“222 W. 23rd St.-Chelsea Hotel, please,” I breathed, as I collapsed in the back seat of the cab, throwing my seven shopping bags around me. The cab driver nodded. Ten minutes later, I had arrived. As I walked into the humble-looking building that is the Chelsea Hotel, I ran through my mental list of talent that had graced the place: Mark Twain, Arthur Miller, Thomas Wolfe, Bette Davis, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix, to name a handful. Most notably, it was in this very hotel that Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols stabbed and killed his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen. Now, part of the Chelsea Hotel is home to Zaldy, the drag queen-come-designer most recently known for his work as co-designer of Gwen Stefani’s clothing line, L.A.M.B. — the now famous acronym for Love Angel Music Baby.

The walls of the third level were plastered with an eclectic array of artwork. I followed a handwritten sign that read “Zaldy” with a big arrow. As I knocked on the door of Room 302, a slim, olive-skinned guy with long black hair answered. It was the man himself. In person, he was sweet, modest and sincere. “Aaah, you’re here with Marci! Come this way...” he smiled. It was the day before Zaldy’s Spring 2006 collection show, and I was in New York with Marci Landgraf, for Fashion Week.

Zaldy led me to his grungy, bohemian bedroom, where Marci was working with celebrity hairstylist Danilo. They were practicing hair styles on a young model, Dree, who I later discovered was Ernest Hemingway’s great-great-granddaughter. Renowned makeup artist, Matthu Anderson, lounged on Zaldy’s messy futon. I sat on the old hardwood floor amidst piles of art books, watching the two at work.

Danilo’s appearance was striking. He reminded me of the Greek sea god, Triton, with his dark just-got-back-from-Burning-Man tan, peroxide blonde hair tied back into a short ponytail, rough beard, and powerful eyes. He wore a plaid Kangol bucket hat, a T-shirt with splashes of pink and safety pins, rolled up khaki pants, and his arms were laden with bracelets and cuffs. I could not take my eyes off him. I wandered into the room next door, where a small team of skilled people were sewing, cutting, steaming, and ironing what looked like the finishing touches to Zaldy’s collection. I could not wait until tomorrow!

Our wake-up call was 5:30 a.m. The beds at the W Hotel were so unbelievably soft, I had a hard time getting up. Nevertheless, by 7 a.m., Marci and I were standing in the lobby with the rest of the Sebastian Artistic Team. We took a taxi to the Altman Building and made our way backstage, where a large room lined with tables, mirrors and lights awaited us. The male models for the Rachel Comey show were the first to arrive. Marci got to work, spraying, blow-drying and sculpting the first model’s hair.

“My goodness! How old are you?” she inquired. “Sixteen,” the pale, gangly boy replied. “Is that the age these days?” Marci smiled. The boy nodded and started listening to his i-Pod. An hour later, the Press arrived, and the room was chaotic with hair stylists, assistants, makeup artists, models, manicurists, catering crew — contrary to popular belief, models do eat — camera crews and security. At 10 a.m., a mellow Danilo arrived, much to everyone’s excitement.

“Gwen’s on her way. She wants to support Zaldy,” he said. He was, of course, referring to Ms. Stefani. Danilo and Marci demonstrated to the rest of the Sebastian stylists how they wanted the models’ hair to look: an opus comprised of a high ponytail split into two, braided and twisted. The Sebastian hair stylists each grabbed a model and began duplicating the Grecian-looking creation. At almost noon, Zaldy, dressed all in white, arrived with his team of seamsters and seamstresses. By now the room was even more hectic, with models rushing to get their makeup and hair done. In between hair styles, Marci was also being interviewed by several TV crews.

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English Model Karen Elson, who recently married White Stripes frontman Jack White, arrived shortly afterwards. She was painfully thin and white and was wearing a long-sleeve polka dot dress. She sat, hunched over a peculiar instrument, which she spent half an hour trying to tune while she waited for Danilo to do her hair.

By 1:30 p.m., the Zaldy show was about to begin. I took my seat in the back row. Gwen Stefani was sitting opposite me, wearing a green, yellow, and red L.A.M.B sweatsuit, a matching rasta beanie, leopard-print pumps, and her customary hot red lipstick. If her goal was to blend in with the crowd, she failed miserably. Her presence caused quite a stir, and the paparazzi were going crazy.

The Zaldy show was a huge hit. His designs were modern, sophisticated, yet edgy. The clothes were sheer and drapy, with geometric shapes and lines featuring heavily. The colors of the collection were red, black, white, and taupe. At the end of the show, Zaldy walked down the runway to rapturous applause. He stopped mid-runway and gave a teary-eyed Gwen a huge hug, much to everyone’s delight.

The next day, Marci and I spent much of the day relaxing. The previous day had been grueling. The call-time for the Venexiana show was not until the late afternoon. At 5 p.m., we headed to the Atelier Building in Bryant Park. There were a lot of people gathering around the tents, and security was tight but we slipped right through with our passes. For this show, Marci was the lead hair artist, so, it was her job to show the rest of the Sebastian artistic team how to achieve the look that Venexiana designer Kati Stern had envisioned. Kati came backstage to check on everyone’s progress. There was one model who was to be the “bride” in the show. She wore a stunning headpiece made out of crystals, and Marci braided her hair into two loops on either side of her head. The effect was grandiose. On the other side of the room, Björk’s personal makeup artist, Andrea Helgadottir, directed the Trucco makeup artists.

At 9 p.m., the show began. The models sashayed down the white runway to loud punk rock music. The fashion critics in the front row scribbled on their notepads. Venexiana’s collection was bright — oranges, blues, pinks, greens — with gutsy combinations of transparent fabrics, leather and mesh. Most of the collection comprised of extravagant dresses and gowns, worn with strappy shoes and little mesh toeless socks. The red-and-black flamenco-inspired dress was one of my favorites, and the famous Venexiana gloves were glamorous and over-the-top.

The show ended all too soon, and people began to filter out of the room. New York Fashion Week was over, at least for me. I thought back to all the hard work that was involved in making the Venexiana and Zaldy shows such a success: Marci’s work, as well as the Sebastian hair team, Trucco makeup artists, guest hair stylist Danilo, and guest makeup artists Matthu and Andrea, the designers themselves... All these people drawn together by their love of the arts. I was inspired.

Now, all that was left to do was go back to the hotel and get ready for the after-show party!    •