

In Bolivia, beauty is queen

Post-feminist America is apologetic about its beauty pageants, but here it's shamelessly about long locks, long legs, and sexy smiles.

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SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA - In the Eastern tropics of Bolivia, beauty contests are so entrenched in the culture that high school students, when raising money, put on pageants here the way American teens hold car washes.

Miss Bolivia Universe 2006, a 22-year-old named Jessica Jordan, regularly gets greeted by politicians – her opinion matters – and never stops signing autographs. The pastime is so popular that even agricultural organizations get into the game each year, crowning a "Sugarcane Queen," "Milk Queen," and "Rice Queen."

While the dramatic snowcapped peaks in the Andes and the bowler hats and petticoats worn by indigenous women are widely known as the exported symbols of Bolivia, here in Santa Cruz, a steamy tropical city that seems far more like Brazil, beauty queens reign. And while in the United States Miss America promoters seek to justify the scholarly aspects of the contest, in Bolivia it's a celebration of long locks, long legs, and captivating smiles.

"Beauty queens are heroes here," says Roque Alvarenga, a makeup artist who coordinates pageants at Gloria Promotions, an agency that also offers beauty classes to local residents. "We don't have well-known artists here. In Santa Cruz, it's the culture of beauty."

On a recent evening at Gloria Promotions, a group of young pupils sat in front of a wall mirror, makeup bags in their laps, and patiently learned the ins and outs of mascara and eyeliner application.

Other days they learn how to choose outfits for events and then how to color-coordinate them. They learn where to put an executive or functionary at a dinner party, and how to speak well. They also practice walking down the runway.

The main difference from the Victorian "finishing schools" of the 19th century is that these kids are in jeans, not petticoats. They don't walk with books balanced on their heads, either – but they do prop sticks across their shoulders as a posture-improving exercise.

On this day, Maybelin Paniagua smudges beige eyeshadow over her lids. "Did I put it on right?" she asks her teacher, Fabiola Orteaga.

"You put it on? You can't even see it," Ms. Orteaga replies. Then the teacher moves on to eyelash curlers. "Press three seconds, and let go."

Many participants, like Jessica Soletto, hope to become beauty queens one day. "Ever since I was born," she says wistfully, her hair pulled back in a bun like a ballerina. "I would love to be Miss Santa Cruz and represent my people."

Others are sent by their mothers. "Many are never going to be models," says Mr. Alvarenga, who has worked at Gloria Promotions for 27 years. "But their mothers send them here to teach them how to eat better, and be more refined or raise their self-esteem."

Maybelin's mother, for one, says she sends her prepubescent daughter after school, so that will she stop slouching, and above all, improve her self-esteem. "With all the hormonal changes, I want her to be sure of herself, to learn posture, and to walk right," says Maybelin Ordonez. "For me, [her] becoming a beauty queen is not what I'm waiting for."

But it's hard not to get sucked into the allure of hair spray and high heels. Outside the class, makeup artists and hairdressers fuss over the aspiring beauty queens in the adjacent salon who are preparing to participate in the annual Miss Santa Cruz pageant on April 12.

They are greeted by Ms. Jordan, Miss Bolivia Universe 2006. These girls don't need to learn how to put on makeup – someone will do it for them. They will also have access to psychologists, plastic surgeons, dentists, and if needed.

For all of Jordan's fans, she also knows she has critics. But she brushes off those feminists who say it's all vanity, all pointless, objectifying. For starters, beauty contestants read authors – such as Brazil's bestselling Paulo Coelho. They carry out social projects: right now Jordan is helping raise money for flood victims in Bolivia. It's obvious that she has been well prepped to field questions, as she pauses and answers as if on stage: "As a beauty queen you are really in touch with people," she says, "and they support you and admire you."

For all the smiles, the pageants do underscore the sadder reality of racial divisions in a country that is split geographically between the more affluent east and the west, inhabited mostly by indigenous groups. In 2004, Miss Bolivia drew controversy for saying that Bolivia was only known as an indigenous country: "I'm from the other side of the country," she said publicly. "We are tall, and we are white people, and we know English."

Perhaps not the most politically correct statement, but Alvarenga defends it. "She spoke the truth," he says. "Pageants can help export Bolivia tourism to the world, which thinks we are only one type of person, that we are only indigenous."

If Santa Cruz's pageants could electrify a racial debate, they are more innocuous when it comes to body image, unlike their sister-activity modeling, the recent punching bag in the renewed debate over anorexia. A "Miss" has to strive for perfection, says Tania Rocabado, who helps candidates prepare their answers for judges' questions, "and that means having meat," she says, sticking out a hip for emphasis.

But lest one think this school is a conservative throwback, there is a male in the class – a 20-year-old model who wants to "get the edge" over his competitors. Gabriel Flores says the first makeup class he attended was such a blow to his pride he nearly walked out, but on a recent day he curled his eyelashes – just like the girls.