

PAGEANT: THE BEAUTY CONTEST

During the 1970s, my family would sit religiously in front of the television to view the annual glittering spectacle that was Miss Great Britain and, later in each year, Miss World. Chairman and Master of Ceremonies Eric Morley's stilted presentation would result in furious discourse from everyone watching. At that time, the televised beauty contest was a popular family show, leading to heated discussions among siblings about subjects such as Miss Sweden's choice of ballgown in the evening-wear section, and whether Miss Italy's views on Third-World famine were sincere. By the late 1970s, the contentious issue had become the beauty contest itself, which was highlighted by a series of public protests. Direct action caused the 'discriminating parade' to disappear from mainstream TV for a while. However, an enduring fascination kept the industry buoyant and, by the 1990s, the Miss World pageant was reaching a global television audience of two-and-a-half billion, proving that politically incorrect 'sexploitation' is still very popular.

People watch beauty contests for different reasons, but the contestants all have one thing in common – a desire to win. The lure of fame, and perhaps of a small fortune, at least in product-sponsorship terms, means big business for the organizers. The 80 Miss Illinois USA contestants currently pay \$1,000 each for the privilege of participating. Most of them are never heard of again, unless they win the coveted Miss Universe title. The struggle for the crown can be tough. Pageant studies the tears and the tribulations, the fights and the falls from grace, as well as the successes and the triumphs.

Nudity is the new black

At the final heat of the first Miss Nude UK contest, the audience seem more nervous than the 14 contestants waiting patiently backstage. In the cigarette-smoke-filled dressing room of London's Spearmint Rhino Gentlemen's Club, the Miss Nude UK contestants mingle with the club hostesses and prepare themselves for the evening ahead. Wearing only G-strings, they are putting the finishing touches to make-up, hair, body shine and body glitter.

The event is being filmed, so the faux leopard-skin carpet of the club is covered with cables, held down with black electrical tape, like dozens of flattened snakes. Paul Stead, the television production company's executive producer, is remotely wired for sound. His unenviable task is to keep everyone in check, both on and off stage: 'Quiet, please. QUIET! We are filming the lovely girls this evening so if you, the audience, don't want to be seen by your loved ones at home, please keep out of the way. We cannot be held responsible if you are "caught" on camera.' There are some women, but the audience consists mainly of men, and the atmosphere is heavy with testosterone. They look nervous, and many slouch in their plush velveteen seats, as though to lose themselves in the surroundings. In contrast, the naked contestants backstage are excited, amused and very confident.

The Miss Nude UK 2001 competition is the first of its kind in Britain. Naked beauty contests have been running in the United States for some time. The Ponderosa Sunclub in Indiana has been home to the Nudes-A-Poppin pageant for over 30 years and is one of the largest nude parades of silicon-enhanced young women, who test the elasticity of human skin to its limits. The promotional literature invites you to '...grab your cameras and join in, as the girls and guys compete in the following contests: Miss Nude Showstopper, Mr Nude Go-Go, Nude Couples Dancing and Miss Nude Rising Star'. Saira Karim, Managing Director of Miss Nude UK, first saw similar contests in Manhattan and Las Vegas: 'What surprised me was the enormous amount of respect the women were given as they performed. I thought I could bring the concept over to the UK. It's a social experiment, if you like, and contrary to what many may think, there's nothing unsavoury or sleazy about it.' Karim wants to promote a positive image of women and increase women's power in the glamour industry. She believes that competitions of this sort may have to be re-evaluated by feminists. She maintains that the real liberation comes from the fact that women will be able to benefit from some of the revenue that is directly generated by the competition. In a powerful demonstration of sisterhood Saira Karim intends to donate some of the profits from the competition to women's charities and female concerns. Access is an issue too – as well as this evening's audience participation, Miss Nude UK has a fully interactive website.

Unsurprisingly, the event and its organizers have had plenty of criticism. Saira Karim has been dubbed the Anti-Christ. Her religion and her sex has caused consternation – how could a Muslim woman be in charge of what is essentially adult entertainment? ‘There’s nothing I am doing that is in any way devaluing my religious background. One thing I’ve been taught as a Muslim is tolerance. I think that whatever your religious background, you shouldn’t be prevented from doing something that’s commercially enterprising.’ Saira Karim and her fellow managing director and brother Imran were both solicitors before they embarked on their new career. The other director is Nick Reynolds, sculptor and musician. Nick’s father, great train robber Bruce Reynolds, relaxes on a banquette to the right of the stage, and on the opposite side is one of his one-time fellow inmates, Paddy Hill of the Birmingham Six, who suggests that ‘The puritans will have a lot to say about this.’

The entertainment agenda for the evening starts with an individual contestant parade, each in G-string and standard issue 6-inch (15.2cm), high-heeled platform shoes, moulded from clear perspex. As the last of the 14 contestants leaves the stage to ‘change’ we are expertly entertained by one of the club’s pole-dancers. Meanwhile, the judges discuss the first round and award marks on their adjudication forms. The only woman among the six judges is looking for ‘poise and personality – but I will be deducting points for silicon implants’.

Next is the fully nude parade. Again the women appear individually, this time clad only in the high heels and waving large Japanese fans, revealing their lithe, shiny bodies. Pubic hair seems to be considered clothing and has been removed and replaced, in some cases, with stud jewellery. The final round tests the steady hand and steady voice of the compère, as he poses the simplest of questions. The ‘What is your favourite hobby?’ question receives various replies. ‘Riding. I’ll ride anything, fast and furious,’ Dionne answers. ‘They’re always happy,’ she adds. Rosie is even more suggestive: ‘I will get arrested if I tell you what my hobbies are.’ Other hobbies are not so rude – kick-boxing, shopping and bungee jumping. Eventually, after three hours of adjudication, the winner is announced – Janine-May Tinsley, 21 years old, from Preston, Lancashire, whose hobbies include sky diving. Ms Tinsley is shocked at her victory: ‘I still can’t believe I have won such a prestigious competition.’ She will receive a cheque for £10,000.

When I first heard about Miss Nude UK, I somewhat naively conjured up an image of a parade of homespun beauties, who were members of the British Naturist Association. In reality, despite Saira Karim’s support of female empowerment and her emphasis on artistry and self-expression, the Miss Nude UK event looks remarkably like a lap-dancing competition. However, she is right about empowerment – what really comes across is that the naked contestants are the ones in charge, and are probably the people having the most fun.

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