

San Francisco Chronicle

SIX QUESTIONS *For Mondo Guerra and Michael Costello*

Of pride and 'Project Runway'

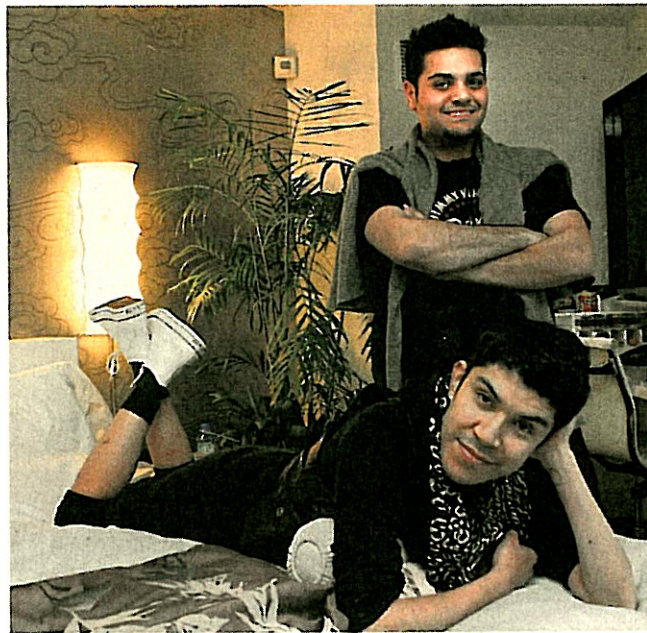
By Louise Rafkin

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The disappointment felt by fans of Season 8's "Project Runway" might be quelled by this piece of news: Runner-up designers Mondo Guerra and Michael Costello are seriously nice guys. And — unlike some of us — surprisingly not bitter about the show's outcome.

Guerra, 32, who lives in Denver, was favored to win, while Costello, 27, of Palm Springs made it to the final four before an emotional elimination episode.

Ensnared in a swank suite in the W, the friends were in San Francisco recently for a photo shoot of their new collections coming soon in 944 magazine. As models were primping and being tucked into fabulous Mondo ensembles (with polka dots!), the two took a break to dish about the real deal of reality TV and *"Runway" continues on N4*



Liz Hafalla / The Chronicle

Season 8's "Project Runway" finalists Mondo Guerra (front) and Michael Costello aren't bitter about losing.

Of pride, polka dots and 'Project Runway'

"Runway" from page N1
the marvelous Tim Gunn.

Q: Your reaction to Gretchen winning?

Guerra: Shocked, but she came in wanting to win, and good for her.

Costello: We're friends. We drunk-dialed her last night.

Q: What don't we know about behind the scenes?

Guerra: It's a grueling schedule, and it totally messed with my HIV medications. For over six weeks, we got three or four hours of sleep. Last year, my T-cell count was down to 14 and I'd been really sick, so I found it

brutal. I was exhausted and sometimes kept going only for the people in my life who had supported me.

Q: What's life been like post "Runway"?

Guerra: The most amazing thing is that I've become an advocate for the cause of HIV/AIDS awareness. For World AIDS Day, I lobbied on Capitol Hill and talked at the United Nations. I love fashion, but there are bigger issues to address than getting dressed.

Costello: But looking fabulous when you address them is important!

Guerra: I wore shiny silver shoes and polka

dots: I predict politicians will soon be dressing like me.

Q: Who are the women who wear your clothes?

Costello: Sex kittens. Orange County housewives. Sophisticated women who turn heads.

Guerra: Women who take risks, and when they open their closets, they expect to have fun.

Q: Speaking of closets, being openly gay, and, for Mondo, openly positive, was a steady backdrop to the season and was timed against national news of gay bashing and bullying. What did you think of all that when the show aired?

Guerra: It was a strange coincidence, but also very positive. My protective parents were afraid for me after I came out, but



Lifetime

For a textile challenge, "Project Runway" Season 8 contestant Mondo Guerra created pants with plus signs to reflect his HIV-positive status. Guerra says he's become an HIV/AIDS awareness advocate.

I'd say 98 percent of the reactions have been great. The other 2 percent were mean and unprintable. And after I came out as positive, Tim sat with me and talked with me about New York in the '80s and the evolution of AIDS. He was amazing, encouraging and genuinely supportive.

Costello: There were some crewmembers who wouldn't talk to us; Tim was always there to re-

mind us who we really were and to be true to ourselves.

Q: What's ahead?

Costello: I'm looking to launch in Los Angeles, and I'm being the best dad I can be to my two kids. Some days are better than others, if you ask them.

Guerra: I'll be designing T-shirts for Pipertime again — my AIDS Day shirt sold out in hours. Old Navy has me doing a T-shirt for Gay Pride. Mostly, I'm overwhelmed with the attention and want to choose the right projects going forward. Before "Project Runway," I worked sewing costumes for a theater, so this has all been a big change. But right now, I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life.