

James The First

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He perfected the drape on an Indian frame. And then disappeared. At Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week 2011, designer James Ferreira staged a comeback. And what a comeback it is...

He has fallen in the doldrums and then sprung out of it like a howling river. James Ferreira's life reads like an original script. Every fold on his face, the spring of his eyebrow, the rosary defining his wrist, and the beady eyes that dance behind vintage spectacles, tell a story. If you care to listen.

Or, are ready to be left speechless. Dressed in denim hot pants and a satin tank top, and an overcoat, Ferreira shook a leg to 2010's hottest Bollywood item song 'Sheila Ki Jawani' at the end of a seamless showcase of his a/w 2011 line at Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week on April 9, leaving behind a sea of smiles. "What is wrong with having some fun? A Bollywood star walking the ramp is a bigger insult for a designer and his craft. My clothes are my showstoppers. I want to live and let live. If I feel like closing my show with a dance, I'll do it. Who gives a damn about what other designers think about my act...," he says of the incident with a nonchalant shrug.

Ferreira returned to the runway at WIFW after a three-year self-imposed exile, presenting *The Tortoise and The Hare*, modelled on the Aesop's fable that stood to map his "slow and steady journey" as a designer, and at the same time raised awareness about India's endangered tortoise population. "Why are we obsessive about saving the tiger? Isn't the tortoise endangered too?" he asks. Ferreira and controversy have grown to become consensual bed partners. So, while the cause of the tortoise attracted positive media attention, the use of rabbit fur over cuffs and collars, and as jewellery pieces, had PETA squealing in horror. "I do love and respect animals, but I'll never put an animal above a human want. Rabbits breed prolifically anyway, causing an imbalance in the ecology," is his matter-of-fact justification.

Jimmy (as he is known among close friends) has chosen a toasty Tuesday afternoon to recall a life shaped by intense experiences with fashion and its people. He's filled with a self-assured humour that belies the serious powerhouse of fashion that he is. His repertoire is vast – in addition to dressing leading ladies at society dos, he had once also ventured into Bollywood. “There was a time when I styled the biggest of Hindi films including *Shahenshah* and *Disco Dancer* through the menswear label Bada Saab. I also ran a successful boutique called First Lady with Kishore Bajaj,” he says.

A personal tragedy around that time caused the carefree party monster to turn a bit aloof and cautious, and retreat from the public eye. Ferreira then invested his time teaching at various fashion institutions like SNDT and Wigan & Leigh College in Mumbai, and worked with the Khotachiwadi Welfare and Heritage Trust.

Sitting in a room that celebrates prized vintage purchases from the iconic flea market in Mumbai, Chor Bazaar, and shares space with family-owned antique furniture, Ferreira is inundated with phone calls. He is a tornado of activity today. He has a slight tan he's picked up from a trip to Goa for Goa Fashion Week. It's still deepening, as he packs a suitcase for Chennai Fashion Week. “I realised, rather late in my career, that I have been a Bombay boy all my life. I had to get my clothes to a national level. If I am offered free shows, why not? I'm grabbing opportunities by the b*lls, exploring markets like Kolkata, Chennai and Goa to bring my label visibility. Yes, I am tired to death, but enjoying every moment of it.”

Every now and then, he throws out his trademark all-knowing laugh. It's especially present when we discuss the use of drapes to lend a garment dimension rather than surface embellishments. The younger lot in the industry – Gaurav Gupta, Kallol Datta, Mathieu Gugumus Leguillon and Saviojon Fernandes – have made friends with fluidity now. However Ferreira had tapped its potential decades ago. “I know I have been a trendsetter in drapes. I've taken elements of Japanese origami and Indian drapes to design Western clothes. For an Indian woman with a full body, my drapes enhance the sensuality of her curves. My time has finally arrived, with the modern woman putting her money on simplicity, wearability and the delights of the drape.”

It's not unusual to replay conversations with Ferreira in one's head. He enthuses, evaluates, mocks, appreciates, critiques, and most importantly, he has an opinion that he expresses freely, spiked with wit. "Being sweet and thoughtful doesn't really work in this industry. A designer has to behave like a prima donna to be respected or even acknowledged. I constantly tell my fashion students to stop looking at Indian designers for motivation. Compete with Chanel... become the designer of the world." He lives by a poetic and practical adage, "It will end like it began; with a piece of cloth," and it's spurred Ferreira to work with local textiles rather than engage in the cash-draining manufacturing of fabrics, or taking the first flight to China. By injecting stylish interest in mundane Sholapuri blankets and lungis, he stresses the importance of reconnecting with what's readily available in local markets. "It is the need of the hour to encourage India's soon-fading textile culture. Ethnic fabric is mostly pure silk or cotton, and that appeals to my design sensibility. I hate polyester," he says. In November 2009, Ferreira showcased an 18-piece collection at the Sri Lanka Design Festival created from the country's homebred Kandgys and Selyn handlooms.

The 55-year-old's sturdy career is sustained on a fragile thread of imagination, executed by expert hands. Watching him slice fabric pinned on a mannequin is a lesson in dressmaking. He admits never scouting for inspiration in fashion magazines, or surfing the Internet for a big idea. "Sex is a major driver. I'm gay. And that makes me love women even more," he guffaws.