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Theyskens' Theory Adds to the Shopping List

By Eric Wilson

Designers, it turns out, are adaptable creatures. Not so long ago, it would have been an insult to call a runway collection "commercial," as if the designer hadn't the imagination to come up with something truly innovative enough to challenge an audience.

Now, we're in a season where the runways are all about product. The collections are just half over, and we've already got a list of things to buy for fall: quilted ponchos, gray flannel suits, printed pajama pants, boyfriend coats and anoraks galore. This is probably a healthy direction for an industry in need of an economic boost. It's not all about the art.

Watching the Theyskens' Theory today, it struck me how shocking it is to see a designer, Olivier Theyskens, who was making nearly crotchless ball gowns just a few seasons ago, show a collection that so deftly included boot-cut corduroy jeans. Mr. Theyskens, it turns out, was incredibly well suited for the role of designer at a mainstream company like Theory, where he made a capsule collection for spring and has since been promoted to direct the design of the entire sportswear company.

His extensive fall collection for Theyskens' Theory had a breathtaking amount of good-looking product, and also a few sly nods to his past. One model wore a floor-sweeping linen coat over a sheer top and denim short-shorts, which was not really a far cry in silhouette from those infamous floor-grazing gowns he made at Nina Ricci with the fronts cut out. And if you think teeny tiny shorts aren't commercial, take a look at the racks of Abercrombie & Fitch.

In the show, there were many cute cable-knit sweaters, long military coats with strong shoulders and slits up to the waist, wrap coats in gray linen, low-slung slouchy jeans in paper-thin denim, bleached jeans, floor-length loosely knit cardigans, broad-shoulder blazers and a military jacket in heavy wool with a deep-V notch, a Theyskens signature, at the back of the neckline. It was what you would call a "want it, need it, bought it" collection, and there's nothing wrong with that.