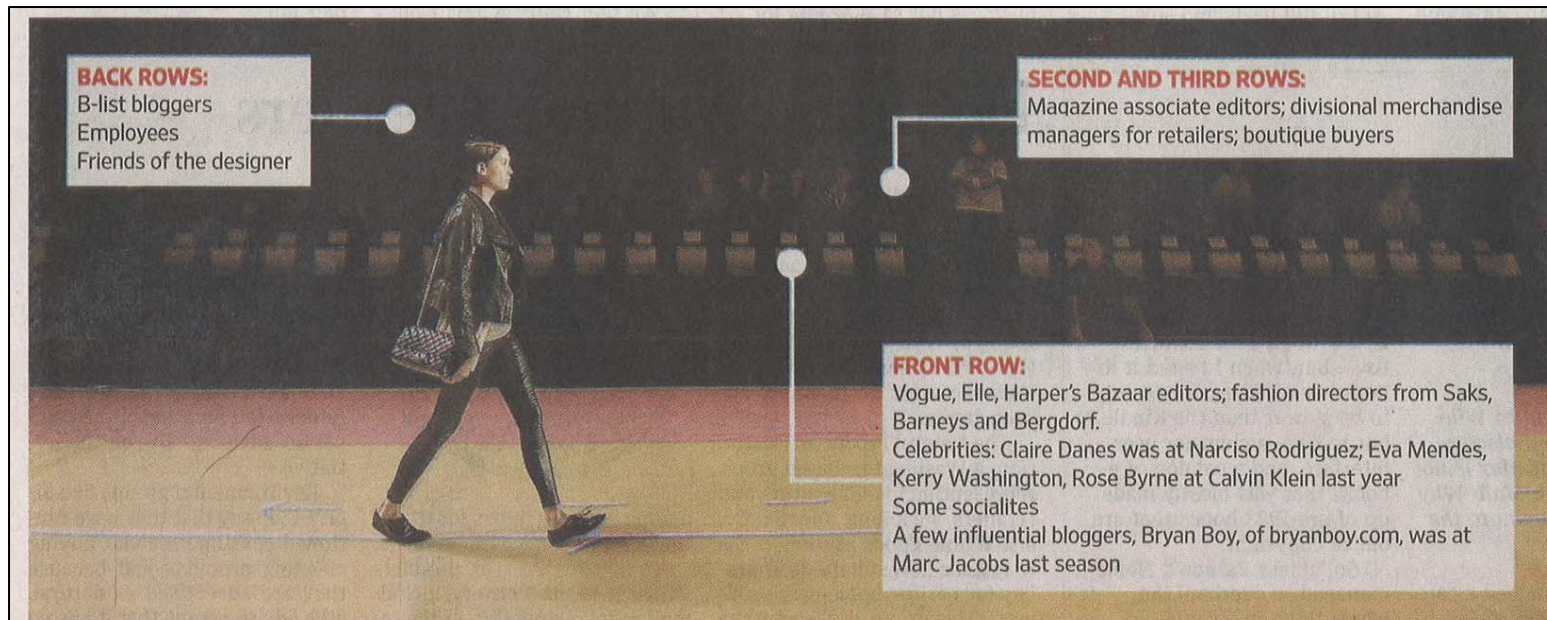


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BACK ROWS:

B-list bloggers
Employees
Friends of the designer

SECOND AND THIRD ROWS:

Magazine associate editors; divisional merchandise managers for retailers; boutique buyers

FRONT ROW:

Vogue, Elle, Harper's Bazaar editors; fashion directors from Saks, Barneys and Bergdorf.

Celebrities: Claire Danes was at Narciso Rodriguez; Eva Mendes, Kerry Washington, Rose Byrne at Calvin Klein last year
Some socialites

A few influential bloggers, Bryan Boy, of bryanboy.com, was at Marc Jacobs last season

A runway rehearsal for Phillip Lim's Spring 2010 show at Bryant Park Sept. 16, 2009.

You Are Where You Sit at the Shows

By RACHEL DODES

At designer Richard Chai's fashion show Thursday, the front row will be filled with the usual suspects: magazine editors, retailers, actresses, a few socialites—and Nina Koduru.

Dr. Koduru, a 30-year-old research fellow at New York's Cornell Medical School, isn't a member of the media-celebrity complex that dominates New York Fashion Week, the twice-a-year spectacle where designers unveil new collections and gin up brand buzz. She is, though, a member of "Noir," an invitation-only retail club for big spenders on

the Web site Gilt.com, which sells designer clothes at a discount. She paid \$2,100 for a Fashion Week package, one of 14 that Gilt Groupe Inc. sold during the past two weeks. It comes with a dress and sweater of her choosing from the fall 2010 collection of Mr. Chair, known for his blouses and tailored feminine looks that mix different fabrics.

"I am excited to cross 'getting into the front row at New York Fashion Week' off my 'Impossible Things to Do' checklist," Dr. Koduru says.

