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Project Runway

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Latifa Mohammed al Nuaimi, 16, holds up her design of a dress made out of electrical wiring and light bulbs. She modelled the garment at her fashion class's final show this month.

The Sheikh Zayed Private Academy is tucked behind a big gate on 26th Street in Abu Dhabi, and like many other compounds that populate this neighbourhood, you can't quite determine its purpose from the street without close inspection. Since its founding in 1999, the school, which is owned by the Al Ain International Group and managed by Global Education Management Services, has provided an American-style education to hundreds of Emirati girls, many of whom belong to prominent local families.

It was a bit of a surprise to arrive there on a hot Wednesday morning not long ago, alongside a number of local journalists, school administrators and the entire grade 11 class, for a full-scale press conference.

The occasion was the announcement of the school's Fashion for Charity event, which was set to take place at the academy in early June. Gift bags with press materials lined a coffee table and slick posters bearing the names of the event sponsors hung on the wall.

Just after 11am, Barbara McKenzie, a Canadian who has been the school's principal since 2006, took her place at a big table in a room normally reserved for staff meetings. After a quick introduction, Fatima Mohammed al Qubaisi, the co-president of the student activity council, took centre stage.

Fatima, dressed in a black abaya and shaila, addressed the crowd with ease, apparently unfazed by the presence of so many unfamiliar faces. "The Sheikh Zayed Private Academy has taken the initiative to assist the Special Care Centre in their pursuit to build a new school with all the facilities that their students require." Cameras flashed, but Fatima, utterly confident, spoke without flinching.

Last to speak was Isabelle Le Bon, the head of fund-raising for the Special Care Centre, one of a handful of schools in Abu Dhabi open to expatriate children with disabilities. She was explaining the dire need for funds at the SCC when the school bell went off – another reminder this was not your ordinary press briefing.

At the back of the room, the other girls listened intently – dressed in the school's uniform, a long green skirt with a smart white shirt and shaila – and occasionally exchanged glances that gave away their age – the sort of look that teenagers everywhere share, the kind that suggests some secret that adults will never be privy to. The press conference was over within an hour and classes resumed for the day.

"It is amazing what these girls have done," Le Bon said afterwards.

In March, the girls held a fashion show at Emirates Palace during Abu Dhabi Fashion Week, and their designs were auctioned off afterwards, raising an impressive Dh139,000 (US \$37,844) for the Special Care Centre, which will help the school build a new campus.

The clothes are the fruit of the grade 11 fashion class. The class has been offered for three years and it is wildly popular with the girls. "The best part is the freedom to be creative," Maha Khadem al Mehairi excitedly tells me. Though you wouldn't know it based on the work the girls have recently produced, the class is offered for just a year and none of the girls have any prior experience in fashion design.

In years past, the members of the fashion class have held a single show in the school auditorium to display their work at the end of the year. But this year, the extraordinary turn of events that led to their show at Fashion Week had the girls setting their sights much higher.

When we met for the first time, in the classroom where the girls design, they excitedly talked about the events of the past six months.

"None of the girls last year did a fashion show like the one we had in Emirates palace," Maha said.

"It was a big responsibility. It's not just cutting and drawing and colouring," Mona Ahmed al Qamzi interjected.

"It is more than just the clothes. For the Fashion for Charity show, we had to secure sponsors and design the stage. It was a lot of work and we did it independently," Maha added.

Georgia Kostakis, an energetic young Toronto native with a background in fine arts and design, teaches the class. She meets with her 21 students for an hour three times each week, and it's evident within minutes how eager and excited the girls are about the class.

"It has been an interesting year," Kostakis said. Her classroom is a composite of evidence – sketches, from short skirts to long flowing gowns, are everywhere – and collages, which the girls made at the start of the year to illustrate their "personal style", line a bookcase at the back of the room. They are crammed with pictures cut from glossy magazines of beautiful women such as Kate Moss and Audrey Hepburn.

"I like elegant, girly clothes," said Mona. "But around the house, we wear mostly khandouras."

"Usually when I go out shopping I wear pants and shirts, but with the abaya, of course," Maha said.

The fashion class, as the girls have learnt, is hard work. "We hated the first semester. We thought it was too hard," said Saydh al Suwaidi.

The curriculum is designed to introduce the girls to all aspects of fashion, from the ideas and concepts behind clothing and design to the technical details required. By the end of the year, the girls are expected to understand the basics of fibres and fabrics, original clothing design, the ins and outs of the fashion industry, and illustration. They are also expected to understand how fashion and identity are linked.

In the first term, Kostakis asked the girls to explore the reasons why people choose certain clothes, and they discussed various cultural issues that inform fashion choices: modesty, protection, decoration. In class, the girls explored the significance of different styles of dress, the process by which cultures adopt styles from one another, the role of fashion in ethnic and cultural heritage, and of course, the important role that abayas and shailas play in Emirati society.

