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All-America Dress

BY AIMEE LARKIN

THE problem Adele Simpson, clothes designer, set for herself was as follows: to produce a dress suitable for summer and winter, daytime and evening, wearable with or without jewelry, with or without furs, with a little hat or a big hat or with no hat, graceful in motion, easy to put on, easy to clean, flattering to flat-stomached figures and the other kind, distinguished in style yet guaranteed to stay in fashion for more than a year, and not too expensive.

All this, we thought, was a lot to expect from one dress. But Miss Simpson sketched and worked and fiddled with materials and came up with the black crepe dress, worn by dancer Zorina in the painting.

This dress, living up to Simpson specifications, bridges the seasons. It accepts warm September days with poise, and, topped by a jacket of cloth or fur, it welcomes cooler-to-cold weather. With its high neckline, its tight long sleeves, it has the dignity that puts it at ease anywhere, any hour of the day. It can take jewelry or let it alone. See how, with a minimum of jewelry, it dramatizes Zorina's hands and throat. It deals kindly with any reasonably good figure. The shoulders are easy, the armhole low, the waistline molded close, and the charitable little peplum there in front stands ready to forgive any slight abdominal bulge. It has the new-season, rounded feeling. It admits that ladies have bosoms and hips and should have them. It is sufficiently restrained in line to make you feel pretty sure that you'll enjoy wearing it next year as much as now. It sells for about \$50.

It is, we think, a fine example of the work America's top ready-to-wear designers are doing, and a reason for faith in their future.

Even before the war, American store-bought clothes were the admiration of all the women of the world. Wartime restrictions, although irksome, indirectly helped the cause of better design. A manufacturer cannot afford to produce five different styles in black crepe. So out of many designs he selects only two, the two best, and uses all of his material on them. Thus the shopper is limited to fewer, but better, clothes possibilities. It is a wholesome limitation, for, as every woman eventually learns, one dress that is right is worth three that are a little bit wrong, somehow. These better ready-mades are not poor imitations of costly, often impractical, custom designs. They are originals—the honest, to-the-point product of thoroughly American ready-to-wear specialists.

Miss Simpson's first interest in designing was personal. She is slight, less than five feet tall, and when she was a high school girl in New York, she couldn't find clothes to suit her in the stores. So she made her own things—and things for her four older sisters, too.

She took a dressmaking course at Pratt Institute, sold clothes in a department store for awhile and then took a sort of errand-girl job in a Seventh Avenue dress house. "If you want to be a designer, apprentice jobs are essential," she says. "When you sell, you see for yourself why

one dress pleases the customer and another does not. You learn about fit, too. Tummies, I found, were the big difficulty with most women. Now nearly everything I design makes allowance for the tummy that isn't quite flat. A tie, a little drapery or carefully placed fullness helps here.

"To learn about grains of material, and how to cut and how to put the pieces together, you have to work in a dress house, even if your job is only picking up pins." Students often imagine that because they can draw clothes they can design. They have to learn that covering a piece of paper with a pretty sketch is a long way from covering a human form with cloth.

Miss Simpson's aim—with her whole collection as with this black crepe dress—is functional. Let other designers think in terms of costumes for dramatic entrances, she says, but she'll keep on thinking of clothes to live and work in. "There's a personal slant to all designing," she says, "and because I am a busy woman myself, I certainly am not going to spend hours getting all tricked out in an impractical costume for the sake of a dramatic entrance. So for women like me, busy women, I make clothes that are easy to manage, suits that need no blouses, dresses that slip on easily, with fastenings where you can get at them, dresses that stay smart under stress, that you can walk in and move your arms in. . . ."

As with modern furniture and modern architecture, the happy by-product of Miss Simpson's modern, functional clothes, is beauty. ***