

The Fixer

Can Silicon Valley venture capitalist Asim Abdullah turn around the fortunes of beleaguered fashion house Ungaro?

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By Carolyn Zinko

No. 2 rises elegantly on Avenue Montaigne, France's high fashion corridor and home to Christian Dior, Nina Ricci and Christian Lacroix. The showroom of Emanuel Ungaro, for 42 years one of France's venerable fashion houses, occupies the third floor of the stately building. Outside, all is quiet. Inside, the scene is controlled chaos.

It's Wed., Feb. 28, fewer than 24 hours before the runway show at which the house's fall ready-to-wear collection will be unveiled to the international fashion press during Paris Fashion Week. Like a high-tech company guarding its latest products and patents, the showroom, filled with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, beautiful women and flashy clothes, is off-limits to most everyone except designer Peter Dundas and a team of 10 stylists who are racing the clock. Their goal: to ensure that each of the 38 outfits selected from more than 200 to be paraded before 1,200 attendees are a perfect distillation of the collection, as well as flawlessly presented.

The company, too, is in a race against time. It seems to have lost its way since 2004, when Mr. Ungaro retired, and needs to build momentum and sales before its reputation, still strong, loses cachet. The trouble may have started as early as 1996, industry insiders suggest, when the house was sold by Mr. Ungaro to Ferragamo, the footwear maker, and began to grind through high-level executives, and revenues, once topping the \$100 million mark, lagged in the low tens of millions.

Then came the latest owner: Asim Abdullah of Atherton, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who apparently likes fixer-uppers - or craves the risk. He bought the French fashion house for a reported \$84 million in 2005. But can a man who built a fortune in high-tech conquer fashion?

Abdullah thinks he can, by transferring some of the business principles of Silicon Valley to a new domain. He wants the staid fashion house to be more nimble, to update its designs to appeal to a broader, younger market, and to offer more in the way of accessories, such as handbags, shoes and sunglasses.

But unlike the world of high tech, where products are designed by teams of employees lured from competitors for top pay, manufactured as cheaply as possible in developing countries and often obsolete within months, high fashion is created by long-time employees whose techniques are not easily learned. The clothes are made in factories in Italy and the product isn't outdated in six months. Well-dressed women paying \$8,000 or more for a single garment select timeless pieces they can keep as collector's items and wear over and over for decades.

Which is to say, some of Silicon Valley's management tactics can be brought to bear on high fashion - but not all. Abdullah is learning there are differences between Paris and Palo Alto.

"The whole model of Silicon Valley is about creating new businesses and new ventures through superhuman effort. You hire people and you become giant-killers," he says over lunch at the Hotel Costes, one of Paris' grandest. "What Ungaro has taught me is that there are some incredible people who work here, and love it here and want to succeed. It's like a family -- you have to work with them and respect them. It's not about mercenaries."

Even so, he wants a turnaround -- and he wants it fast. "In Silicon Valley," he notes, "you have to move quickly, or you're dead."

The pressure on Dundas, the Norwegian-American designer, is enormous. He is the house's third women's wear designer in three years, preceded by Giambattista Valli, who designed the ready-to-wear line while Mr. Ungaro was still at the house doing haute couture. After the two had a falling out, Valli left and Ungaro retired. The second ready-to-wear designer since 2004, Vincent Darre, lasted little more than a year.

The expectation is that Dundas will not only help resuscitate the brand, but also restore it to its vaunted status of decades past, when the house - founded in 1965 by the master couturier known for his expert tailoring, draping techniques, bold colors, and ability to mix kaleidoscopic floral patterns and animal prints - was mentioned in the same breath as Dior, Yves Saint Laurent and Chanel.

To do that, Ungaro (pronounced OON-guh-roe) has to not only modernize in a way that stays true to its roots, but he has to also add enough sizzle so that the apparel will be coveted by socialites and celebrities, as well as thousands of other women ages 20 to 45 who are expanding the ranks of luxury shoppers worldwide.

