

# Behind *the* sash

Last year Miss Universe's judges were all female. Miss World has done away with the swimsuit round. But has anything else really changed in the world of beauty pageants? **SALMA HAIDRANI** entered to find out >

*Photographs* BEN RIGGOTT







Salma Haidrani practises her best “ecstatic winner” face

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DRESS, TOPSHOP; EARRINGS AND NECKLACE, NEW LOOK; ROSES, FLOWERBOX.COM. THIS SPREAD: DRESS, AIDAN MATTOX AT HARVEY NICHOLS; TIARA, STYLIST'S OWN

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y ankles feel close to buckling. They're strapped into five-inch, diamante-encrusted heels, and are barely visible underneath my floor-length sequin dress. I'm hovering at the top of a set of stairs, leading to a stage. I feel as though I'm surrounded by butterflies; a cluster of women resplendent in coordinating, shimmering jewel tones, their delicate bodies quivering as they await their turn. One of them wrings her hands and cricks her neck to the left, and then to the right. But they must keep waiting. Until I've had my turn. A microphone is thrust into my hand. I place my other on my hip, take a shaky step out into the spotlight. I am here to win Miss World.

Three months previously, my parents were staring at me, goggle-eyed over a Sunday roast, their forks suspended in mid-air. “But, but... you have a degree,” spluttered my mum. I'd just broken the news to them that I have been accepted to compete in the Miss London heats, the first step (on a long road) to becoming Miss World (prize money: \$100,000). It could be, I tell them, life-changing. But they remain unconvinced. I can't blame them. Becoming a beauty queen is no longer the lofty, aspirational career choice it was in the '60s. Back then pageants were televised to millions and made instant celebrities out of the women who entered them, offering many a chance to escape their quiet hometowns. Then, slowly, they slipped out of fashion. There were, of course, the protests (at Miss World 1970, held in the Royal Albert Hall, the Women's Liberation Movement chucked flour bombs at those entering), but also, as is the way of many things that grip the nation, we simply got a bit bored. Unlike in China and South America (where they're still huge events), ask any twentysomething in the UK and they'd struggle to name a single beauty queen. The

competitions haven't been televised on the main channels since 2001.

Yet, recently, there's been a bit of a buzz around pageants again. Last year, 20,000 women signed up to enter Miss England – the highest number of applications received since the '80s. Why? Well, the contests, have, they say, changed. They're trying to appeal to smart, forward-thinking women, like you and I. Organisers say the “empowered” women who compete should see pageants as a platform to advance their careers or highlight philanthropic causes close to their hearts. Take Carina Tyrrell,

“There's a buzz around pageants again”

Miss England 2014, a doctor, who used her reign to raise awareness of the prevention of infectious diseases. Or law student Sara Iftekhara, who last year became the first Muslim woman to compete for Miss England wearing a hijab. Even Miss World has ditched the infamous bikini round (which included reading out each contestant's “vital statistics” on stage). “Beauty comes from within,” says Angie Beasley, Miss England's national director, who I've chased down for an interview. “We look for an all-rounder and we don't have a size requirement.” She also confirms less able-bodied participants are welcome and references one

competitor in a wheelchair. But is this just a hastily applied plaster, shoved on in order to remain relevant in modern times? There was only one way to find out.

### THE EASY ROUTE?

If you want to add “beauty queen” to your CV there are several ways to go about it. The ultimate goal for any circuit pro is to compete in a top-tier pageant, such as Miss World (where over 100 countries choose just one woman to represent them in battle). Before reaching that point, however, there are many more titles to be won – at both local and mid-tier levels, with most wannabe beauty queens repeatedly entering a mix of them. The biggest crown up for grabs in the UK is, arguably, Miss England, which leads to the month-long Miss World competition. Before attempting to win it, you must first compete in regional qualifying heats (women can enter any, regardless of whether or not they're from that particular area). Next up: the semi-finals. Conquer those and you're off to the Miss England final. Complicated, right? I've nabbed myself a spot at the Miss London heat, where there are three catwalk-led rounds: Little Black Dress (self-explanatory), Eco (something old, borrowed or recycled – I choose >



