

There she is ... Miss Whatever

Beauty pageants may be passé but the shows go on

BY ZACHARY GOELMAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 11, 2009



Miss Universe contestants, from left, Elisa Najera of Mexico, Crystle Stewart of the United States and Samantha Tajik of Canada pose before the 2008 pageant in Vietnam. The Miss Universe Canada pageant will be held next week in Toronto, with the winner going on to compete in the Miss Universe pageant later this summer.

Photograph by: Adrees Latif, Reuters

Sarah Palin sashayed across the stage in a red one-piece and heels, contestant number eight in the 1984 Miss Alaska pageant.

Footage of that swimsuit competition exploded on YouTube during the last U.S. election campaign. The winners? Tina Fey and viewers of Saturday Night Live. Already the vice-presidential candidate was being mocked by some for being a bumbling airhead with little understanding of politics or the economy. The vintage video and its profile of her posterior seemed to encapsulate her character flaws. Fey's impersonations made them worse.

The resulting media heyday was enough to make pageant organizers and participants squirm.

"It's completely unfair and awful," Tara Hall -- Miss Canada International 2002 -- says of the stigma. Hall says she hates to be judged by her former title. And yet, as Palin discovered, it's just so easy to judge.

And while beauty crowns have been kicked around of late, this week in Toronto one will be awarded to Miss Universe Canada. That lucky winner will go on to compete in the Miss Universe pageant later this summer.

With the glory up for grabs, it's as good a time as any to consider what all of this means in this day and age.

When the Miss Canada pageant last aired on TV in 1991, many assumed it had had its day. Just a few years later in the satiric film *Canadian Bacon*, director Michael Moore suggested its loss was a *casus belli* for the U.S. to invade its northern neighbour.

Almost 20 years later, the contests endure.

There's Miss Universe Canada, Miss World Canada, Miss Galaxy Canada, Miss Canada Globe, Miss Canada Earth, Miss Polonia Canada, Miss Latina Canada, Miss Black Canada and more. "There's always going to be young women who grow up, girls who grow up who aspire to be Miss Whatever," explains Jimmy Steele, a former Canadian pageant director and industry veteran. "Beauty pageants, even though they are passé in Canada, are still a part of our cultural ethos."

What's one more competition in this age of American Idol, America's Next Top Model and So You Think You Can Dance? "It is the era of contests -- of being voted 'off the island,' " said Terry O'Reilly, a media maven and host of CBC Radio's *The Age of Persuasion*. "Beauty pageants were really probably the only thing of that nature in the 1960s and 1970s."

Each year more than 100 women compete in Miss World Canada and Miss Universe Canada. Contestants pay an application fee, which can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars, which they are encouraged to raise from donors.

"Everything worthwhile costs something," observes Shannon Green, who doesn't regret the \$850 she spent to enter the Miss Universe Canada pageant. (She made it to the Toronto-area finals.)

Ira Pettle serves as host of the Miss Canada International pageant. For one week each year, he coaches young women ("the misses") and teenagers to dance, strut, speak and sparkle.

To help explain why he's involved, he tells the story of an overweight 14-year-old named Ashley, "not a beauty queen by society's standards," but a contestant in the teen division.

Ashley joined a cadre of young women for a week of dance rehearsals -- "she wasn't a dancer, she was just sweating and working her butt off" -- photo shoots, day trips to Niagara Falls and, finally, an evening where the winner was chosen.

When they announced the final six, Ashley heard her name. "She got eliminated in the final three," Pettle recalls. "She was bawling tears of joy. She kept saying 'I did it, I did it.' " Pettle broke down, too. "It was the most inspiring moment of the pageant. I thought, 'Yes, this is why I do this.' "

There was a time when families would gather around the television to watch a young girl's dreams come true, says Steele. "That made for good television."

The rising status of women led to the decline of the pageant. In 1975, a group of activists broke into the CTV studio and pelted the host of Miss Canada, Jim Perry, with packets of flour.