"We can't just do beautiful clothes; there are lots of beautiful clothes out there," said Mounir Moufarrige, the chief executive officer of Ungaro. "We're selling dreams, through products. Once a customer feels a buzz, that there's something in it for her, she'll buy it."

Mounting a ready-to-wear show is no easy task. With the runway show scheduled for Thursday, March 1, preparations began on Monday, Feb. 26, when the collection arrived from the factory in Italy. It was more than 200 pieces in all, and it was up to the designer and his styling team to distill it to the 38 pieces that would tell the right story on the runway.

The shows are hugely expensive, costing anywhere from \$200,000 to \$800,000, depending on whether the collection is ready-to-wear (mass manufactured clothes sold in department stores) or haute couture (one-of-a-kind pieces). The show's cost also depends on whether the models are superstars, and whether it will be a subdued affair in a spartan setting or a theatrical extravaganza on the order of Cirque du Soleil.

Video and still photos are shot at each show. The video is used in TV news clips and continuously playing videos in department stores and boutiques the world over. Still photographs of models are put on laminated tags that hang from the clothes at trunk shows to show customers how the garment looks when it's worn.

Wednesday, 3 p.m. It's been a rainy, cold week, with cloud cover creating drab, white light. But with the show set for 2 p.m. the next day, the showroom, the inner sanctum of the fashion house, is a warm and brightly lit hive of activity. Styling team members flit around the models, who arrive one by one for their fittings. Two of the stylists speak only Italian, others speak only French and others only English. Dundas is conversant in all three -- as well as Norwegian, which isn't generally required.

The stylists stand back, wordlessly, arms clasped, or they slouch on couches. The models prance with a clopping horselike gait in front of the mirror, stone-faced, almost angry-looking and silent. The stylists add and remove belts, raise and lower hemlines, and puff up or deflate the capped sleeves of dresses by adding or removing various fabric stuffings. A jacket's two clasps are fastened, and undone, fastened and undone. In the end, they decree that only one clasp will be fastened, to get the right look.

They move on to the collar and fuss over details that seem meaningless.

"Jack, will you put the collar up?" someone suggests. With a flick of the wrist, the limp fabric turns into a surprising architectural funnel. The models will wear their hair long, not tied back, which means in this case that the model's hair splays over the collar, obscuring its effect.

"Will someone tuck her hair in?" a stylist asks. The maneuver changes the look from sloppy to chic, an enormous difference.

Tanya Dzhahileva, known as "Tanya D.," a 5-foot-11 Russian beauty all of 15 years old, keeps her parka on. Most of the models keep their jackets on, despite the balmy weather outside and the warmth inside the building.

Tanya D. is thin -- 110 pounds, perhaps. She, like the others, looks like a baby giraffe -- all torso and legs. Her face is gaunt, her eyes almost bulging. (Pictures of starving children come to mind, all forehead and eyes and tiny chins). Her expression is stern and frowning -- until she suddenly breaks out in giggles, delighted by the \$20,000 white fox fur coat she is wearing, her smile transforming her from a walking clothes hanger into a fresh-faced teenager for a few fleeting moments.

Meanwhile, downstairs, in the atelier led by Lucia Silva, a half dozen seamstresses -- "the surgeons of couture," as Dundas calls them -- are at work modifying garments that the style team has sent down to be worked on by hand. Most nettlesome is a black dress that hangs above the knee; its tubular hemline bulges like a cardboard canister of refrigerator biscuits. It's the third time it has been sent down for revisions.

"Peter doesn't like it so we're starting again," said seamstress Clare Cousin, disassembling the hem, which had taken another seamstress an entire day to make. "We don't really know what he wants. So this is the third time."

It's an apt description of the state of the fashion house today.

The show March 1 will be Dundas' third collection and third try at bringing the spirit and sensibility of Ungaro back. He's struggling to carve out a new identity for the house, and can't seem to express it clearly. With the multitude of brands and labels competing for attention, fashion editors have limited patience for a fashion house whose message can't be deciphered. Dundas' first two shows were greeted with cautious optimism. Not blockbuster reviews, but not the kiss of death, either.

