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Discovering Malaysia's Miss Right

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TIME passes, which is really rather decent of it. It was much for the best, for instance, that each of the 20 women standing in front of me in swimsuits that afternoon was young enough to be my daughter.

I believe this was the only appropriate male mindset to bring to the judging panel for Miss Malaysia/World 2002. (Although I must not presume to speak for Alan Lim of DDB Public Relations, franchisor representative and the only other bloke on the panel.)

Alan and I left it to our three women colleagues - Rosie Hong of Rapp Collins marketing, fashion designer Tom Abang Saufi and former Miss Malaysia Betty Anne Brohier-Nield - to bitch about the swimsuits. (Which were, reportedly, unflattering to a woman's eye.)

Dads of Malaysia, although I have never joined your brave fraternity, I presumed this time to sit there on your behalf. Your girls have done you proud, Sires. I wish particularly to mention Serene Choong Choy Yean of Johor, who was the only contestant to cry at her prejudging interview.

Serene is second of four siblings. One of her brothers is deafmute, another autistic. When we asked her, innocuously enough, to reflect on her own beauty, she started talking about them. "I don't know why I'm normal," she said, and burst into tears.

We were there to select the singular young woman who would best represent Malaysia at the Miss World pageant to be held in Abuja, Nigeria in November, from among the top 20 of the 300 or so pretty girls nationwide who had presented themselves for consideration at State-level contests this past year.

Now, it might be possible to design a mythical uber-Miss Malaysia in the imagination. Some hypothetical vision containing all our genetics would be undoubtedly gorgeous, and if she spoke all our languages she would win everything in the world.

Serene Choong, whose mother is Indian and father Chinese, knows Malay, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, the sign-language she uses to speak with her brother, and Tamil, in which she once fluently admonished a muttalpayyan Eveteaser. We adored Serene, but she didn't make the final eight.

Let's face it, beauty is a business. Miss Malaysia/World has made RM5 million for local charities since 1986, under its present franchise holder. (This year, the beneficiary is the National Autism Society of Malaysia, so Serene's helped her brother anyway.) As Miss Selangor Dennapa Ung Seet Yeeng matter-of-factly said on the "purpose" of beauty: "Beauty can sell things."

Denappa did make the final eight; indeed, the final four. But she didn't emerge as third runner-up for that comment, nor for stating that the person she would most like to be is Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. She did well because she had an aggressive, confident personality to go with her stunning Thai-Chinese genetics.

She didn't do better because, as far as this judge was concerned, she shouldn't have told us her dream in life was to emigrate.

Miss Malaysia rarely has a chance to win the Miss World crown. (Not even by seeking asylum.) Our country is literally divided over the pageant, which offends many - not all of them Malays or Muslims. Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu forbid beauty contests.

The pageant has therefore curtsied away from the spotlight over the

years. The last Malay contestant entered in 1996, and didn't distinguish herself. And since the tawdry "Miss Petite" scandal the following year, in which three Malay contestants ended up arrested, handcuffed and prosecuted for lewdness, beauty contests have retreated strictly to the non-Malay sectors of our society.

But Miss Malaysia/World is still the doyenne of them all, held uninterrupted since 1961 and still unearthing beauties such as this year's Miss Johor, Pamela Ramachandran, and Miss Sarawak, May Miku of Bintulu - a celestially lovely Kayan princess in blood and bone.

Some lament that not having Malay involvement halves the national beauty resource. It is an acceptable sacrifice, in my judicious opinion. (Besides, we have Puteri Umno.)

Although Miss Malaysia is no longer able to reflect the totality of her country in herself, she must nonetheless be the sort of young woman any and all Malaysians would be pleased to see representing us internationally.

At the Miss World finals, Miss Malaysia will not be among those most eagerly sought by the world's cameras. She will find this a relief in some ways, but she will also find much more scope in being naturally gregarious, personable and articulate. (And nowhere more so than in Abuja, Nigeria, this year.)

The judges' relief was palpable, then, when it emerged that the top three women we had chosen would all have done us equally proud in that respect.

Second runner-up Michelle Hon Lai Kuen, 22, of Kuala Lumpur was, moreover, dimple-smiled and fawn-graceful.

First runner-up Audrey Chong, 18, our proudly Sino-Kadazan Miss Sabah, was also prettily dimpled, but hers came from being bitten in the face by a dog at the age of three. And still she grew up with the kind of looks that make people forget to breathe for seconds at a time.

Audrey was my personal favourite, admittedly because she wanted to be a journalist, which meant of course that she was the smartest of the lot and the crowd favourite too.

But, as my fellow judge Betty Brohier murmured after we'd handed in our scoresheets and were free to share our thoughts: "She's only 18. Give her a year or two."

So this year's Miss Malaysia, by a split decision but without doubt (and as I'd predicted to the guys in the car pool) is Miss Penang, Mabel Ng Chin Mei.

At 24, Mabel's the managing director of three companies employing a total of 70 people in skills training, cosmetics, and beverage distribution, whose "greatest satisfaction" comes "when you're able to manage everything, create a good system and retain staff".

And she looks like a swan-necked angel.

Mabel wins RM20,000 and a cornucopia of stuff. It's less than some previous Miss Malaysias received, but still a fair statement of what's expected of her in the year ahead. It won't be an entirely pretty story, and she may end up, like last year's Miss Malaysia Sasha Tan, indisposed to be present to crown her successor. (Which honour fell to Datin Seri Ena Ling instead.)

When our beauty queens succeed, however, they tend to do so with style. Miss Malaysias Lina Teoh, Michelle Yeoh, Arianna Teoh, Samantha Schubert, Erra Fazira, Nancie Foo and Yasmin Yusuff all did well with their "reigns" and thereafter.

And it was my privilege and pleasure to have shared the evening with Miss Malaysia Betty Anne Brohier, who's living proof that we'll only know Mabel Ng is a true beauty when she's a working woman pushing 40 with a

husband and a kid, and still the prettiest girl in town.