The event also got squeezed by the recession as advertisers tightened their belts until they finally pulled the plug. "It was a very sad day for the couple thousand people who were still actually watching the show, and for a couple hundred girls who still wanted to try," Steele recalled.

In its place, smaller pageants appeared, though none could claim to be the true Miss Canada pageant -- a registered trademark.

These days beauty contests -- a sort of dog-and-pony show -- are an anachronism; at worst misogynistic. Pageant organizers reject this, of course. "We're not about beauty queens in bathing suits," Sylvia Stark, director of Miss Canada International, recently told guests at a dinner promoting her event. While beautiful women still parade on stage in evening gowns and cocktail dresses, they do so in a competition for academic scholarships.

The Miss Canada International pageant has reinvented itself as an organization dedicated to public service and ambassadorship (winners are expected to spend a year supporting charitable causes). Miss World, meanwhile, serves up "beauty with a purpose;" Miss Universe advocates HIV awareness; Miss Earth is devoted to the environment.

Pageants invariably include a category in which candidates are judged on more than physical appearance.

Just as pageants are changing, so too are definitions of beauty. Beauty has been democratized, says Sharon Haver, a fashion industry veteran and the founder of focusonstyle.com. When we look at prior beauty queens, we see something foreign. "They're not natural," Haver says.

Beauty today comes in different combinations -- in part thanks to advertising. Looks were once something had by a lucky few (and you, too, with the right products); now advertising assures us that beauty is inherent in us all. The pageants take this into consideration.

"It can't simply be about the outward manifestation of beauty," says O'Reilly. "That's just candy floss unless you have something else in this day and age."

Pageants, he says, are shallow. "You're really being rewarded for your genetic structure, which you have really very little to do with." Hence the nod to inner beauty.

Gwen Elliot, 20, is a contestant for the crown of Miss World Canada 2009. "You might be 200 pounds. But you know that if you want to do this, you have to work hard to get to that point where you look like

one of these girls," she says. "I really want to show them that they can be really smart and look really good in a bathing suit -- at the same time."

Seventeen-year-old Lacey Tippett will also compete in the Miss World Canada pageant. She insists anyone can win because it's about inner beauty -- "your confidence, your integrity and your morality."

And what of outer beauty? "Well, everyone's beautiful," she responds.

Whether or not Tippett, Elliot and others truly believe this, it's clear they want to win. They view pageants as tickets to success.

Ksenia Mezenina, who competes in this weekend's Miss Universe Canada, says the contest falls in step with her ambitions. The sapling-slim model, born in the Siberian city of Yekaterinberg, is enrolled in York University's international studies program. She hopes recognition on the world stage will launch her career as a Canadian ambassador.

Rival contestant Ravi Bansal, 24, came across the Miss Universe pageant while working to raise funds for school construction in Punjab, India. She called director Denis Davila and asked if she could make her initiative a priority were she to take the crown. Had he said no, she would have declined to participate. "I'm not going to waste my time or anyone else's."

She came up with a business plan to raise the almost \$7,500 needed for travel, wardrobe and registration. In preparation, she met twice a week with a coach to learn how to walk properly in eveningwear -- more challenging than you think.

Bansal considers her beauty a natural, accidental asset. "Hey, if this is what people find pretty, so be it" she said with a shrug, "If I refuse it, I'm not using something I have,

Nicole Dundson was the last woman awarded Miss Canada before the title vanished.

"Pageants do attract the stereotypical pageant participant: egotistical, materialistic, slightly air-headed and ill-informed, lovely looking young woman who just wants the attention," she says. "But those ones never win. The other type of person a pageant attracts is probably pretty much like me. Out for an experience, a fan of the stage, excited to face a personal challenge, and interested in giving back to the world around her in some way, shape or form."

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Bonus Material:

Listen to excerpts from Zachary Goelman's interviews with Gwen Elliot, a competitor in this year's Miss World Canada pageant, and Nafisa Merchant, who is 2009 Miss Teen Ontario.

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