Suzy Menkes, the doyenne of fashion writers and a frank critic, had this to say in the International Herald Tribune on March 3, 2006:

"Dundas, hoping to be the third-time lucky designer after two flops, did his best to be faithful to the original Emanuel Ungaro spirit. ... But with so much draping creating a taut, short silhouette, Dundas seemed to have started where Ungaro himself stepped down in ready-to-wear and that was six years ago. Fashion moves so fast and there was no sign here of the modest grace that is the leading look of the season. But as the choice of the house's new owner, Dundas should be given a grace period to establish his own look to take the Ungaro label forward."

Six months later, on Oct. 7, 2006, a review by Menkes had more bite:

"Ungaro is trying to bring together and to refresh the essential codes of the house: draping, a pert sophisticated sexiness, all put together with superb craftsmanship.

The first exits, working on Ungaro's fascination with drapes, were not too bad in their gaudy way. But as the brief, tight dresses and skinny pants with snug jackets walked the runway, it became clear that this collection was not reaching down to the soul of Ungaro but creating a caricature of what the brand stands or stood for."

Certainly no breakthrough for Dundas. Not yet. The fashion house owner wasn't particularly worried. Not yet. Abdullah, whose fortune was made from the painstaking work of writing computer codes, knew that persistence pays.

It's almost comical now to look back at news reports from 1996 proclaiming that some day in the future, people would be able to conduct financial transactions over the Internet. Abdullah, 42, was one of the people who made it possible. An electrical and computer engineer with a master's degree from Stanford, Abdullah worked at Rolm and Taligent before becoming executive director at CommerceNet in Palo Alto, a leading consortium that promoted the development of e-commerce software.

He made his fortune from high-tech investments, notably from the sale of his company Veo Systems to Commerce One, a business-to-business Internet software firm. The initial public offering left him wealthy enough to buy a \$15 million house in Pebble Beach designed by Clarence Tantau (which burned to the ground in an arson fire in 2002), as well as homes in Atherton and San Francisco. He had enough left over to dabble in venture capital and, finally, to buy a French fashion house.

He and his wife, a physician and kidney specialist who volunteers at El Camino Hospital in Mountain View, have two children. They are also philanthropists, contributing to the Asian Art Museum, the Human Development Foundation of Northern California and hospitals in their native Pakistan.

But how did the high-tech entrepreneur more familiar with pocket protectors, khakis and dress-down Fridays end up at the helm of a frilly fashion firm?

"I had been and have been fascinated by consumer luxury brands like Hermes and Ferrari and what it takes to develop those brands, and -- more importantly -- what it takes to maintain them and grow them in marketing to consumers," he explains. "The fashion thing was not a planned event. It was an opportunity I came across. And even though I knew very little of it, I knew with a brand like Ungaro I could refurbish it and that I'd be able to do other things as well. It gives me a platform to build upon. I'm very committed to this business, but I see it as a stepping stone to other things."

And, he admits, "To tell the truth, I was getting a little bored with technology. It wasn't enough for me. We went through such a high with the dot-com revolution. ... When you get done with that roller coaster and you're asked to ride the bunny train, it's not that fun. Fashion is very stimulating. I'm learning again. I love to feel I'm working my way through a whole new challenge."

His timing appears to be good. The worldwide luxury market is estimated to be worth \$200 billion, and is expected to grow by 10 percent in 2007, according to Pierre Mallevays, managing director of Savigny Partners LLP, a corporate finance and mergers and acquisitions firm in London.

"At the top end, demand for high luxury is fueled by an ever-increasing number of 'überraich' consumers looking for things authentic and exclusive, while the wider 'aspirational brands' segment will continue to benefit from a large and established customer base in the West and the emergence of a fast growing middle class in the East," Mallevays said via e-mail. "Ungaro is one of those truly great brands that have been reduced to shambles. It definitely has the pedigree and the potential to re-establish itself up the luxury ladder; it depends whether its new owners will manage it for the long term or for the short term."

Abdullah says he'd like to see a turnaround within five years. Moufarrige, whom Abdullah brought on as Chief Executive Officer, is also a limited partner in the fashion house, and is not content with that time frame.

