

# Fashion ramp gives Cape seamstresses a glimmer of hope



**INSIDE LABOUR**

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**H** OPE springs eternal in the human breast. So wrote the much-quoted 18th century English poet, Alexander Pope. And, although this has all too often described the futility of chasing after rainbows and never finding a promised pot of gold, hope continues to sustain millions of people in situations that, to the more fortunate, might seem hopeless.

But, even amid drudgery and disappointment, there can be Cinderella moments: times when there is a glimpse of what may be possible: times when even the humblest and most exploited may be able to indulge, however briefly, in the illusion of what a better life might really be.

Carnivals of one kind or other – from New Orleans to Notting Hill, let alone Cape Town – do not qualify as such moments. They have become spectacles of fantasy, opportunities for the down-trodden and oppressed to strut their stuff in often outlandish disguise, masters and icons for a day or more in cities where they are often widely despised. The real masters and official icons are those who line the streets to applaud and who even become involved in the carnival processions and organisation.

Real Cinderella moments tend to contain a social bite, for all their contradictions, because they retain their moorings in reality. At best, they amount to sticking two fingers up at the world of exploiters and oppressors, even if this remains an inside joke, little observed beyond the participants. So it is probably no coincidence that the best example of this emerged in Cape Town in the wake of the 1976 anti-apartheid uprisings.

Since then, Cape Town has annually hosted just such a moment. It belongs to the garment workers of the city, that almost

exclusively female workforce that has cut and sewed the lingerie, shirts, blouses, dresses and suits worn by millions of usually much more affluent men and women.

These are workers who often make clothing they could never afford, but who can still dream of a world where they could – and would – buy and wear such finery.

Today, the greatly diminished numbers of workers in the industry are faced with still more thousands of retrenchments, but hope lingers on. It does so in preparations for the annual Spring Queen pageant, staged by the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu). Amid the clatter of machines in sometimes dusty environments, are workers who dream because they have not denied their ability to do so, or become too scared to dream.

**We are all factory workers. But we will show Cape Town that even ordinary factory workers can be models and queens, even if it is for one night only.**

In the midst of the chill of an unusually cold winter, these workers are planning, designing and sewing, preparing in each of the remaining factories to select their plant's pageant queen, who will go on to walk the Spring Queen fashion ramp, to compete to be the Queen of Queens.

The winner will be acknowledged with a paste tiara and a sash.

The trappings are irrelevant. This will be the main focus for the workers although the pageant, especially in recent years, has become a promotion for local designs and for the faltering "Buy SA" campaign. As such, it is an attempt by Sactwu to position Cape Town as a global fashion capital.

At the grand finale, workers from competing factories are able to model casual wear and there are prizes for "Miss Personality" and "Miss Best Dressed".



Local singers and dancers are also given the opportunity to display their talents.

However, for the workers, the pageant is primarily about claiming their dignity and showing off their potential. "It's the one chance that we, as factory workers, get to shine and feel like queens," a 2007 Spring Queen participant, Bronwyn Asher, told researchers from UCT.

This quote is one that now graces the walls of an exhibition at the UCT Hiddingh campus that highlights the largely unknown history and background of what has been, since the late 1970s, the garment workers' pageant of dreams. The curator of the exhibition, Siona O'Connell, has accurately described it as "Spring Queen – the staging of the glittering proletariat". For throughout, the women identify themselves solely as factory workers, although with dreams of something more, something infinitely better.

This attitude is summed up by Daphne

Jantjies, who walked the Spring Queen ramp seven years ago: "We are all factory workers. But we will show Cape Town that even ordinary factory workers can be models and queens, even if it is for one night only."

The commercial, economic, and all too often political agendas that intrude into the pageant pale into insignificance beside this desire to show that "ordinary factory workers" can be as good as – if not better than – the queens of film and fashion who grace the screens and the covers of glossy magazines, let alone the middle-class fashion plates who parade the works they create.

The pageant is also a bittersweet experience for many younger workers who hoped to escape the clock punching, low status and lowly paid drudgery of factory work. In interviews, O'Connell, who has a fine arts and African studies doctorate from UCT, and her research assistant, Dale Washkansky, discovered a number of

workers who noted: "I have a matric. I shouldn't be in the factory."

Like so much else about the pageant and the exhibition, this comment raises many questions which, say O'Connor and Washkansky, is the aim of the exhibition. And they point out that this could perhaps be "a space where fragments of freedom can be imagined" amid the superficial glitz and glamour of a Cinderella moment.

Many of the former Spring Queens have joined the ranks of the jobless, but they and their employed and often younger sisters continue to look to the pageant as a symbol of both hope and defiance.

It is an attitude summed up by Ayesha Hendricks, who walked the ramp in 2009: "Always believe in your dreams and never give up."

The dreams are simply for a better life, of a world without drudgery and exploitation. And never giving up means working towards achieving this.