

Among the beautiful people

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The politics may be deadly but in Venezuela gorgeousness is a patriotic duty. Nicholas Griffin meets the 'Misses' and the men who remake them

Last month I travelled to Caracas, to act as a judge in the Miss Venezuela competition. With 80 per cent of the population watching the pageant on television, Miss Venezuela commands a much greater audience share than any FA Cup Final. In international beauty competition, the country is dominant, having won four Miss Universes, five Miss Worlds and three Miss International titles in the past 24 years.

It is said that Venezuela has two great exports: oil and beauty. The former accounts for more than 90 per cent of GDP, but despite this source of wealth half the populace lives in poverty, a legacy of poor government spanning generations. Even with the oil millions at its disposal, the current Chavez administration persists in blaming its failings on private enterprise and imperialism as it tries to force an unwilling nation towards Cuban-style communism.

Beauty, on the other hand, is much more accessible to the average Venezuelan. Whether you travel on the subway or walk the finest shopping streets, you will find men and women who care deeply about how they look. It is estimated that 20 per cent of average household income is spent on beauty products and enhancements. With such interest, it is little wonder that winning the Miss Venezuela title is considered a genuine achievement. As a result, competitors in the pageant come from all walks of life, although the 20 entrants who make the final cut are invariably university students. Individual success is often parlayed into successful careers in television, film or politics.

On the Monday before the competition, I join the 11 other judges in a room to interview the women individually. Questions vary from simple inquiries regarding personal tastes and hopes to high-end economics: "Do you think Venezuela would be better off as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement?" Only two trip up on the easiest of questions. One declares that she wants to climb Everest, but insists that it is in Europe. Another says that she loves the films of Hitchcock. Which ones? *The*

Sixth Sense. Silence from the judges. But most talk fluently about their studies in journalism, medicine and engineering. When the contestants re-enter the office together for a final assessment before the grand show, they are in swimsuits and heels, with hair not far from the ceiling. They stand, breasts jutting forward, putting the judges quite literally in the shade.

Renny Yagosesky, the author of a series of bestselling self-help books, is responsible for the high degree of confidence and presentation we have witnessed. He teaches the Miss Venezuela finalists public speaking and self esteem. "In this country," he says, "beauty is power." He says that polls conducted by the MacLellan Group, the Los Angeles-based international business advisory organisation, show that Venezuela is a country highly orientated towards power but orientated against achievement. "That's why people are most attracted to beauty or politics."

Usually the Miss Venezuela pageant takes place in Caracas's equivalent of the Albert Hall, but this year, because of punitive government currency controls, it was staged in a television studio. Such cutbacks are typical of Venezuela in 2003. Private industry, from one-man newsstands to conglomerates, has taken a beating under the rule of President Hugo Chavez. Everywhere there is tension and the expectation that soon there will be few areas of life that the Castro-inspired leader will not seek to control.

The stage is an elaborate garden of giant golden roses, yet Miss Venezuela is unlike any other pageant. The 20 "Misses", as they are known, have trained for six months in elocution and deportment, and have also learnt to dance and sing. The event is closer to a Broadway show or old-fashioned spectacular, not surprising when you learn that its producer, Joaquin Riviera, is a Cuban who was responsible for the pre-Castro extravaganzas at the Tropicana nightclub in Havana.

"I used the Misses as an excuse for a huge musical production," Riviera says. In 25 years of themed productions, Miss Venezuelas have shared the stage with lions, tigers, elephants and giraffes. But the success of the pageant is generally considered to lie in one man's hands. Osmel Sousa has controlled the Miss Venezuela Organisation for more than 30 years. His "Academy", a strange palace with zebra-skin sofas, is to be found on top of a hill overlooking the capital. The room he works from is decorated with numerous crowns won by his queens and a dozen gold-plated mirrors hung at offsetting angles. Sousa works with Moises Kaswan, a cosmetic dentist who refers to himself as a "Smile Architect", and Dr Eduardo Krulig, the country's most famous cosmetic surgeon.

About 1,500 women register each year in the hope of being accepted to study in Sousa's Academy. When they enter the academy, they stand before his team for individual assessment.

“Nature is not perfect,” Sousa says. “It’s perfect for just a few, and if there is someone who can correct minor mistakes, why not do it?” Krulig is more direct: “We are judging beauty, not nature. Marble may be beautiful, but it’s the sculpture that you admire.”

Many of the women admit that part of the attraction of the academy is in having their minor physical defects taken care of free of charge. The willingness to subject themselves to cosmetic surgery raises few eyebrows. “It is all preparation,” Sousa explains. “If you are well prepared, you have a better chance to win.” Is there one thing you look for, I ask. Sousa paraphrases the old basketball axiom: “You can’t teach height.” Most of the contestants are little short of 6ft (1.8m) tall.

On the night of the pageant the atmosphere, even in the TV studio, is tense. The judges sit in formal wear above the stage. On my left is a former Miss Venezuela; on my right, Pilin Leon, a former Miss Universe. When introduced, she receives a particular cheer. The first oil tanker to join the general strike against the Government in 2003 was named after her. As soon as it docked, she led the sailors on a march against the Government. Chavez responded by changing the name of every ship in the fleet, which, in typical Venezuelan fashion, had been named after their country’s beauty queens.

Tonight, however, politics appears to be forgotten, and Leon is happy to wave to the cameras. But just as the last advertisement rolls and the lights go up for the introduction of the Misses, the images on the large studio screens jiggle and up pops Chavez’s face. He has interrupted the programme to capture the audience of the largest show of the year for himself. What follows is an hour on the glory of his revolution. All sit patiently, waiting for the President to disappear.

Finally, his broadcast is complete and the night’s entertainment turns to salsa and dancing, swimsuits and smiles, and ends with the announcement of an 18-year-old blonde engineering student, Ana Karina Anez, as the latest symbol of the great Venezuelan export of beauty.

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