"My horizon isn't five years," he says with the measured smile of someone who is sure of himself, and accustomed to ruling with a tight fist. "The market doesn't wait five years."

Wednesday, 4 p.m. While the flurry of activity continues upstairs with Dundas, the models and the style team, Isha Abdullah flies in from California and arrives at the Ungaro flagship store, which is located on the street level of the same building on Avenue Montaigne. She considers herself an unofficial "brand ambassador" and shops for something to wear at the runway show.

Discreetly placed around the store are framed photos of celebrities who have worn Ungaro in the past: Nicole Kidman, Elizabeth Hurley, Julianne Moore, Uma Thurman, Penelope Cruz -- but none, yet, of the Pussycat Dolls, who wore Ungaro to the Grammys, or Eva Longoria, who bought her own Ungaro dress for the Golden Globes.

The bright spring collection, shown on the catwalk in October, with a dress Isha has already picked to wear, has not yet arrived in the stores. She browses and then heads up to the showroom to observe the design team at work on the models. Neither she nor her husband has any real influence on the colors, hemlines or designs of the clothing, but their opinions are treated with respect

Hearing of her clothing predicament, a stylist pulls out a fur coat and several dresses, including a black mini with a large print that features big lipstick kisses across the torso. Moufarrige and Abdullah maintain that the Ungaro woman is sexy, but never vulgar, and that the house's signature garment is a "mistress dress." The paramour concept does not sit well with Isha Abdullah.

"Well ... " she says, trying for diplomacy. "The lips are not me."

"You're covered with kisses," Dundas offers, trying to convince.

When the mistress concept is mentioned, she shakes her head and says, "I'm talking to my husband about that one."

"A wife can't be a mistress?" asks Dundas, teasing, with a smile. "It's a state of mind."

In the end, Isha settles on a little black dress, having it hemmed to fit her petite frame.

Wednesday, 5 p.m. It's not just the designer who's racing the clock. The public relations team is under fire, too.

Last season's fashions have been pushed on rolling racks from the showroom, where the models are being fitted, into the PR offices to make way for the new collection. As a result, employees can hardly see one another over the hundreds of ruffled blouses and flouncy dresses on hangers.

A 3-foot-long map of an auditorium is spread across a desk -- and each of the 1,200 seats has a name penciled in. It's the granddaddy of all seating charts, and it has taken two weeks to complete.

At any fashion show, the first two rows are always reserved for the powerhouse publications with international influence -- the International Herald Tribune, the New York Times, the Washington Post, Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, to name a few.

But the phones have been ringing for days now, and e-mails are coming in fast and furious. Like socialites who want to sit at the center table at a dinner on gala night, the reporters from lesser publications are jockeying for position. To some, even the fourth row is akin to Siberia.

A French media representative demands front row, to no avail. A Norwegian journalist tries to cajole a seat because Dundas, after all, is a countryman, but it's standing room only. A reporter from a German fashion magazine says she won't be attending because she doesn't like her seat. If it's a bluff, it doesn't work.

"What am I going to do? I can't kill Suzy Menkes," says communications director Philippe Angelotti. Menkes always merits a front-row seat.

Wednesday, 6 p.m. Amid the chaos, Moufarrige takes time to explain the Ungaro strategy. A Londoner of Lebanese descent with a flair for natty attire, he is an old industry hand at marketing savvy. He is the one, company officials say, who replaced Karl Lagerfeld in his final stint at Chloe with British celebrity designer Stella McCartney, to great success. (Lagerfeld was designing for Chanel, Chloe and his namesake line at the time.) Moufarrige took Dunhill from tobacco to leather goods, and also created stand-alone Mont Blanc pen stores, even though company officials told him it would never work.

Ungaro, which discontinued its costly haute couture line several years ago, will -- like many fashion houses these days -- try to turn its fortunes around by taking its women's ready-to-wear in a more youthful direction, in response to the luxury market's changing demographics.

