

Susanna: Suitable Theatrics

BEVERLY HILLS – The hyperbole sounds familiar: “I do a fabulous collection and my customers, I call them ‘Susanna’s Girls,’ totally love it. They call me up crying ‘We love you, we love you.’”

The speaker, Susanna Chung Forest, 35, rattles nonstop in a press release flood of words. Eighteen years in the United States have not erased the thick Korean accent of this diminutive retailer and designer. Likewise, her growing success has not erased her own driving need for self-promotion.

By any account, Chung Forest should now sit back and enjoy her reputation and loyal

creator – seem an anomaly in Beverly Hills, a town of sparkle and overindulgence.

Just a block and a half from Rodeo Drive, the shop’s streamlined designs “appeal to husbands who see suits in the windows and then bring their wives back to shop,” says Susanna’s calm and steady husband, Pierre Forest, who manages the business side of the company.

The Susanna collections – four a year – each have 30 different styles. Suits are sold as sets, but are priced individually to mix and match. An average suit sells for about \$1,000 and Chung

Angeles to become a clothing designer and partner in a small boutique. A series of misfortunes – a badly received collection, a broken back from a fall, eviction from her apartment and a dire financial situation – greeted her in her first months.

She decided to try again and this time caught the eye of several enthusiastic private clients. Marianne Rogers was one of the first clients in Beverly Hills. Terry Moore’s appearance



customers. Her Designs by Susanna boutique on Santa Monica Boulevard garnered \$2,500,000 last year and is planning to do \$4 million this year.

Television studios call her regularly for clothing. “Hardly a show goes on the air without something of Susanna’s,” says Eilish Zebrasky, wardrobe department head for Aaron Spelling Productions, who has used her clothes on everything from “Charlie’s Angels” and “The Love Boat” to “Dynasty” and “Hotel.”

And, most recently, Susanna’s signature look of sleek, subtle three and four piece suits has

Forest says a woman with a \$5,000 budget can create 15 different outfits.

Eveningwear is equally subtle in design. “It’s womanlike,” says Chung Forest. “I don’t like naked dresses for evening.” She accentuates the waste for a flattering silhouette and believes in minimizing flaws like large hips, small busts or short legs.

Aside from flattering, simple designs, Susanna’s customers appreciate the use of fine imported fabrics. For fall, she offers deep jewel colored or black and white silks, wool gabardine,

Paperweight navy wool crepe jacket trimmed with crisp white cotton collar & cuffs. Matching shirt & pant.

“I went to Susanna because she did a beautiful suit and we both had the same point of view that simplicity was the best design,” – Robert Turturice, “Moonlighting”

been associated with the character played by Cybill Shepherd in the series “Moonlighting.” Chung Forest receives sketches from the show’s designer, Robert Turturice, makes the suits in triplicate (two for Shepherd and one for her stand-in) and then incorporates the looks in her own custom-order designs.

“I went to Susanna because she did a beautiful suit and we both had the same point of view that simplicity was the best design,” said Turturice. “It’s a give and take situation. If I come up with a concept she likes, she is welcome to use it. She doesn’t give that look to other television shows. It’s just for her walk-in trade.”

The understated, quietly elegant suits – in a way a study in contrast with their intense, vocal

cashmere wovens and lightweight wool herringbone and checks.

The suits have long jackets, slim skirts, matching blouses and minimal details like shawl or notched collars, roll-up cuffs and small slits in skirts.

Susanna’s sense of design and quality stems from early exposure to good clothing. Her wealthy land baron father and fashion-conscious mother gave her a privileged childhood in Korea. “My mother wore a lot of originals and I remember their simplicity. I loved looking at fashion magazines. When I was eight my dream was to be a famous costume designer,” she says. At the age of 15, she moved with her mother to Paris and a year later to New Jersey. She studied at the Fashion Institute of Technology and, in 1976, moved to Los

on “The Love Boat” in her own Susanna wardrobe brought her to the attention of the Spelling wardrobe department.

The tiny shop in Beverly Hills – which Susanna says will be her only store – doubled its size last April to 1,200 square feet and houses 25 employees. It is not elaborately decorated, but rather resembles a simple showroom and sewing shop. “When a store gets too fancy, it scares you,” reasons Forest. “It’s intimidating.”

Oddly, the strong-willed, melodramatic Susanna also takes a lowkey approach in the store. “Try on one of my suits,” she says in the enticing tone of a confidant to a new customer. “I’ll make you look beautiful and you’ll feel successful. And if you are successful, then I am successful too.”

–MAUREEN SAJBEL

Photos by MARISSA ROTH