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Designing for *queens*

There is more than meets the eye when it comes to the spectacular fashion that goes into beauty pageants. 2-3

Photo: Miss Universe Organisation Malaysia

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The Star, Malaysia

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DESIGNING for a pageant is a lot more complicated than it seems.

For one, there is the time constraint. You'll also have to contend with the outpouring of public opinion.

"From start to finish, we worked on three creations and completed them in a total of three weeks. They are all handmade," says Ezuwan Ismail.

The Malaysian designer is outfitting this year's Miss Universe Malaysia, Sandra Lim, who will compete in the Mexico City finals on Nov 16.

As with every year, the unveiling invited unrestrained comments over social media.

Ezuwan fashioned the national costume – a warrior princess-inspired design – and evening gown, plus a third "secret dress" to be revealed during the competition.

His pageant designs this year have been called out for being too subtle. People also asked why a skirt was not the go-to, as that would be more elegant.

According to Ezuwan, he worked closely with Lim to conceptualise the looks.

"She wanted something that could go with sword fighting. So we thought pants would be best," he notes, about the national costume that uses songket as the base.

Lim is a fitness enthusiast who practises wushu, kickboxing and stunt work.

The evening gown Ezuwan created is a floor-length number bearing intricate beadwork.

As a designer, he is known for his dramatic designs. His clients include Malaysia's biggest celebrities like Datuk Seri Siti Nurhaliza, Ziana Zain and Rozita Che Wan.

He says that balancing between wants and needs is crucial to get that perfect look for a beauty queen.

"The experience is different because the design will be seen by so many people across various countries. So, there's a lot more pressure," he points out.

"For singers or my own collections, I focus more on personal style. For pageants, the design has to capture the contestant's personality and country's representation on a larger stage."

Designed to be eye-catching

Everyone seems to turn into fashion experts when pageant season rolls around.

Comments circulated on social media can range from mild critiques over the choice of colour, to pointed remarks coming from those who simply don't think what our beauty queen will be wearing is stylish enough.

Carven Ong, who designed for Malaysia's Miss Universe beauty queens in 2019 and 2020, says he does not pay attention to online chatter.

He also notes that "national costume" should not be seen as "national attire".

"Things changed maybe about 10 years ago. Before that, the designs are more alike to heritage dressing. They're now very much showpieces instead," Ong says.

Lim, this year's Miss Universe Malaysia will wear a national costume inspired by a folktale about a warrior princess. – Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation



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Ezuwan showing Lim's evening gown for the finals in Mexico, an intricate handmade creation. – Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation

"That's why you have things like our KLCC Twin Towers or nasi lemak being used as inspiration for a national costume."

Malaysia's other past designs have resembled objects like a traditional fishing boat, a kampung house, and the iconic Mount Kinabalu.

This is in line with what other countries have showcased at the competition's finals in the past decade – which can be seen as quirky and avant-garde, or even downright peculiar.

Last year, the Philippines won "Best National Costume" for a design resembling an airplane.

Thailand snagged the award in 2015 with an outfit inspired by a Tuk-Tuk (the famous three-wheeled auto rickshaw of Bangkok). Myanmar won at the 2016 pageant for a costume bringing to life a Burmese puppet show.

As for the evening dresses, they should be elegant and chic – but also practical.

"Always remember that the beauty queen has to walk in it. She needs to really deliver a stunning performance, where she catwalks across the stage," Ong says.

He adds that gowns for pageants are the usual chic red carpet designs.

"Bling bling – that was the only requirement I got when I designed them," shares Ong, whose dresses were used in 2018's Hollywood rom-com *Crazy Rich Asians*.

"For films, usually the costume designer already has specific

needs or looks for different scenes," he adds.

Working on the evening gowns for pageants afforded him freedom to design what he wants.

"I just came up with two or three sketches. Then the organisation chose whichever one they thought is more suitable," Ong says.

Contemporary fashion to the fore

Syomirizwa Gupta believes beauty pageants are changing to remain relevant.

The fashion designer says that back all the way to the 1940s (the decade when pageantry rose to worldwide popularity), it was about looking very classic – the black-tie kind of style. To him, the fashion seen on stage is now more contemporary.

"At one point, a lot of designers were still going the more traditional route – not in the aspect of heritage and culture, but fashion-wise. For example, national costumes that looked like wearable garments," Syomirizwa explains.

"National costumes currently play on pop culture instead. So you can get inspiration from famous iconography like a national car or even superheroes."

Syomirizwa designed the national costume for Malaysia's 2013 Miss Universe. His creation comprise a pair of pants, an exaggerated sampin and a shirt top.

"I wanted to elevate the look.



The past decade or so saw designers coming up with national costumes that play on theatrics. Ong's in 2020 was inspired by traditional Malay kampung houses that dot the landscape in villages across Malaysia. – CARVEN ONG

Something contemporary but still spectacular," he says.

"At one point, designers around the world were going the dress route for national costume, so I wanted something different. I thought that the pageant already had an evening gown segment, so why come up with something similar?"

Alia Bastamam, who designed the evening gown that same year, recalls how she felt worried whether her aesthetic would be too clean or elegant for the stage.

"There is a certain impact in designing that a designer needs to achieve," she shares.

"But I guess the most impor-

tant thing is the person you're dressing, she needs to love and 'feel' the dress – as she's the one walking on stage."

Alia explains that creating a fashion collection is slightly different from designing for the pageant stage.

A designer has to consider elements like commercial viability, costing and retail price when it comes to clothes that are sold in the boutique.

"Pageant dressing, on the other hand, comes with its own set of challenges – for example, all the moving parts to a beauty queen outfit that would truly make it eye-catching," she concludes.



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Beauties to behold

SOME of the national costumes worn by Malaysia's beauty queen are certainly eye-catching enough.

Whether you like the designs or not, you have to admit that they work to create a spectacle on stage. Each one is able to

wow, or create conversations.

From one that allowed for a quick outfit change on stage to interesting creations based on national iconography, here's a roundup of the more recent Miss Universe Malaysia national costumes.

Designer duo Rizman Ruzaini created a futuristic national costume inspired by the iconic Twin Towers for Miss Universe Malaysia 2016 Kiran Jassal. — ONG SOON HIN/ The Star



Miss Universe Malaysia 2022 Lesley Cheam donned a national costume by Hatta Dolmat inspired by Mount Kinabalu. The eco-friendly design was made using recycled plastic waste. — Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation



Miss Universe Malaysia 2020 Francisca Luhong James wore a national costume by Carven Ong. On stage, she stepped into the 45kg construct and emerged to show off a second outfit. — Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation



Miss Universe Malaysia 2018 Jane Teoh was seen in a national costume designed by Salleh Hamid. It is inspired by a traditional Malay boat. — Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation



(Above) The national costume by Brian Khoo for Miss Universe Malaysia 2017 Samantha Katie James represented everyone's favourite dish, the nasi lemak. — SSKANESAN/The Star

(Left) Miss Universe Malaysia 2019 Shweta Sekhon represented the country in an extremely colourful national costume by Carven Ong. It paid tribute to the rich cultural influences from Malay, Chinese and Peranakan communities. — Miss Universe Malaysia Organisation



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