



# Beauty Isn't Only Skin Deep

Another year, another beauty queen, another wave of backlash. What's with all the vitriol, Singapore? By **Lisa Ann Lee**

**O**K, so as Singaporeans, it's no surprise that we like to complain. But our de facto national sport tends to reach a fever pitch around the time some poor girl is elected Singapore's next representative to the Miss Universe or Miss World pageant. It ebbs when the winner (usually from a Latin American country) is announced.

Even before the current Ris Low debacle, local beauty contestants have had to put up with ridicule from local viewers for failing to measure up to their Latin American counterparts on the big stage. When Low's poor communication skills and criminal record were exposed by the local media, you would have thought, judging from the comments she received, that she had sold her critics minibonds. Earlier this year, another contestant, Miss Singapore Universe Rachel Kum, also had to endure calls from critics to be stripped off her crown when so-called "racy" pictures of her were leaked onto the Internet. So what is it about beauty pageants that get Singaporeans foaming at the mouth with moral indignation?

## Looking for the Impossible

For a start, there is the "R" word. Beauty queens, many say, are role models. "People expect you to behave a certain way when you're a beauty queen," says lawyer Samuel Seow, a beauty pageant judge. Alan Sim, president of the Mister Singapore Organization, adds: "Being a celebrity or national representative means that there is a certain standard you have to set. People expect this of the contestant and when you fall short, [Singaporeans] tend to be very critical."

But are we looking for saints or beauty queens? True, while it is not in the country's best interest to have someone with a criminal record elected as



its delegate, why the furor over Kum and her photos, or the ensuing allegations that she'd had plastic surgery? Why the holier-than-thou attitude when botox and breast enhancement surgeries are so popular in this country, and when it's a widely-acknowledged practice in the international beauty pageant industry?

On what he considers to be his ideal beauty queen, Fauzi Rassull, a blogger with MediaCorp's BlogTV, writes: "My ideal beauty queen must not only be a role model for young women but also someone who is passionate, courageous, entertaining and aware of the suffering of others and hoping to do something about it. What's more, to support various charitable causes and make a difference!" Such a woman, if she did exist, would probably be insufferable. Asked why the public expects so much of its beauty pageant winners, local actress and former Miss Singapore Universe contestant Ling Lee offers: "Singaporeans like to be convinced that the person representing us is charming and attractive, and has the smarts, at the same time, to impress the world." Ah yes, there we go again, trying to impress everyone. But given Singapore's paltry record, it would seem that we haven't really succeeded in impressing anyone so far.

## Time for a New Order?

As a nation, it's time we made a decision. Are beauty pageants just something we hold so that we have something and someone to laugh about? Or do we really want to get serious about producing a winner on the world stage? If the first case is true, then let's just scrap the damn things and focus our energy on topics that really matter (a viable two-party political

system or getting U2 to play the next F1 Rocks Concert, for example). If the latter is the case, however, perhaps it's time we recognized that contestants do not win beauty pageants by some stroke of genetic good fortune alone. Osmel Sousa, president of the Miss Venezuela organization and the man responsible for producing the country's bumper crop of pageant winners, puts it best when he says: "This isn't a nature contest. It's a beauty contest, and science exists to help perfect beauty." Science, sure. But there's also that one-year stint (for those participating in international pageants) at Sousa's Miss Venezuela Academy, which one former contestant likened to "a military school." There, the girls are put through a grueling regimen where every imperfection is singled out and purged by Sousa and his team, which includes a dental surgeon and a plastic surgeon, among others.

The preparation process is just as intense in Japan, whose recent success can be attributed to Frenchwoman Ines Ligrón, director of the Miss Universe Japan organization, who has single-handedly turned the fortunes of the pageant around. Formerly dismissed as "just a swimsuit gala" (indeed, Ligrón had to scour the streets for contestants when she first started due to a lack of good prospects—sound familiar, Singapore?), Miss Universe Japan now attracts more than 4,000 applicants. Gone are the women who embody the traditional demure, *kawaii* (cute) ideals of Japanese beauty, which she dismisses as "a concept for 12-year-old girls". Ligrón's charges are "fierce" style sophisticates who undergo a rigorous seven-month training program, which includes living in France and being trained in French etiquette. Her biggest success so far? Riyo Mori, a "chubby dancer from Shizuoka" who won the Miss Universe title in 2007.

Say what you want about inner beauty; today's pageant winners are made, not born. Preparing for a pageant, even a local one, is not just about standing around looking pretty. There is a lot of work involved. Says Ivy Leow, winner of Miss Earth Singapore 2008: "Participating in a beauty pageant is very time-consuming. There's a build-up along the way. For Miss Earth itself, events are held for nine months. As a contestant, you have to participate in these things, so this means you burn your Saturdays and Sundays." Adds Lee: "(In various countries), the hopefuls spend years preparing before they contest among themselves to represent their country. Are Singaporeans willing [to do this]?" Given that most of us can't even be asked to adhere to a dress code, can we honestly expect anyone to spend months preparing for a competition that is constantly dismissed as shallow and frivolous?

## What Now?

Ris Low may not have been the ideal delegate to represent Singapore in many ways. However, maybe it's time to give the girl a break. Had she not been forced to resign her crown due to her credit card fraud convictions, it's possible that with the kind of training that Ligrón's girls get, she could have become a contender. So she doesn't

speaking great English. It can be fixed. Venezuela's contestants are taught to speak in front of the camera, so why shouldn't we do the same for our own? Perhaps, if we are really serious about winning, then it's time to take a leaf from the Indians, Japanese and Venezuelans, and look at the pageants for what they are—real battles—and prepare for them accordingly, instead of griping about the caliber of the contestants who join, or the lack of good participants. Beauty pageant contestants aren't leading the free world, after all—they're just trying to make us smile. ■



Miss Earth Singapore winners 2008

