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New designers work to give Detroit its own fashion image

By Lorraine McClell
staff writer

The models, designers, seamstresses, ironing boards and sewing machines that are filling up space now in an old winery on Grand River are the beginnings of Kirin Designers.

While the first of the moving was still going on, the less than two-month-old company was simultaneously in the midst of its first project, introducing newcomers in the fashion design world to audiences at the 1983 Builders, Home, Furniture and Flower Show in Cobo Hall.

"It went off very well and our audiences loved us," said Kirin's president Ruth Whittaker.

"Our clothes came from six Detroit designers whose works had never been shown before and every one of our models is a novice," she said, describing the format of Kirin.

"We're saying 'Yes to Michigan' by showcasing the design talent we've got here because we believe we can make Detroit a recognized name in the fashion industry," she said.

WHILE KIRIN's origins are based in getting the clothes fashioned by unknown designers before the public, hiring models to wear those clothes became a necessary adjunct to the business.

"We chose to go with the untrained models so we could tailor them to suit the clothes and the styles that are suitable to us in the Midwest," Whittaker said.

"We're really not in the modeling business and we are not in competition with model agencies. Take a good look at our models. They are not all beautiful and they are not all tall and skinny. We have a large variety, including those who can model for the fuller figured woman and the mature woman."

"None of our models are stereotypes because our clients aren't stereotyped." As for the clothes the models wear, "We're picking Detroit styles," Whittaker said.

"All of the new designers we featured at the builder's show have Detroit people in mind who are going to

give the country a Detroit image," she said.

The idea for Kirin (which is of Greek derivative and means Unicorn) came when Whittaker was a student at Wayne State University.

"There was a tremendous amount of talent around and no avenue of outlet for those trying to get their foot in the door," she said.

"Or there were those who knew a great deal about designing but absolutely nothing about marketing."

WHITTAKER said she realized it was "next to impossible" for one new designer to put together 30 original designs, gather up the necessary models to show them, and then promote his or her own show.

"We gambled by taking four, five or six designs from several unknowns, having them made up by our own seamstresses, and putting together a 40 minute show. Now we're hoping and waiting that the orders will come in and so far, pretty good," she said.

Designs for Kirin's first show came from Edward Woschlo, Tonya Belton, Mirjana, Karla's Fashion of Detroit, Ken Harp and Kirin Designers.

The showing ran the gamut from a signature kimono wrap to a white tuxedo made of terry-rayon.

"We've got another dozen sewing machines and as many ironing boards on the way because all of the manufacturing will be done here," Whittaker said. "We're not yet fully moved in and I'm already thinking we're going to need more space."

Vice president for Kirin is Rick Lawlor who has worked extensively in training models for top model agencies in the Detroit area in addition to doing commercial photographic work in the area.

Lawlor chose 43 to work as models for Kirin from the more than 150 people who answered the company's first ad for newcomers in the field, placed in the Observer & Eccentric newspapers.

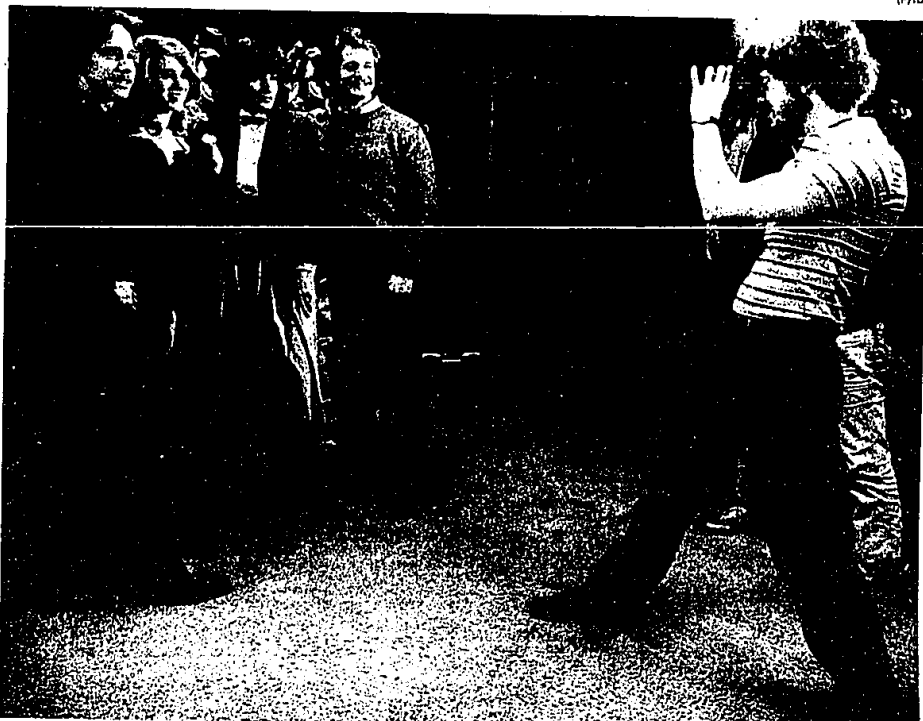
Lawlor and Whittaker work with Karen Cox, who is the company's fashion consultant.

