Designs of a Lifetime

Posted on

Kirthi dressing a bride during the early stages of his career

At a time when fashion designing as a career for a man was unheard of in Sri Lanka, Kirthi Sri Karunaratne had unwittingly created his very first sketches that changed his life forever. As he retraced his steps through memory lane reminiscing of a glamorous journey in fashion designing, Kirthi, fashion guru for over 50 years brimmed with pride over the achievements of an unforgettable lifetime.

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka

Several long decades ago a representative from the House of Dior in Paris had arrived in Sri Lanka to explore avenues for opening up a fashion boutique. Inquiring after local designers and finding none, he had instead learned about an exceptionally talented teenager named Kirthi who sketched as a hobby. Having found the young Sri Lankan artist, Jeoffrey De Seynes of Dior had actually

discovered the first Sri Lankan fashion designer. With this meeting, Kirthi reached a turning point in his life where he decided to drop his studies in medicine he had embarked on in the hope of becoming a surgeon, to follow his one passion in life: fashion designing; and a while afterwards he moved to Paris to work at the House of Dior.

It was Sita Jayawardana a versatile journalist at The Sunday Times who had made him realise how gifted he was and encouraged him to follow a path in designing. “I am always grateful to Sita for having guided me, because if not for her I don’t think it would have ever come about,” began Kirthi, laying before us the intricate details of the colourful story of his life thereafter as a designer.

Learning the A B C’s of the designing craft in romantic Paris, Kirthi had then moved on to Rome to work for the then renowned designer Emilio Schubert. “Rome was exciting for me; and during a very short stint with Emilio, I had the privilege of meeting people like Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida which for me in my youth was very thrilling”. Having learnt what he could in the Western world he decided to return and see if he could achieve success, in then Ceylon.

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Kirthi’s career in designing had thus begun, and he held his first fashion show in Colombo after his return to Sri Lanka with just one model, Rita Fernando. She had at the time been the only London trained fashion model in the country who took to the catwalk to showcase just four outfits designed for morning, noon, cocktail and evening wear. The show had attracted somewhere near 500 women who had gathered that evening in 1956 at the Women’s International Club in Colombo to view and appraise his creations.

Endeavouring to preserve the Sri Lankan tradition in his work, Kirthi has since then dressed and designed for a host of well known locals, foreigners as well as Sri Lankans living abroad. He has also produced several beauty contests including Miss Sri Lanka and Mrs Sri Lanka both of which were won by Rosy Senanayake, and has hosted many an outstanding fashion show within and outside the country. He recalls one memorable show held in New York in 2003 which had been organised by the Old Boys’ Association of Ananda College, his school, at which he had also been awarded with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Happily recalling the weddings of cousins Mrs Ranjan Wijeratne, Mrs Neville Coorey and several other cousins whom he had designed for and dressed even before becoming a professional designer, Kirthi also recalled several others that he had dressed. Among them are Sicille Kotelawala, Rukmani Maharajah, Shushila Gunesekera Fernando and Malani Wijeratne from the many thousands he has lost count of and has no record of. Among the many figures both known and otherwise that he had subsequently worked for, he said “I have worked for a couple of wives of the Presidents, wives of visiting dignitaries and dressed beauty queens from Yvonne Gunawardene, Angela Seneviratne and Rosy Senanayake to Jaqueline Fernandez during my life time, who have also modelled for me in some of the prestigious shows I did in Colombo; and today I serve the granddaughters of my very first clients,” he said with a sense of pride.

Kirthi’s talents have however surpassed the single sphere of designing and have also taken him into the limelight through acting, singing, dancing as well as writing. Nidhanaya, Kalu Diya Dahara and Kolomba Sanniya are some of the films he has acted in. “I love acting, but I prefer the stage to the movie experience and have immensely enjoyed working with people like Ernest MacIntyre and Iranganie Serasinghe,” said Kirthi. He is also an excellent writer, penning his thoughts on fashion, art, music, dance and social events in newspapers and magazines for over four decades. “The only thing I haven’t been able to do but would love to is to be in a teledrama,” added the smiling Kirthi.

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Having celebrated his 80th birthday recently, Sri Lanka’s first ever fashion designer, with decades of success, fame and name, believes that to become a designer is no easy task. “Not everyone can turn out to be a designer, it has to be in you; it is an inborn talent,” explained Kirthi adding that whatever the profession one is into, he or she has to foremost have the dedication and passion to achieve the kind of success that he has enjoyed.

“It has been a long ride, but I have no regrets, I am happy with the way my life has turned out,” concluded this inspirational designer, the vanguard of Sri Lankan fashion designing, still holding on to his true beliefs in life.

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