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Fashioning a comeback

After a ten-year sabbatical, James Ferreira is ready to reclaim his place in the Indian style arena, says **Sushmita Biswas**

FACE OF THE WEEK - James Ferreira



It's almost a name from a bygone fashion era. James Ferreira is still remembered as the designer to the stars back in the '80s and for his swashbuckling innovations like the double-layered sari and knit *kameezes*. Then, he mysteriously vanished from the fashion scene letting others grab the glory.

Now, after a 10-year gap, Ferreira is bursting back onto the scene. Today he's showing off his latest collection at Lakmé India Fashion Week in Mumbai. And the new collection is only one prong of his comeback strategy. Last month he created a buzz in the fashion world by opening his first signature store D'Box in Mumbai. To open the store he has teamed up with entrepreneur Kunika Singh.

"I've never participated in the rat race as I don't believe in the numbers game. For me, my creations are much more important than anything else," says Ferreira who lives in a sprawling two-storeyed house in Khotachiwadi, one of the oldest Maharashtrian localities in South Mumbai.

Nevertheless, he admits that the adrenalin is coursing once again now that he has decided to return to the fashion scene in a high-profile way. "I was nervous about participating (in Fashion Week) but my expectations from it are high. I had sleepless nights while finishing my collection to be in time for the show," he says.

Ferreira may have been out of circulation for a decade but he still has his finger on the fashionista pulse. That's evident from his fun and trendy collection, called Bombay-Tokyo and which has strong Maharashtrian influences, according to him.

Bombay-Tokyo consists of short dresses, trousers, shorts, sari-dresses and more. Though the silhouettes are Western, the sensibilities by way of texturing, appliqués and Japanese origami are entirely Eastern.

Ferreira has been liberal with crochet detailing on black and white dresses. He's used Sholapur blankets as skirt-tops and dresses. Another twist comes by way of Maharashtrian *puja lungis* as well as his use of *dhoti* voile that has been converted into short dresses. The palette moves from stark blacks and whites to bright shades.

Did he really disappear all these years? The answer to that is yes and no. He stayed extremely low profile and didn't scout around for new customers. But he has still been

designing and making outfits for select customers like Maureen Wadia and Queenie Dhody. "All the time I was busy designing clothes on my own," he says.

Still he did take it easy during this time. "It was an extended sabbatical really," he says.

Why did he shy away from the limelight? He doesn't elaborate. But his only explanation for the decade in the fashion wilderness is that he was unhappy at how the trade worked and its unorganised state. "I don't understand the tricks of the trade and so completely distanced myself from it," he says.

Besides showing at the LFW, he's excited at the buzz created by D'Box that opened last month in Mumbai. Since Ferreira's forte lies in giving a spin on traditional Indian designs, his latest collection for D'Box is a mix of Indian and Westernwear.

He's played with drapes and gone heavy on detailing like drawstrings in a spectrum of fabrics.

"I'm always moved by the Western look but my sensibilities are deep-rooted in the traditions of our country and it is reflected in my outfits," he points out. Though he feels that sourcing fabrics is a major constraint in India, he likes to use natural fabrics like silks, cottons and wools in basic colours like black, beige and white.

Though Ferreira has never done a solo show in Mumbai before, he's hoping that taking part in I FW will boost business. "It's a great platform for designers to showcase their

part in LFW will boost business. It's a great platform for designers to showcase their work," he says. Adds Anil Chopra, vice-president, Lakmé Lever, "He's one of the most reputed designers we have today. His clothes have always been bestsellers and stand out in the crowd."

Ferreira, even as a young lad, had always wanted to be a designer. As a schoolboy he used to sketch at the back of his mathematics notebooks. "Subjects like mathematics, biology and physics left me cold and I recall telling my parents very categorically that I wanted to be a designer," he says.

That was an era when fashion designing was looked down upon and it was hardly surprisingly that he faced strong opposition from his family. Nevertheless, he signed up at the J.J. School of Art in Mumbai and did tuitions to fund his college education. Also, to get a hands-on understanding of the trade he enrolled for a tailoring course at Sheroo Coopers Academy of tailoring.

He got his first job as a designer in the '70s at Orkay Mills where his brief was to create garments for export to Europe. He also worked at several other export companies in the following years.

As his reputation developed he started designing clothes for a boutique called Bada Saab, which was a favourite haunt for many movie stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Shabana Azmi and Rakhee. But soon he was bored with designing costumes for filmstars and he shifted to London where he worked for a period with British designer Zandra Rhodes.

On returning to India, he worked with organisations like the Handicraft and Handloom Export Cooperation and the Central Cottage Industries in Delhi. He also teamed up with entrepreneur Kishore Bajaj (who also ran Bada Saab) and opened a womenswear boutique called First Lady in Mumbai. In addition, he also styled ad campaigns for companies like Raymonds, Mafatlal, Piramal Textiles and Garden Vareli. But he always hated the commercial side of the business. "I hate to deal with the financial side of things and decide on the price points of my clothes," he says.

He still has qualms about how the fashion trade works. "The success of a collection today largely depends on the presence of Bollywood celebrities in the front rows. This is sad as designers should constantly try to perfect their art and not depend on celebrities to pull off a collection."

Though he likes to take each day as it comes, Ferreira has already chalked out his plans for the next season. He wants to come up with a lingerie line in pure silk. "Though it's too early to talk about it, I intend to do some interesting pieces in soothing colours for the next season," he says. So, Ferreira is pretty clear that, for the foreseeable future, he plans to be in the thick of things.

Photograph by Gajanan Dudhalkar



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