For fashion fanatics without industry connections, an invitation to a Fashion Week show is, if not impossible, then very close to it. At Fashion

Week's main venue, the Tents at Bryant Park, demand for seats usually exceeds supply. The "salon" tent seats about 500, and the main tent, where Michael Kors and Diane von Furstenberg are showing this week, seats about 1,200. Guest lists are carefully curated by the designer with a fashion public-relations firm. Seating is assigned, and it isn't negotiable. Invitations, which go out a few weeks before the show, are non-transferrable and often explicitly say so. Guests must show the invitation at the entryway; some of the biggest designers check I.D.'s.

Please turn to page D8

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New York Fashion Week last fall: Actresses Lynn Collins (left), Amanda Bynes and Joanna Garcia at the BCBG Max Azria show; right, sign on Anna Wintour's chair at the Oscar de la Renta show.

Fashion's Hierarchy: Decoding the Seating Chart of a Show

Continued from page D1

Fashion shows—often over in all of 15 minutes—have their own seating conventions, especially in the front row. At Bryant Park, the catwalk comes out into the audience, with retail buyers, the press and celebrities sitting on either side, forming a kind of letter “U.” Photographers, who can get rowdy, are crammed into a pit at the bottom of the “U,” where they may shout to elicit a reaction from the models.

Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour and other V.I.P.s will almost always sit near the end of the front row in the section to the left of the runway—sometimes known as the “A” section. This is considered the best vantage point because it is the first place where the models turn. It is also close to the doors—ideal for making a quick exit and getting on to the next show. Celeb-

rities usually sit in the middle of the front row, so the photographers can see them without creating a traffic jam. Retail executives usually are sprinkled between rival editors, to avoid awkward situations: Bergdorf's, for example, doesn't want Saks knowing which looks it is circling in the program.

The worst seats are those next to the back end of the runway—although some are technically in the front row, says Kelly Cutrone, founder of People's Revolution, which produces shows for designers such as Davi Delfin and Toni Francese. “They are usually given to sponsors who don't really understand the language of seating,” she says. A seat in rows one to rows three mean you are “still in the game.”

For celebrities seated in the front row at a Marc Jacobs show, it is considered good manners to

wear a Marc Jacobs outfit. Wait until after the show to go through the gift bag tucked beneath the front row seats, Ms. Cutrone says.

During the show, front-row guests should keep their feet under their chairs to keep them out of photographs. Conversation of any kind is frowned upon; stray comments can land on a blog, especially now that some influential fashion bloggers are landing prime seats. Often, people assigned to a back row will creep forward to claim a better seat. The designer's publicists may encourage this practice so that all seats appear filled.

Paul Wilmot, a PR executive who produces shows for designers such as Oscar de la Renta, says if he can't accommodate a celebrity in the front row, he discourages them from coming so as to avoid a perceived slight. “I've seen meltdowns, I've seen

tears,” Mr. Wilmot says. “It's just math. If there are only 100 front row seats, and 200 people who want to sit in the front row, it's not going to work.”

Designers will reward a top-spending client with an invitation and sometimes a prime seat. Naeem Khan, who gained attention for dressing Michelle Obama for the administration's first state dinner, reserves a front-row spot for Google executive Marissa Mayer and Houston fundraiser Becca Cason Thrash. Designer Yigal Azrouel invites the top 10 clients of his New York store but reserves his inventory of about 100 front-row seats for buyers, editors and celebrity clients, says Donata Minelli, the label's managing director. This season, the designer sold a few runway-show packages through **Gilt Groupe**, but none in the front row.

The industry is trying to fight invitation reselling. Some designers ask Internet auction sites to remove such sales. Still, on craigslist.com, a seller last week was offering “access and runway seats to all the fashion shows” for \$499. (It isn't clear if the offer was legitimate.) On eBay, an invitation to an unidentified designer's show recently had a \$50 starting bid. Auction-site sellers don't reveal their identities, and several contacted via email with requests for comment didn't respond.

A spokeswoman for IMG Worldwide, which organizes Fashion Week, says, “We actively research and identify Web sites where [resale] activity is taking place and get our lawyers involved as needed.” Some legitimate tickets are sold at charity auctions and through corporate sponsorships. Alexis Maybank,

Gilt Groupe co-founder, says the Noir program's fashion-show tickets are “about giving our most loyal customers hard-to-access experiences.”

Janelle Heiser, a 37-year-old wine consultant from Canton, Ohio, bought a seat to a Carolina Herrera show several seasons ago via an auction site for \$600. (A spokeswoman says the design house's fashion shows are by invitation only, and admission is never intended to be by resale invitations.)

Nowadays, however, Ms. Heiser buys legitimate tickets to fashion shows through American Express Co., which has a skybox overlooking the tents as part of a sponsorship deal with IMG. The \$150-a-person packages also include drinks, hors d'oeuvres and a visit in the skybox with designers and fashion experts.