"We looked at the effects of clothing on group dynamics," said Kostakis. Pointing to a picture of a woman in a short dress, she continued: "What would the reaction be if someone wore this out to the mall? Or if someone wore this to a wedding? Or if someone wore this on their trip to New York? What kind of statement do we want to make and what reaction do we want to get? Do we want to be accepted by the group, do we want to blend in without being noticed, do we want to make a statement and turn heads?"

Though the girls all wear abayas and shailas in public, the clothes they design in class have included their share of skirts above the knee. "For the last one, we could do anything, because the models were wearing the clothes. We had mini-dresses and shorts," Maha said.

"We are very religious," Mona explained. "When we go out in public, we wear abayas. It is part of our culture to cover up."

The girls have spent a good deal of time this year talking about what fashion is, and they seem to have it pretty well sorted out.

"With fashion there is always stuff that you wouldn't actually wear. What is displayed on the catwalk is not what you are going to wear," Fatima said. "Personally, my parents are flexible with what I wear. There is nothing really prohibiting me. I don't go, oh that's a cute miniskirt, but I can never wear it, because I could wear leggings or jeans underneath."

The tenor of the class changed in the middle of the year when the girls were introduced to Maven Corporate, the firm that founded Abu Dhabi Fashion Week. Last autumn, when the girls heard that the Italian designer Valentino, who is hugely popular among their set, was coming to Abu Dhabi, they told Kostakis they wanted to see his show.

Kostakis contacted Maven, which made arrangements for the girls to attend. But a few months later, Kostakis got a call from the company's chairman, Alice Teeuwen; she wanted to know if the girls would like to participate in fashion week themselves. "It was a big opportunity for us," said Saydh, "even though it freaked us out at first."

At first, they talked about displaying sketches, but when Teeuwen came to the class and saw their work, she had other ideas. She suggested to Kostakis that the girls design an entire collection.

"At first when Alice came we didn't expect what happened to happen," said Maha.

"It was a lot of pressure," said Fatima. "We took fashion in the first semester, and it was a lot of sketching. But then in the second semester, we really learnt that there is so much more to it. We really saw what happens behind the scenes. One garment can take months, it goes through so many changes."

The collection took traditional Emirati clothing and gave it a new twist – men's garments became dresses, household items became mini skirts, a dress was styled from a shaila. The girls' work was showcased at the Emirates Palace alongside that of established designers such as Milia Maroun from Lebanon, and the up-and-coming Emirati designer Aisha Desmal. One of the oldest and most established houses in Italy, Missoni, presented a full collection.

The girls garnered good reviews, with some in the local press calling their designs among the most exciting presentations at the weeklong show. "It was the designs of a group of teenagers aged 15-17 from the Sheikh Zayed Private Academy that was the most impressive," wrote one reporter in Gulf News. "The students of SZPA had the most innovative designs, proving that talent can come from the most unexpected places."

It took the girls about a month and a half to prepare for the show, from the point that they started designing the clothes to the day of the event. "As far as sewing goes, the easy stuff we can do," said Fatima. "Some of the more complicated pieces were sewed by tailors."

The collection showcased a number of unusual and original designs, all inspired by Emirati traditions. "Our culture has strict roles, there are men's roles and there are women's roles," Fatima said. "So we took masculine garments and masculine things and we made them feminine, which isn't something you can do every day. And it worked. No one was expecting us to do all of this. We even surprised ourselves. People did not expect girls between 15 and 17 to do all of this work. They said that one of the highlights of the evening were our outfits."

Maha took a bisht, a long white robe traditionally worn at formal occasions over a man's khandoura, and made it into a loose dress that hung over tight gold pants.

Latifa Mohammed al Nuaimi had three pieces in the show. "Latifa was very creative with her designs," said Fatima. "She took what we used in olden times to cover food and made a skirt out of it." Latifa turned a m'chab'bah, a cone-shaped item made from palm fronds, into a stunning skirt that hung from suspenders made from the straps of a burqa – the metallic mask worn mostly by older Emirati women to cover the eyebrows, mouth and nose.

"Hind's design sold for the most," Fatima said of her classmate Hind Eissa al Fahim. The outfit, which Hind calls "the blue butterfly", was inspired by an old design called "fasashah", or butterfly, which is worn to this day by women around the house. The outfit has two parts – a sheer blue robe with Swarovski crystals fixed to it that hangs loosely over a tight black dress, creating a stunning effect. It was auctioned for Dh19,000.

"They really managed to make a statement about who they are and about Emirati culture," said Teeuwen. "The elements they used in the collection are part of their heritage and culture, and everyday life. It has been really very interesting for people who have not been so much in touch with Arab culture to see what it's about and also to discover a little piece of history."

