



When one Mainer spins a thread, the world wears the dress.

BY JARRETT MELENDEZ

At the 60th Annual Miss USA Pageant held at Planet Hollywood in Las Vegas, no fewer than seven of the 51 (Washington, D.C. is included) stirring evening gowns were presided over by Biddeford's Ashley Lauren Kerr, 28.

How did this stunning transformation come about, if she just signed with Los Angeles dressmaker SCALA USA and launched her international design company ASHLEYlaurenKerr in August, 2011?

"Very quickly," says Kerr. "I was down in Miami for a photo shoot of my first collection, and Jackie Guerrido (Univision's weather forecaster) happened to be there doing a fitting for an award show. She's trying on all these dresses, then she sees one of mine and goes crazy over it. She wore it at *Vanidades Magazine's* Icons of Style Awards show in New York City the next day. Now, about three-quarters of my first collection has been worn to different red-carpet events, including the Latin Grammy Awards," where singer Shaila Durcal wore one of Kerr's designs and was voted by *People Español* as one of the top five dresses at the ceremony.

As for the Miss USA Pageant, "I was the Official Fashion Sponsor for 2009. My best friend, Jessica Rafalowski (Miss Florida 2008), sat next to Donald Trump. When people saw that, there were rumors

Some Like



FROM TOP: COURTESY ASHLEY LAUREN KERR / MODELS: GIO ALMA

It *Haute*

Ashley Lauren Kerr's SCALA 'Jessica' design is named after her best friend, Jessica Rafalowski, Miss Florida USA 2008. \$900.

Mainers will know Kerr from her father's restaurant, Surf 6, on Old Orchard Beach. Also, "my great uncle was Nicholas Danton, Chief Judge of Maine District Court (1974-1981)," says Kerr, "and my dad was a State Legislator from '90 until '98. Currently, he works with Gov. LePage on the bipartisan budget committee."



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but they were quickly squashed. He's very professional, though he doesn't like to shake hands.

"I've attended every pageant since then. This year, we dressed seven contestants and trained six, so it was important for me and my whole team to be there to support the girls."

Kerr understands their challenges, having participated herself in the 2009 Miss Maine USA pageant. "I spent months working out at the gym and training in Puerto Rico, where my dresses were made. There's a lot more to pageants than people think—it's not just walking and wearing pretty dresses. It takes a ton of confidence to get up on stage wearing a bikini in front of thousands of people."

As for her flair for design, it's all grown out of "my passion for fabulous," she laughs. "I love fashion—beautiful pieces crafted out of rich and luxurious fabrics. There's nothing more satisfying to me than seeing a woman enter a room in one of my dresses, looking gorgeous and glowing with confidence. Collaborating with SCALA has opened the door for my designs to be sold to an even broader international market. Their 26 years



of success gives my line instant appeal."

Of course, you can't develop an eye for fashion overnight: "My great aunt was super fabulous," she says. "She'd wear the most amazing fur coats, dresses, and jewelry. She and my mom would take me shopping to upscale boutiques. I always loved that—it was like a fantasy, and that's what it's like for women when they dress up for special occasions, whether it's for weddings, pageants, galas, or big red carpet events. It's a beautiful fantasy."

It takes more than just good fashion sense to succeed in this business. You have to know how to say the right thing at the right time, something at which Kerr is very adept: "Growing up, I saw the covers of *Ocean Drive* and, for me, *Portland* magazine was on the same level. It's the trend-setting magazine for Maine. More than *Vogue* or any other magazine, I dreamed of being on the cover, thinking, 'I made it.'"

You said it, sister.

With her inspirations springing up at show-

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Some Like It Haute (continued from page 55)

rooms in Manhattan and Los Angeles, two local boutiques feature dresses by Kerr-Tavecchia, in Portland, and Simply You, in Saco.

"Ashley's worked incredibly hard on her new line," says Simply You owner Lori Irving. "Anyone who's seen her products or had a chance to try them on is completely floored by their design, shape, fabric, and colors."

Tavecchia's Judith Parker agrees. "[These dresses exceed] the level of quality and style our customers have come to expect from us. Knowing it was created by a fellow graduate of Waynflete gives me an extra degree of satisfaction."

After graduating in 2002, Kerr left Maine to study communications and marketing at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, but "[not] fashion," she says. "I can sew, but I couldn't make a pattern for a dress."

Kerr's fashion industry contacts are surprised to learn she can get there from here, but she's quick to jump to Maine's defense. "Maine doesn't have much of a reputation for being fashionable, but we are," she says.



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Kerr's dress shimmers through the window of Tavecchia on Exchange Street.

"We're true to who we are. That's the most important thing. Even if we wear an old pair of L.L. Bean boots, we have ways of making them fashionable."

Kerr constantly travels for business. "I haven't spent more than a month in any one place for the past three years," she says. Even with an office in Manhattan, Maine is her home base. "I try to make my schedule so I can spend as much summer time here as possible. I've always worked summers at my dad's restaurant, Surf 6, in Old Orchard Beach. That hasn't changed." ■

» For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2012/01/some-like-it-haute-extras.

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