



TEARS AND TIARAS

The Miss World pageant, 50 years old this year, was once an event of global importance, but scandals and changing attitudes made it an irrelevance. Philip Watson explores the chequered history of this most British gift to the world

IN 1968, MISS WORLD was a major cultural event. Much like royal weddings and World Cup finals, it brought the country to a standstill. Photographs of the beauties were splashed across the papers and sweepstakes were organised in every office and club. And while streets lay empty and pubs closed for the night, half the people in Britain gathered around televisions to pick their favourites and argue over who was going to win.

It was the hominoid version of the Grand National, with champion thoroughbreds required to hurdle fences both physical and mental. They had to teeter on the staircased stage of the Royal Albert Hall in colourful swimwear and white stilettos. They had to maintain glazed expressions while parading in

Bum rush the show
The swimsuit round of Miss World in 1973

national costumes and evening gowns, with sequined parrots on their heads and exotic fruits on their breasts. Hardest of all, they had to endure Michael Aspel's imaginative line in questioning ("And just what did you eat for breakfast?") and embarrassing penchant for flirtation ("It says here you play piano – do you know 'I'm in the Mood for Love'?").

People loved Miss World's comfortable formula: its tears and tiaras, its vital statistics ("Miss South Africa is 19, 5ft 9in and 36-24-36") and its varnished nail-biting suspense, with the copiously Brylcreemed Eric Morley announcing: "As is customary, I shall announce the results in reverse order."

At its height in 1968, Miss World wowed a television audience of 27.8

million, but just two years later it sustained a blow from which it would never quite recover. Women's Liberationists stormed the stage that night, hurling stink bombs and tomatoes. They carried placards that read "Pageants Hurt All Women" and, more enigmatically, "Jealousy Will Get You Nowhere". Comper Bob Hope was seen scrambling to the wings with a dazed and disbelieving look on his face. Perhaps his pre-PC crack that "It's been quite a cattle market and I've been out there checking calves" hadn't helped matters. But from that moment on, the days of Miss World – and with it Benny Hill, Playboy bunnies and *Carry On* films – were numbered. Britain had discovered sexual politics and things could never be the same again.



I'M MISS WORLD...
Five queens cursed
by the crown

▼ **1970**
MISS GRENADA
 In the year after winning the title, Jennifer Hosten,

below, was kidnapped and held to ransom. In later years, she became ambassador to Canada.



▼ **1980**
MISS GERMANY
 Gabriella Brum, *below*, reigned for just 17 hours, resigning when

it emerged that the 18-year-old had appeared in porn films and was living with their 52-year-old producer.



was vilified as sexist and demeaning in the Seventies, the BBC allowed the baton to pass to Thames Television in 1979. During the Eighties, audience figures began to fall. In 1984 BBC Television Controller Michael Grade dealt Miss World a serious blow when he called it “an anachronism in this age of equality and verging on the offensive”.

Even though audience figures for the 1987 show were still a respectable 12.5 million, Thames announced it was dropping its network broadcasts in 1988. Disenfranchised in the UK, Miss World began to look abroad for support. From 1992 to 1995, the event was staged in Sun City, South Africa; in 1996 it was taken to Bangalore in India, where the pageant met a storm of protest. One man, allegedly chanting anti-Miss World slogans, burned himself to death. More than 1,500 people were arrested outside the Miss World stadium on the night of the final.

“It’s been quite a cattle market and I’ve been out there checking calves,” cracked compere Bob Hope

It started innocently enough. Created 50 years ago by then PR manager Morley as a bikini beauty contest to jazz up the Festival of Britain, the event proved a huge and instant success. “It was something of a shocker,” Morley explained later. “There weren’t any Page Three girls back then and it was very risqué.”

The event was planned as a one-off, and it was only after a US group launched a “Miss Universe” competition the following year that the patriotic Morley

decided to make the pageant annual. Shying away from the adverse publicity sparked by the bikini parades, he promptly banned the use of the two-piece in the 1952 event. The ban stayed in force for several years.

The BBC began broadcasting Miss World in 1959 and 12 million viewers tuned in. In the Sixties, it regularly attracted audiences in excess of 20 million; compères included Terry Wogan and Esther Rantzen. When the pageant

▲ **1974 MISS UK**

Helen Morgan, *above*, was forced to resign four days after winning the contest when it was revealed that she was an unmarried mother.



