



# SPOTLIGHT ROBERT BAVA

Ask any hairdresser in the industry's upper echelons whose work they admire, and you can be guaranteed that the name Robert Bava will feature strongly in their responses. Renowned for his strong photographic work that is always simple, beautiful and feminine, this shy stylist from Adelaide is certainly not one to beat his own drum in the PR stakes – but he boasts a long list of accolades and awards to his credit and runs an incredibly strong salon business, Parlour Hair. So what is the secret behind this quiet achiever's success? By Jenny Burns

Not many people know that Robert Bava developed his Parlour Hair brand more than a decade ago – probably because it was his days under the Toni&Guy banner when Robert's profile really began to grow. He and wife Karen ran the company's thriving Adelaide city franchise for five years from 2002-2007 – and after 15 years hard at work; suddenly the industry sat up and began to take notice.

"Parlour was created back in 1998 when we outgrew our previous salon Groove, which we started back in the late 80s," Robert explains. "I had just returned from a conference in LA where the movement towards very large spa salons was happening, and this triggered the process for us.

"At the time, Parlour was one of Adelaide's largest salons – it was perfectly located on one of Adelaide's high profile streets and incorporated hair, skin and body. Then after a few years, Toni&Guy approached us and we decided to join the company in 2002."

Robert speaks very enthusiastically about the years under the Toni&Guy umbrella. He says that the experience was both enriching and educating, giving he and Karen the tools to move forward with their own business and grow the Toni&Guy brand within South Australia, eventually expanding to three salons.

Not only was Robert's boutique salon group successful from a business sense, it also received recognition creatively. And in spite of producing work that was always a little different from the distinct Toni&Guy look, Robert's team did win the Toni&Guy 'International Salon Team' award for their photographic collections two years in a row out of all the Toni&Guy salons around the world – a feat that Robert believes is additionally reflective of the broad range of skills gained from this global hairdressing institution.

"We learnt a lot of great stuff during those five years that we will utilise for a lifetime," Robert says. "The training system is fantastic. Toni&Guy has always produced really superior collections and campaigns and I feel they always manage to reach the hairdresser and the consumer in one hit. Anthony Mascolo and then Sascha had this incredible talent of producing a fashion hair look that the consumer can relate to and wear – and ultimately want. This then translated nicely to education that other hairdressers want to learn and replicate.

"Not a lot of other hairdressing imagery really touches the emotions of the consumer and the hairdresser like theirs do!"

Speaking of imagery, Robert's motto that 'simplicity is beautiful, combined with strength and femininity' is one that he certainly abides by in his work, both photographically and on the salon floor.

"I believe in creating a really good strong foundation or structure, then free hand personalising the style to suit the person," he explains. "It's really important to me that a woman looks beautiful, the best that she can look. But suitability is paramount. There is a definite naturalness in the way I love hair to look and I think nothing looks more beautiful than a well-executed, classic shape."

Actually, when it comes to the natural beauty evident in the style of Robert Bava's work, he credits a few of his hairdressing heroes for the results.

"The late and incredible Sharon Maher never failed to inspire me," he recalls. "Even in a small format show, I would come away totally inspired. I certainly miss her insightful and amazing fashion-forward work.

"But I think my biggest influence would be the team from Shibui. Not that I have seen much of their work over the last few years, but in the 90s I always came away inspired watching them perform. Rob, Dean and Lia were a force on stage and one of the best educational teams I think this country has ever produced. They opened my thoughts on the beauty of natural and undone hair, which had a great influence on the finishing of my own work and the way I like to see hair.

"Closer to home though, my wife Karen is my true hair hero," Robert adds. "She has this amazing talent to work quietly behind the scenes; she is the art director behind everything I do and she has these hands that can turn something that looks okay into finding the exact way to make it perfect."

It seems as though lots of people think Robert Bava's work is right up there in the perfection stakes. His CV lists a swag of accolades, including several AHFA awards nationally and in South Australia, international awards from Toni&Guy and plenty of finalist awards at Expo, including Australian Hairdresser of the Year.



But praise and tributes aside, Robert still remains a bit of a dark horse – held in high esteem by his peers, but still on the perimeter of all the usual suspects when it comes to top end hairdressers of profile across the country. Does he agree?

“Yes, I suppose I am,” Robert ponders. “Whether it’s because I’m in Adelaide and away from the epicentre of fashion in the Eastern states I’m not sure, but admittedly I suppose that’s in my nature too. I’m someone who has had to overcome quite a fear of public speaking – although it is getting a lot easier and I’m much better at it now! But essentially, I’m quite a shy person in reality and perhaps that has kept me on the perimeter.”


“But I am truly passionate about the industry and I’ll quietly keep working away at making a difference, whether it’s through education or mentoring the youth in our industry and providing opportunities to reach goals, or by simply showing them that it doesn’t matter where you’re from, anything is possible.”

Very inspiring words indeed. But Robert doesn’t just talk the talk – he walks the walk too. When he and Karen left the Toni&Guy fold to re-brand back to their Parlour Hair group in September 2007, Robert had big plans – his own product line (that’s due to hit the streets next year), plus a new salon concept geared towards hair industry youth.

“It’s quite a different time in our industry now and I feel we need to adapt to keep moving forward,” Robert explains. “This particular side to the Parlour brand is a Generation Y friendly product and it’s been created to help the youth in our industry achieve goals faster, get what they want sooner, help them learn to save money and basically adapt to the difference between their needs and the needs of someone of my generation. It’s a work in progress – and an exciting one at that.”

The first stage of Robert’s plan came to fruition earlier this year when the second Parlour salon opened in May, with young protégé and two-time AHFA Australian Apprentice of the Year Jason Fassbender at the helm. For Robert, it was a dream come true – he believes seeing his team grow and become successful is what life in business is all about.

“When we re-badged back to the Parlour brand in late 2007, the feedback was really positive,” Robert says enthusiastically. “Clients who were with us through our changes rejoiced at the return to the name – they seem to love it!”

And now it seems there’ll be a whole new generation of clients waiting to embrace the next stage of Parlour Hair. 

Hair by Robert Bava  
 Photography by Andrew O’Toole  
 Makeup by Kylie O’Toole  
 Styling by Emma Cottrell