Several decades ago, women were considered old when they hit 40. That was before the advent of health clubs, Botox, liposuction and guilt-free cosmetic surgery. Today's older woman is interested in style. At the other end of the spectrum are teenagers with increasingly sophisticated tastes who are demanding name brands they've seen on celebrities in magazines, and on TV and the Internet.

"Today's 65-year-old woman and 25-year-old woman can slip into the same dress," maintains Moufarrige, "and often they do."

Unlike fast food chains, which sell bigger, more expensive portions to continue to make money off the same customers, the luxury market is expanding, he said, from bottom to top.

"It's not old people buying more. It's new people buying for the first time," Moufarrige said. "If we don't try and look ahead and understand our market to address it, we shouldn't be in this business."

But is Dundas capable of super-charging Ungaro, of turning it into a giant-killer?

The low-key 41-year-old looks like a cross between a rock star and a surfer. The son of a cardiac surgeon, Dundas came to the United States at age 11 to live with an aunt in South Bend, Ind., after his mother, a pianist, died. He played hockey in high school, and for college, went to New York, to Parsons School of Design.

His interest in design dates in part from his childhood acting on the stage in Norway -- and from playing with his father's 1920s clothes. Dundas remembers finding them in an old trunk in the attic, and being fascinated with the removable collars and cuffs on the shirts.

After design school, he moved to Europe, and spent eight years at Jean Paul Gaultier before leaving for Christian Lacroix and then Roberto Cavalli, always an understudy -- until he won the starring role at Ungaro.

There, he is learning what every designer must know: that creating entire collections is about more than making fantasy gowns for red carpet starlets. There's the whole line to think about, including daywear, which generates more revenue with \$2,000 price tags, the top end of the impulse purchase price range.

Fashion industry insiders have knocked Dundas for being too referential to the archives, lacking the tailoring skills of Ungaro himself and of dumbing down the aesthetic. But Dundas sees it differently.

"I see the Ungaro woman as a woman who's much more sensual than the other houses, who is slightly more dangerous, smoky, a bit unpredictable," he said. "I'm finding new coats, changing the fabrics, which were traditionally chiffon and satin, and going for new treatments of fabrics that young people could identify with."

And he's trying to block out worries about what the critics will say.

"History has proved again and again in fashion that if you do what you do with conviction, and do it well, people will come around," he said. "When you're sketching and your head starts dancing, that's the best. Working with the fabric, seeing what it can do, the fittings, the final sprint before the collection -- it's like Christmas."

It's also about getting the clothes fitted in time. At least one of the models has missed her appointment and will have to come in just under the wire tomorrow morning, hours before the show.

Thursday, 12:30 a.m. Most of Avenue Montaigne is dark. But the lights at the atelier are burning bright. So, too, at the bar at the Hotel Plaza Athenee. Abdullah, who met for dinner with Pakistani dignitaries, relaxes with friends. His wife went to bed early. He turns in when the bar closes at 2 a.m.

Thursday, 3 a.m. The design team calls it quits and goes home. Dundas falls into bed an hour later.

At fashion week shows, spectators are crammed into small chairs or onto bleachers with no cushions, craning their necks to see any VIPS who might walk by at any given moment. They're not hard to miss because they're the ones followed around by TV cameras with lights, and reporters begging for quotes.

No one gets in without a formal invitation, typically a large card on heavy, colorful stock, with the fashion house logo and the guest's name and seat number written in calligraphy. The invitations are waved in front of the doormen to gain entry, leaving the cardless in the dust. The Academy Awards in Los Angeles coincides with fashion week this year, so many Hollywood stars are absent from the Paris shows. That doesn't stop photographers from swarming around anyone thin, tall and dressed in the style of the moment, on the theory that she might, after all, be someone important.

Months of labor come down to minutes -- about 15 minutes, the amount of time it takes anywhere from 38 to 60 models to walk up and down a runway. The designer comes out onstage to take a bow, and when the lights come up, the audience bolts in less than five minutes to meet their hired drivers, find a taxi stand or catch the Metro to the next show.

To the uninitiated, a fashion show is a mysterious, if not baffling, thing. Clothes that look completely unwearable or downright bizarre are pronounced "fabulous," while outfits that everyday people would love to wear are considered mundane and therefore unworthy of attention on the runway.

