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CROWNING

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ELAINE MERGARD

PRINCESS DIANA MADE THEM LOOK EXQUISITE, PRINCESS BEATRICE HAD A CONTROVERSIAL ONE, AND PRINCESS KATE BROUGHT THEM BACK IN VOGUE. HATS! ELAINE MERGARD HAS MADE ALMOST 5,000 OF THEM IN A MILLINERY CAREER THAT’S SENT HER FROM CATWALKS TO GOVERNMENT HOUSE. TONIA ZEMEK TIPS HER LID TO A WOMAN WHO IS HEAD AND SHOULDERS ABOVE THE REST.

One Melbourne Cup I had the good fortune to be invited to the Emirates Marquee. After an aperitif of French champagne, I dined on trays of fresh lobster and oysters.

Although the food and atmosphere were overwhelmingly exquisite, it was the fashions that left me truly awestruck. I’d never seen so many meticulously groomed women. I found myself wishing we could return to an era when it was *de rigueur* to wear gloves and a hat.

Elaine Mergard was lucky enough to grow up in a period when hats were compulsory attire for church on Sundays and heading into town on weekdays. “It was the ‘60s and everyone wore hats,” she says.

Of course, the real history of hats dates back centuries. Elaine reminds me that in the days of the Renaissance, crowns were the most regal of all headwear. “Hats really came into vogue during the time of Marco Polo and the silk trade,” She explains.

“This is where the word ‘milliner’ originated. One of the cities on the Silk Road was Milan, and because fabric was easily accessible there, people

started making hats. They were called Milaners which of course later became milliners.”

Elaine is more than just a history buff, she’s a professional milliner who made her first hat back in 1964 during her training as a home economics teacher in Brisbane. More than 20 years later, after a move to Beerwah in 1990, she started her own label, Hatrageous Headwear.

By 2003 she had some highly distinguished clientele, including the then Governor of Queensland, Quentin Bryce. “I was called up to Government House and I was absolutely terrified. I’m a bit of a country girl and I was going to visit the Governor!”

Beforehand, she was so nervous she made an appointment to chat with her local MP for the do’s and don’ts of how to behave in an environment fraught with protocol. Elaine need not have worried.

“Her Excellency was very, very gracious,” Elaine reveals. “She was down to earth and showed a real interest in my family. I even received Christmas cards from her!”

Over her five years in office, the Governor commissioned Elaine to make around four to six hats annually. Consequently, Elaine had regular one-on-one appointments with both the Governor and her couture designer.

"I'd take samples and swatches of straws or felts and we'd work through them together. On other occasions I'd visit her couture designer's workroom and I'd get fabric from her to incorporate into the hat."

Speaking of famous hat wearing women, Elaine admits to being a fan of Princess Kate. "She has a beautiful heart-shaped face and she wears a lot of very small hats, in particular cocktail hats, which are like a little button that's covered in fabric. She looks stunning in hats."

I ask Elaine what type of hat suits someone with larger features and a big head (like me)! After a long look at my head she flashes me a cheeky smile and delivers a self-deprecating remark to which I can relate. "With a wide face like mine, if I wear a small hat it looks like a pimple on a pumpkin," she laughs.

"A lot of people say they don't wear hats because they don't suit them but I tell them to just tilt the hat slightly. It gives you height and makes you look more elegant."

Teaching tips has been part of Elaine's life since 1966 when she took up her first millinery mentoring role. In the early '80s she taught at TAFE in Mundubbera. Later, in 1995, she secured a teaching position with the Cooloola Sunshine Institute of Tafe.

In 2010 Elaine developed the Hat Academy, an online resource that teaches millinery via video tutorials. Her students span the globe, taking in Nepal, Dubai, Spain and Nigeria.

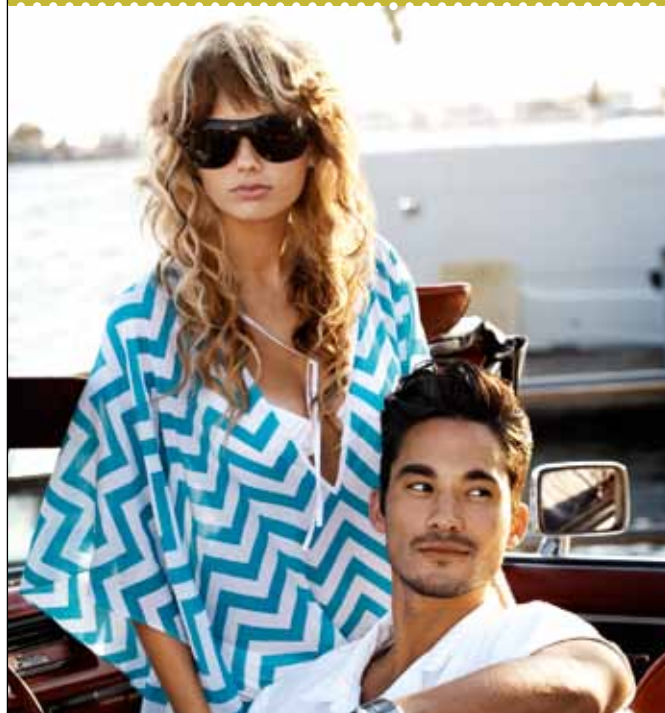
She says prospective milliners need two main skills. "Firstly, you need patience because milliners do a lot of hand work. Secondly, it's important to have an eye for detail because if you're going to make something unique you have to have very specific details."

Elaine has made plenty of unique and detailed headpieces. Possibly her most challenging commission came five years ago when she was asked to create a haute couture piece for Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week. "It was a hat for the catwalk and from edge to edge it measured one metre. Needless to say, I had to hand deliver it!"

When asked about her most cherished creations, Elaine is quick to respond. She has four favourites – her two daughters and two sons. Let's hope she gets a hat for Mother's Day. ■



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