a pink mermaid dress of my mum's from the '80s), and Evening Dress (I have one shipped from Dubai). There's not much guidance in the email I receive two weeks after applying, telling me I've made it through to the heat, but I commit to a thorough grooming regime including false nails, eyelashes and a full-body wax. My bank balance feels the hit of a couple of hundred pounds, but Zoiey Smale, 29, a former Miss England competitor and Miss Oxfordshire winner, says I've got off lightly. "During my decade of competing, I regularly met women who spent thousands – one told me her competition evening dress cost more than her wedding dress." Many wannabe beauty queens are increasingly opting for "tweakments" too, such as fillers, permanent make-up and teeth whitening, alongside extreme dieting. "Some survived on meal-replacement shakes," says Zoiey. The cost of entering depends on the scale of the pageant, too. There's no fee for Miss England, but for top-tier competitions, like Miss Universe, each hopeful is expected to shell out \$3,000 (or find a sponsor to do so for her).

During the underarm wax, I grit my teeth and tell myself it's worth it. I have to come top in at least one round or do well in most to make it through to the next stage. Overall, Miss England has 12 rounds you can be graded on, ranging from a fitness contest to Miss Beautiful Hair. There's also a charity fundraising round (Beauty With A Purpose) and general-knowledge demonstrations (Beautiful Mind). If I want to fast-track my way to Miss England, skipping the heats, there are a couple of ways of doing so: I could hustle hard to come out on top in Beauty With A Purpose (my fellow competitors throw themselves into this with varying degrees of success

– one did a bungee jump, skydive and three half-marathons, raising almost £20,000, another struggled, scraping together £600 by running raffles), or I could try my luck at Miss Popularity. This is where "fans" – read: friends and family – vote for me via text or on social media. I give it a go, but with a smaller Instagram following than most, I can't muster the votes. Off to the heats I go.

## SHOW TIME

The spring sunlight glitters as I stroll briskly from the Tube station to a nightclub in east London, where the heats are being held. Below ground, my eyes struggle to adjust to the gloom. The hum of Red Bull penetrates my nostrils. Weaving my way through rogue stilettos strewn haphazardly across the floor, I join my fellow competitors "backstage": a cramped room, where everyone is chatting between racks of sparkly dresses. The vibe is one of camaraderie, united over grumbles that there are no mirrors provided. One particularly distressed contestant

calls her parents, who then drive over with a full-length one. I make do with plastering on my make-up in a grotty toilet with subpar lighting. Amid the small talk, a whisper travels through the group of 18 competing today that there's a model scout in the audience. Zoiey tells me

"Smile... you'll lose points for frowning"

many women take part in the hope of segueing into an acting, reality TV or presenting career. "Media companies like girls who've competed – whenever I watch *Big Brother* or *Love Island*, it's like 'Who will I recognise from pageants on this series then?'" Reality television needs instantly recognisable 'characters' and the stereotypical beauty queen is an easy win." But others have different motivations. Yoana Wong, 24,

a fashion-PR assistant, explains she's here because she wants to challenge stereotypes. "The public perception of Asian women is that we're submissive and don't speak out. I'd like to encourage others to step out of their comfort zone," she says, strapping on a shimmering heel. Chloe Shannon Brookes, 20, an hourglass redhead who has already been crowned Miss Grantham, says, "I hate my appearance and wanted to prove to myself that I can look as good as the other girls, who are often smaller sizes. I'm a size 14." Some of the Miss London competitors are curvy, but no one is notably plus size.

As I watch from the darkness off-stage, the message "All bodies are beautiful" doesn't appear to have reached the judges. When one competitor, who's slightly curvier than the others, parades down the catwalk in a figure-hugging dress, the room falls silent. This could just be my imagination – Angie Beasley insists sizes don't come into play, and that they've previously had a size-16 contestant finish second – but Zoiey tells me that in her experience of international pageants, she'd often see the curvier contestants positioned at the back of the stage. A size 10 herself, Zoiey says she was once instructed to lose weight by the organisers of an international pageant: "They offered me a fasting diet plan that advised only drinking water and maple syrup. While I do have happy memories of pageants and learned great hustling skills from them, I was also raised to be true to myself. I never wanted to change to fit someone else's criteria, so I handed back my Miss UK crown." The organisers have since said this was a "gentle recommendation" that was not compulsory.