In a March 2 review, Robin Givhan, the Washington Post's Pulitzer Prize-winning fashion editor, sniffed at John Galliano's Hollywood-style luxurious and romantic offerings at Dior that many women would covet. She lauded Nicholas Ghesquieres's designs for Balenciaga -- Asian and Middle Eastern-inspired patterns topped with prep school jackets -- which she considered groundbreaking, for the following reasons:

"A designer's influence isn't necessarily measured by the number of socialites he caters to or the gowns he gets on the red carpet. Instead, the true determination of today's fashion influence is how the designer alters the way the average woman dresses. For instance, whose handbag has she been lusting after in recent seasons. (Balenciaga, yes. Dior, no.) What has Dior done for the communal aesthetic lately?

"Who has never seen a prep school blazer? Or the print on an inexpensive bandana? But Ghesquiere weaves them into something entirely new -- not a new philosophy, but a new garment. He is not offering up a high concept from which the audience must extrapolate a reality. He does the most fundamental thing that a designer is supposed to do: Offer alternative ways of thinking about attire."

Thursday March 1, 12:30 p.m. Inside the tent erected behind the Trocadero, where the Ungaro show is to occur, the scene is a palette in black: black carpeted bleachers, a long

black runway made of glossy tiles, black tenting. The only lights overhead are twinkling and meant to represent stars.

The show's theme is *The Nightbird*, influenced by Dundas' nightclubbing experiences in London. It's the Ungaro woman going out into the night, dancing in the city metropolis, in light mini-dresses, with chubby Swarovski crystal-beaded coats (for a mere \$36,000) to protect against the elements.

The public relations team is scrambling to put place cards at each of the 1,000 or so seats. Some, up near the rafters, are for a cheering section of friends from San Francisco. They include the Abdullahs' interior designer, David Kensington; Nob Hill real estate agent Joel Goodrich; Silicon Valley real estate investor Mark Calvano; Merck & Co. health science associate Afsaneh Akhtari of Woodside; and Fariba Rezvani, president of Linkore LLC, a venture catalyst fund in Foster City.

Backstage, three dozen makeup artists and hairstylists are at their stations, turning the models' faces into pale palettes with eyes streaked in a blue-gray teal. With their delicate angular faces, and strong brow ridges, they look like Cro-Magnons and fairies at the same time.

Tanya D. is one of them. Because she's a minor, she's allowed to work in eight or nine shows only, she says. "I'm choosing the best shows with beautiful clothes to present myself as a model," she says, which, considering her demographic, should be music to Moufarrige's ears. "The collection is fantastic and beautiful, every work he's done."

Those who aren't dressed yet are goofing around the way teenagers do. Snejana Onopka and Maryna Linchuk are lying on the ground, in an out-of-the-way place, flipping through pictures on a digital camera, smiling.

Dundas, whose right front jeans pocket serves as a pin cushion, clipped with a half dozen safety pins for emergency use, is fussing with a glittery gold gown, trying to get more lift in the shoulders. The model is sent off to the seamstress.

A glittery ski jacket still doesn't look right. "Try it open," a stylist says, but the zipper won't work. The hem of the jacket is too puffy and the wrong shape; it is being pinned to reduce its volume and to make its tail less rounded and more oval. Someone else rolls a lint brush, removing imperceptible lint from a model's skirt.

Thursday, 2 p.m. Unlike the head-turning attention generated at the Dior show by the entrance of billionaire owner Bernard Arnault, the Abdullahs walk in with little fanfare. It's an improvement over last season, when Isha arrived early but couldn't get in, because the doorman didn't recognize her.

Thursday, 2:52 p.m. Nearly an hour past the scheduled starting time, the lights dim, the crescendo of conversation dwindles to silence. Music blares, the lights go up. The show finally begins.

