

Clothing to restaurants, David Nelson designs it all

By KENDALL MORGAN
Staff Writer

You don't hear the term "Renaissance man" much these days, but if anyone fits that description, it would be David Nelson.

"Designer" is probably the easiest label to stick to the Wichita Falls native, since he has created, over the years: a clothing line, theater sets, apartment interiors and restaurant concepts for Liberty Noodles and Venus Steakhouse and Supper Club. He has also been the stylist for many catalog shoots, from Neiman Marcus to Spiegel.

Add his recent short film *I Am Scorpio* (shown at the South by Southwest and Dallas Video festivals); his nightclub act, "Chez David;" and an occasional job as a club promoter. The result is someone who refuses to be pigeonholed in one career.

"As a child, I didn't want to be an artist; I wanted to be everything," explains Mr. Nelson. "I didn't want to have one career; I wanted to have 20 careers. People said, 'David, you have to choose one thing!'"

"And I was, like, 'No! I want to be the creative director of the universe before I die — just move that star to the left.'"

A woman who worked with him on a design job recently says Mr. Nelson reminds her of actor-writer-director Steve Martin.

But Mr. Nelson says he feels more like "a cross between Leonardo da Vinci and Steve Martin: Leonardo came up with concepts and ideas, and Steve Martin's a funny guy who does a lot of differ-



DAVID WOO/Staff Photographer

David Nelson reclines in a favorite chair at Venus Steakhouse.

ent things."

After his costume design won him a scholarship to Midwestern State University, he studied voice, theater, art and photography, finishing in 1979. He moved to Dallas and opened shop as a clothing designer in the Melrose Hotel.

"I had been collecting vintage clothing forever, and at the time, no one else did," he says. "I just started designing new things — it was kind of accidental."

The shop, Poussois (a French-sounding word he made up), had his one-of-a-kind creations under the label Ta-Daa. Local and statewide recognition followed, and he began to stage fashion shows that were more theater than runway.

But by 1984 he was ready for a change. "The economy was starting to fail, and people weren't buying one-of-a-kind clothes. When I first started designing, everybody was wearing Izods."

Mr. Nelson moved to New York and, soon after, accompanied a friend to an interview at the Wooster Group, the New York theater collective where actors Spalding Gray and Willem Dafoe got their start.

"All these people were sitting around a sewing machine talking, and this girl was trying to sew a collar on a vintage dress that had rotted off. After five tries, I said, 'Do you mind if I do that?' and they hired me immediately to be in

technical directing. I met a lot of people through that group."

He ended up with a six-year stint as an associate (a member who has many duties, from technical director to house manager) alongside actor Steve Buscemi.

The work he was doing with the Wooster Group led to jobs designing the look of indie films, as well as art direction and casting jobs for Surf laundry detergent, Kellogg cereals and Duracell batteries. It seemed that every new job Mr. Nelson got had a domino effect.

"Novelist James Patterson [*Kiss the Girls*] saw a film I did and hired me to design his office, beach house and New York apartment. People just see [what I do] and go, 'Oh, you could do this.'"

"It has a lot to do with style. That's why I do costuming and interiors and am now doing catalogs. Style is style — you've either got it or you don't."

Style he may have, but the difference between Mr. Nelson and other design-oriented jacks-of-all-trades is his sense of humor. His recent work on restaurant interiors is always touched with a visual pun or two.

Liberty Noodles (on Alta Street off Lower Greenville Avenue) has lights made from woks, and upside-down paper parasols that float in the breeze from the ceiling.

The seats in the recently opened Venus, on Lemmon Avenue, are high-heeled shoe chairs, clams on the half-shell banquettes or lip-shaped sofas that he chose.

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people took it seriously. It's so corny, but my secret is just keeping a spiritual mind and a sense of humor."

He's been blending spirituality and humor in Dallas since the early 1990s, when he came home to work with friends such as the late theater director Brooks Tuttle.

Work in styling for the Clutts Agency followed, as did the restaurant design jobs, starting with a remodeling of Deep Ellum's Blind Lemon. His latest addition to the Liberty chain opens on Cedar Springs Road in the fall.

Mr. Nelson says that if he had

to settle on one career, it would be in film, "because it encompasses so many elements."

"It has fashion and theater sets and photo styling — it has everything."

Yet, even with his packed resume, he says, "I'll always feel like I have something to prove. I'll always feel that I have some new idea to come up with to show people. I always want to have an edgy quality."

"I swear I've redefined myself more times than Madonna," he jokes. "She's following in my footsteps now." ■