

New business flourishes

Designer scours the world for exotic fabrics

BY CORINNE ABATT

The one thing you regret when you run into the likes of designer, Stella Devlin who recently showed her collection at Jacobson's is that you didn't think of it first.

Ms. Devlin, a Boston expatriot who now makes her home in the Cajun country of Opelousas, La., has created a going business from a rather ordinary idea. So going, in fact, that while she was at Jacobson's, buyers literally bought the clothes off her back.

Longtime traveler and compulsive fabric buyer, Ms. Devlin's husband one day yelled a loud 'Enough!' She started the business to appease him and make use of some luxurious, antique fabric bolts.

Close at hand was a marvelous resource—excellent seamstresses anxious to make a buck or two. Cajun women are trained to sew as children by their grandmothers, and Opelousas, had, until Ms. Devlin came along, few work opportunities for the women.

A cottage industry was formed quickly. Her first venture was to take a half dozen or so dresses to Market Week in Dallas in 1976—the acceptance was instantaneous. Before she got back home, she was on the phone with her seamstresses arranging for a stock of orders to be filled.

BUT, CLOTHES, flowing tunic tops and cocktail dresses from elegant silks from China, India or Burma, are only part of the Devlin endeavor. Every scrap of lovely fabric is used—the smallest for coin purses and notebook covers, the largest to line a bed comfort in flowered, gold embroidered damask.

Ms. Devlin, a former model, does all the designing, and this year's loose

styles are ideal for they require less change. For instance, she frequently teams a wrap kimono jacket in a rare, exotic print with white pants of new silk. Or an Oriental style, narrow sheath of antique fabric may go over contrasting points of new silk.

In her book, if she uses new fabric to go with her treasurers, silk goes with silk with no substitutes on quality.

Everything is hand made, something the seamstresses do beautifully, just like the fine clothes of 100 years ago when the inside was almost as pretty as the outside.

Since Ms. Devlin's clothes and accessories are something of a financial investment, although below many

other designer collections, she suggests her material be saved and reused for other items, just as she does right now.

She covers the world on her shopping tours many times a year, often walking the narrow back streets in

search of the old and the beautiful. But it has paid off handsomely. For, plus the satisfaction of a successful business in two years time and a welcome mat in many of the world's fine stores, there is the knowledge that her industry is supporting many women and young people in Opelousas.

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