Thirty-eight looks trot down the runway, in deep blues, purples and reds, as well as black, silver and gold, and a few prints with patterns that harken back to the Ungaro archives. The first look out of the gate is a black belted funnel neck jacket with blousy sleeves over tight leggings and high heels, followed by more jackets with funnel necks, a few blazers with pants, and then mini-dresses aplenty, beaded, with asymmetric necklines, with flouncy hems, and in jersey with draping. To close the show there's a flowing white chiffon full-length gown. Editors watch, stony-faced and silent, scribbling furiously on their note pads. Only when all the models return to the stage to parade at the end, and Dundas takes a bashful bow, does anyone applaud. Twelve minutes after it started, it's over.

Thursday, 11 p.m. The entire fashion house -- the Abdullahs and Moufarrige included -- celebrates at Neo nightclub on rue Ponthieu, one of Paris' hottest dance clubs. The runway video plays endlessly on TV screens while music thumps; Pommery champagne flows like the Seine, until the supply runs out at 3:30 a.m., and bottles of Budweiser are served instead. The Abdullahs party with everyone except Dundas, who is home asleep. At 4 a.m., the party winds down, and the Abdullahs retire, bracing for the morning's reviews.

Mincing few words, Menkes' review March 2 in the International Herald Tribune is the harshest in the mix:

"In a glitter gulch of references to having fun at night, the Emanuel Ungaro collection Thursday focused on a star whose light never seems to dim: the disco diva.

For flash, pizzazz and razzmatazz, Dundas is doing something to breathe life into Ungaro, which has not suffered the fate of famous Paris houses that just seem to wither away. Dundas showed his cutting skills with high-waisted pants creating a lean silhouette. But his glitter dresses baring the back or a scarlet calf-length cardigan, like a caricature of

bordello wear in the red light district, were only just this side of vulgar. And how many glam-puss luxury customers are there out there for these kind of dresses for dancing queens?"

Abdullah, accustomed to setbacks in the high-tech world, takes it in stride. "The reviews, whether positive or less positive, have to be respected because we have learned from them," he says a week after the show, back at home in Atherton. "Peter was going for an impact, trying to make a high-energy showing. When you try to take a risky road, you risk alienating some folks."

The department store buyers had come in during the week after the show to see the entire collection, not just the 15 percent on the runway, and liked what they saw. But there is work to be done, Abdullah acknowledges.

"From this particular show, the one message that comes across is we've got to have a much clearer identity vis a vis this designer, and where we are headed with Ungaro. An identity is important for the brand. As Mounir said, anyone can do beautiful clothes. To have the identity and message articulated through the clothes is important."

Moufarrige contends that reviews aren't everything. After all, a Hollywood film can be panned by the critics and be a hit at the box office. Ungaro fashions are slowly being embraced by stylists in the magazine industry -- given prominent display in fashion spreads in publications from Tatler to the New York Times Magazine to Harper's Bazaar.

And if customers in San Francisco are any indication, things may actually be looking up for Ungaro. Neiman Marcus, which stopped carrying the line for a season, concerned about its drift, reinstated Ungaro in its San Francisco, Los Angeles and Houston stores. To kick off the spring collection, a runway show and cocktail party were hosted in each city, to introduce well-heeled customers to Dundas, who attended personally.

At the Union Square store in late March, more than 100 guests -- including lapsed devotees wearing vintage Ungaro frocks -- oohed over the brightly colored spring collection, themed around butterflies, which premiered in Paris last October. But noticeably absent were young A-list society mavens whose names guarantee high-profile coverage in national fashion publications -- Melanie Ellison, Victoria and Vanessa Traina and Vanessa Getty, for example.

While several more mature customers opted for longer, flowing gowns with ample coverage, Amber Marie Bently, 27, co-owner of the trendy Kamalaspas on Union Square, was the living answer to Menkes' question about minis, and proof of Moufarrige's assertions about market demographics.

Bently ordered a beaded mini with dragonfly motif for \$11,000 and a full-length chiffon gown in bright grasshopper green for \$10,000, as her husband looked on with approval.

She is comfortable with color and likes to be noticed, and therefore plans to wear them "anywhere," she said. "They're so out there, so sexy, not like the black dresses you see everywhere."

Abdullah can only hope there are thousands more Bentlys out there.

End.