Now that the rehearsals are over, the real show is underway. When my name is called, I totter out sporting a cartoonish grin to join the others already on stage. My black dress does the job, but I'm put to shame in the



Salma entered the Miss London heats

eco round, with its Plastic Ocean theme. Most have designed their own outfits – one is fashioned from bin liners and plastic straws.

No matter how much effort you put into your outfit for the judges, though, Amelia Perrin – Miss GB South East 2015 – believes it's the sponsors you really need to impress. She fell into pageants accidentally when an organiser, also a friend, had a late drop-out. After winning her heat, sponsored by a weight-loss brand, Amelia was interviewed and asked, "What did you eat in preparation for this?" "I answered honestly, not aware of the unwritten subtexts, and said, 'I had a kebab for dinner.' They cut the interview."

It's a sentiment that Zoiey echoes. "During international competitions, we'd have incredible three-course dinners, all of which the rich older businessmen who'd sponsored the pageant also attended. We were basically all treated like escorts," she explains. "I never experienced sexual harassment myself, but it'd be naive to think it doesn't happen." Sadly, Jaime Yvonne VandenBerg, Miss Earth Canada 2018, does have first-hand experience. She tells me she left the month-long Miss Earth finals in the Philippines when one of the sponsors obtained her telephone number and called persistently. "He would say things like, 'What's your room number? I can come over and tell you how to win the competition.' It was so degrading and unnecessary." When, as she'd been advised to do, Jaime reported him to the organisers, she says she was met with a wall of silence. The organisers say she told no one and that several policewomen were deployed to keep contestants safe. But eventually, Jaime took matters into her own hands and posted on Instagram about her experiences, sparking a media furor, before quitting the competition. >



## ALMOST FAMOUS

Waiting to hear if I've been placed is as tense as election results night. Some women visibly tremble as they silently pray for their name to be called. Mine is not. The girls whose names are can now move on to the rest of the competition, which includes a "Beach Beauty" photoshoot. This is non-compulsory, but Beasley says almost all of the girls choose to participate and love the chance to show off their hard work. They feel it's about body confidence. "If it was like how it was in the '80s, when I competed, it would be degrading," says Beasley. "This way, there's no parading around or any mention of measurements."

The rules also state that women who partake in beauty pageants must be unmarried, childless and 26 years old or under. "Miss World travels the globe during her year," says Angie. "How can she care for a child if she's doing this? Miss World doesn't want to break up families – it's a very demanding role with lots of last-minute commitments." But in the age of the digital nomad, this justification falls flat.

Despite pageants making some changes to remain relevant, they haven't really moved on all that much. But society has. Once, pageants might have been one of the few places you could view beautiful women in bikinis or see their aptitude for making dresses from carrier bags – we now have *Love Island* and YouTube to fill the void. Beauty pageants were once a stepping stone to fame: now it's possible to upload a few sultry bikini snaps to Instagram and reap the same rewards as a hard-won modelling contract or endorsement deal. In contrast to Miss England's 20,000 applications, last year *Love Island* reportedly received 150,000 (that's more than Oxford and Cambridge universities combined). It seems the superficiality by which we judge



ourselves and others might have remained the same – but the metrics have tipped entirely.

Months later, I see that Chiara King, who was crowned Miss London 2018, has removed all mention of the competition from her Instagram biography. She says she has done so in order to pursue a music career. I leave my own sparkly dresses behind when I move into a new flat. I have a feeling I won't be needing them. ♦



### BEHIND THE SCENES

#### Salma Haidrani

"I saw so many impressive hustles during my time as a beauty queen. To win the Miss Popularity contest, one of my fellow competitors had a friend stopping strangers on the street to vote for her. She got 900 votes that way. And in the eco round, Miss Cotswolds 2018 made her dress entirely from plastic spoons. No matter what you think of these women, they hustle as hard as any businesswoman."