Miss World 1973, Marjorie Wallace, announced that she wanted to “make love to as many men as possible”. She succeeded

Brought home again, last year Miss World was presented – rather fittingly, it seemed – in the surroundings of the botched and beleaguered Millennium Dome, with Jerry Springer acting as its tongue-in-cheek host. Sky had picked up the broadcasting crumbs first, and Channel 5 had begun to televise the show in 1997. It tried to give Miss World an ironic, postmodern, new-laddish spin, attempting to ape the way that Terry Wogan simultaneously both mocks and celebrates the Eurovision Song Contest. It failed. This year, as the pageant returns to Sun City on 16 November, even Channel 5 has withdrawn.

From my experience of the Miss World circus it is not hard to see why. I attended Miss World 1997 in the Seychelles, having fallen for an invitation that promised “the world’s most beautiful women in the world’s most beautiful islands”.

Sure, I swam with a bevy of Miss World beauties in one of their rare, unguarded moments of relaxation before a final evening rehearsal. At the coronation party, I danced and gossiped with the buxom, coquettish Miss Thailand and flirted woefully with the indecently sexy Miss Bosnia. I loved it when Miss Colombia introduced herself, ingenuously it seemed, with the line: “Hola! I am from the land of coffee.” I enjoyed the cheesy Miss World dance



▲ **1973**
MISS AMERICA
Marjorie Wallace was sacked 104 days into her tenure as Miss World for “failing to maintain a first-class public image”. During

her brief tenure she’d announced that she wanted to “make love to as many men as possible”. She succeeded, having affairs with Tom Jones and George Best.

The Beauty and Best
Top, 1973 winner Marjorie Wallace with George Best – she later gave him “3 out of 10 for performance”. Left, Rosemarie Frankland, Miss World 1961, the UK’s first winner, who recently took her own life



▼ **1984**
MISS AMERICA
 Singer Vanessa Williams was crowned Miss America in 1984, but, shortly before she was due to appear in

the Miss World finals, *Penthouse* published photographs of her out of her designer swimwear, below. She was promptly stripped of her title.



“They should shove Miss World in the archives and forget all about her,” said the UK’s 1961 winner

... routines and the kitsch set, built to “recreate a lush, tropical Garden of Eden”. I didn’t really mind when the camp guard chaperones confiscated my tape after my interview with Miss Lebanon strayed onto such excluded topics as war, Israel and Palestine. Hell, I even, very nearly, after several D-list celebrities had failed to show, stood in as one of the judges.
 But in the end it was all just so tacky and tedious – and perversely asexual.

For all its supposed modernisation (swimsuit sections pre-recorded on the beach, no more vital statistics or national dress, and 33 per cent of the marks given to something called “personality”), for all its global reach (Eric Morley, who died last year aged 82, told me that Miss World had a worldwide audience “approaching 3 billion in 155 countries”), for all its “beauty with a purpose” and claims to have raised £100 million for charity (“We make money on

Hell hath no fury
 ...like a woman exploited. Protests against the beauty pageant that will not die in 1970, top, and 1999, above

beauty and spend it on the ugly face of the world,” said Julia Morley, part-owner of the Miss World business); for all its importance in the developing world, from the countries of Latin America and Africa to the new economies of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, where Miss World is a potent symbol not of exploitation but of sexual and personal empowerment... for all this, Miss World remains a risible irrelevance.
 Time-locked in a long-gone age of austerity and Stepford Wives, Miss World exhibits all the grey, suburban, reactionary and dogmatic attitudes of her time and her creators. Miss World has always been a barometer of sexual politics, of the way that women’s lives have changed enormously over the past 50 years, and the way men’s attitudes to female beauty largely have not. Miss World has been usurped by Page Three, *Baywatch*, supermodels, the *Sunday Sport*, internet porn, plastic surgery, girl power, reality TV, lads’ mags, TV babes – even the Spice Girls. It has had its day.
 Recently, Rosemarie Frankland, Miss World 1961 and the United Kingdom’s first beauty queen to win the title, committed suicide in her Los Angeles apartment. By the time she was found, she had been dead for almost a week. Forty years on, this is hardly the fault of the Miss World Family (as it likes to be known). It is perhaps appropriate, however, that this particular Miss World should have the last word. “They should shove Miss World in the archives,” she once said. “And forget all about her.”