With Abu Dhabi Fashion Week behind them, the girls turned their attention to the show that marks the conclusion of the class and determines whether they pass. Inspired by the success of the collection at Fashion Week – and the funds they raised for the SCC – they decided to make it a charity event, a first for the school. They set out to secure sponsors – Sorouh, Prestige Jet, Finance House and Gasco signed on – and to design new collections they would model themselves.

But doing a fashion show on their own to rival the one produced earlier this year and keeping up with the demands of coursework was a massive undertaking. The girls organised the press conference, designed invitations and posters – which feature a stylish woman with a rocket for a leg – planned the design of the stage, and compiled the soundtrack. "The music is spacey," Saydh said. "We decided on a mix of techno and Arabic music."

Lastly, they had to decide on the theme. After a pitched battle, "Intergalactic" narrowly won out over "Dollhouse". "We didn't want to name it Space, because it seemed a little

childish," said Maha, "so we called it Intergalactic." The group was divided on the theme. "Democracy rules. But some of us are still not convinced," said Fatima playfully.

Before the programme, the girls organised a number of rehearsals. At the first one, they laid the clothes on the stage and talked about the order in which the models would walk the runway. It was decided that Latifa would go first. That afternoon, when their classes were over for the day, they congregated again in the school gymnasium to practise walking in their three-inch heels.

Two foam hockey pucks stood in for the points on the runway where they would stop and pose. The girls – some wearing their designs, some wearing jeans and T-shirts, and other still dressed in their school uniforms– strutted about. Kostakis gave direction from across the room: "You don't want to walk stiff!" she yelled over the din of teenage voices.

Putting on a fashion show, the girls learnt, is ripe with logistical difficulties. Originally scheduled for Thursday, June 5, it was moved to the Sunday following a period of mourning after the death of Sheikh Nasser bin Zayed Al Nahyan. By the time of Thursday's final dress rehearsal, the stage designer, the only person who did not donate his services, had not yet finished the runway, which meant that the girls had to come to school over the weekend for a final rehearsal.

During a break in the rehearsal, one of the girls took hold of the microphone. "Girls, two things. When we pause we say, 'One Mississippi, two Mississippi', OK? No one is doing that, no one. OK, I have to admit, not even me. If it's because you are shy or there are too many people here, that's what's going to happen tomorrow. Tomorrow maybe a hundred times this number of people will be here. OK?" The rehearsal resumed.

In the end, the girls mastered the runway, and on June 8 the show went on in two intervals. There was a run-through for the lower grades and another for the upper grades and guests. By one o'clock, the theatre, which holds about 250, was full and a handful of women stood in the aisles. The crowd, made up mostly of teachers and relatives, waited eagerly as Justin Timberlake's *SexyBack* played over the loudspeakers.

And then after a short documentary about the fashion class, the screen rose to unveil a bright green sign that read "INTERGALACTIC FASHION SHOW 2008" in sparkly letters. Two of the girls, dressed in long bright silver dresses, appeared on the stage and welcomed the audience in Arabic and in English. Green lasers shot out from a machine in the centre of the stage and fire went off at opposite ends.

The music went on, and a booming voice – sounding a bit like Vincent Price in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* – counted down until Latifa appeared in a long burgundy dress covered with wires and big light bulbs. As she made her way down the runway, the floor lit up in different colours.

There was a wide variety of styles showcased that afternoon, from short silver dresses to tight jeans and Eighties-inspired jackets. Though some of the clothes could be considered prêt-à-porter, most of the designs were strictly couture.

Mona made a dress that was fun and over the top – half space suit, half tutu. It's hard to imagine that she will ever have another occasion to wear it. Fatima made a long flowing dress from orange taffeta, silk and tulle. "A lot of people did stars and that's why I wanted to do something different," Fatima said. "I like to be unique."

Sheikha bint Saeed bin Saif Al Nahyan made a skirt shaped like a planet with a black T-shirt for a top with a ring around it made to look like a planet orbiting. She called it "Around the Planet in Five Orbits".

Hind made a stunning dress with minimal beading at the neck – perhaps the simplest item in the collection – made from a sparkly silver fabric.

For hair and make-up, the girls went all out. A Dubai-based modelling agency called Bareface donated its services. "Our faces will be covered in gold and silver," said Maha before the show. "And we want to have big hair," she said, smiling.

On our second meeting, Fatima characterised the kind of clothing the girls like. "Nowadays we are really into funky things, we like new things, we like things that make us feel elegant, but still are cool, you know. We don't want to be old-fashioned, because that is what we consider to be over the hill."

When the show ended, members of the audience milled about, commenting on the girls' work. "I was impressed with the clothes the girls designed," said Alyazya al Khili, whose sister-in-law is one of the young designers. "It was nice."

"I would wear some of the clothes in the collection," said Shadeeda Ashraf, a tutor in Abu Dhabi. "But so many clothes in fashion shows are not actually for wearing, and this fashion show is no different."