Kirin will take individual orders for custom-designed clothing in its office and showrooms at 31505 Grand River.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Ruth Whittaker promotes the work of unknown fashion designers and trains unknown models to show those clothes through Kirin, with the goal of giving Detroit its own fashion image.



The new Kirin models in one of their first photographic sessions are from left Joe Staten, Alycia Hutchinson, Peggy Osterbeck and Jerry Gashey. Kirin photographer is Mike Meredith.

RANDY BORST/staff photographer



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Tina Krenitsky (at left) is one of the new Kirin models who hopes to trade in her job as a waitress at The Tollgate for a place in the fashion world. Above, Tomi Conrad gets some makeup advice from Karen Cox, Kirin's fashion consultant, who is helping to create the new Detroit image.

Students tackle heavy drama

By Lorraine McClell
staff writer

The story of a man discovering himself despite physical deformities that make him physically repulsive to others is not usual high school fare.

But Farmington High School will present the daring Tony Award-winning play "The Elephant Man," April 21-24.

It tells the story of a man afflicted with neurofibromatosis, thought to be a genetic disorder which is suffered by about 100,000 Americans. Design skin blemishes connected with abnormal bone growths can be removed surgically, but it is likely that they will grow back.

Senior Kristyn Mahle said the play wouldn't even be considered by most high schools.

"Most high schools stick to comedy and murder thrillers. This will be our first drama in five years."

The difficult play was selected by director Craig Hane, who has brought it to him what Mahle thinks of as

"some neat, innovative ideas" to put the story across.

This is a total student production and the second students have taken on to stage by themselves, under the direction of Hane, after drama coach Rita Piron asked for a year's vacation from overseeing the traditional (twice-a-year) productions.

"But Craig came to our rescue," said Mahle, who with a group of seniors disappointed at the prospect of not participating in a play, sought out Hane to direct last fall's production of "The Matchmaker."

HANE is a graduate of Farmington High who worked in theater while he was there. Then he went on to study theater at Oakland Community College and was simultaneously affiliated with Quaker Valley Theatre. This fall he will enter Central Michigan University on the honors program.

"He must have done something right with 'The Matchmaker,' because eight of the nine member cast of 'Elephant

Man" had worked with him before and all of the back stage crew came back to work with him again," Mahle said.

Mahle stresses that "The Elephant Man" is not to be confused with the movie of the same name.

"Rehearsals are going on schedule. By the end of the first week we knew we had it together and now it's just a process of keeping getting better. Craig is very happy with all of us."

"We couldn't recreate that make-up with a high school production crew without making it look phony so all of the responsibility falls on the actors and their words," she said.

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All proceeds from the opening night's production of "The Elephant Man" will be given to the National Neurofibromatosis Foundation.

"The benefit is Craig's idea," Mahle said, "and fully supported by all of us."

It was also Hane's idea for all of his nine-member cast to take multiple roles, "because that's the way they do it on Broadway," Mahle said.

Leads in the play are Kim Niles, Dan Schroeder and Phil Lynch.

The cast is rounded out with Larry Wilk, Tim Snyder, Janette Fleck, Liz Berger, Joseph Panyard and Tim McHugh.

Mahle is acting as publicist and also sewing a few costumes, though many of the costumes will come from Farmington Players' collection.

Curtain for the student production of "The Elephant Man" is at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, April 21-23, in Farmington High School's auditorium, on Shiloh between Orchard Lake and Power Road.

Tickets are \$3 each, at the door.

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Kristyn Mahle talks about Farmington High School's production of "The Elephant Man," the first drama staged by the students in the past five years, and one that depends heavily on the actor's dialogue.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer