

KUALA LUMPUR ASIA FASHION WEEK PROVED A RUNWAY SUCCESS FOR AUSSIE DESIGNERS, AS RAGTRADER DISCOVERED.

MFIA PRIVATE, THE ORGANISERS behind Kuala Lumpur Asia Fashion Week (KLA FW), can be accused of many things. But being backward when it comes to being forward is not one of them.

The event founders began putting their plan into action around 18 months ago when they first announced their intention to stage an international fashion promotion event. Opting against a trade sales event they sought to position Kuala Lumpur as the fashion hub of Asia while building international trade relations for Malaysian and Asian-made goods.

Armed with the support of the Ministry of Tourism and Tourism Malaysia, it was hoped the event would prove a global crowd-puller.

Now, just weeks after the staging of the second annual KLA FW, the question needs to be asked, just how effective has MFIA's efforts proved? From an Australian perspective at least, the news is all good.

Dubbed Asia's largest fashion marathon, KLA FW's second outing attracted more than 80 designers from 17 countries in the region, each of whom had their accommodation and flight costs picked up by the Malaysian Government.

The beneficiaries of this included an Australian delegation of up to five designers – including 2005 WA designer of the year Alvin Fernandez (ae'lkemi), Rebecca Paterson (Breathless), Roderick Ng and Eleni Kondos (Master & Slave), Ivan Gomez (Vicious Threads) – each of whom was invited to participate in a special Australian group showing. Sydney-based womenswear designer Nicola Finetti also travelled with the group but showed as part of an "Asia Magic" showcase alongside seven established designers from other Asian countries.

While the overall number of designers featuring at KLA FW remained static, the diversity of the countries from which participants originated increased by 30 per cent. Unlike 2004 when there were no Australian buyers or agents present, this year both Maria Short (of the More stores in Perth) and Margaret Farrell, from Suki Moo (also in Perth), registered as delegates. Media coverage too was a lot more extensive in the 2005 incarnation with up to eight Australian publications making the trek to KL, compared to just three last year.

Carol Hanlon, founder and manager of Textile Clothing Footwear Resource Centre of Western Australia, a first time visitor to KLA FW, says from an Australian perspective the best thing about the event was the exposure opportunities it offered Australian delegation.

"The networking between the designers and the media was also [great]. Nearly every one of the 80 designers that showcased was able to be interviewed personally and speak directly with the media. [That] does not happen at the bigger events." Among those benefiting from the increased media attention was Sydney-based label Master & Slave, which was picked up by *Collenzioni* magazine from Milan and used for a fashion shoot.

Others, including Breathless designer



The mark of Malaysia

Rebecca Peterson, who showed an exclusive collection of her demi-couture garments in the show, gleaned a fistful of business cards and promises of follow-up visits. ae'lkemi designer Alvin Fernandez, however, just wanted a chance to get a toe-hold into the Asian market. "I've shown at Milan, Singapore and Australian fashion weeks and was quite surprised at the media turn out. I made many insightful contacts, including a fashion exporter who travels between New York and Paris and is keen to represent my label."

But while the event offered great exposure, others appeared frustrated by the lack of buyers at the event. Vicious Threads designer Ivan Gomez, who already sells in Hong Kong, Singapore and through 120 doors

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around Australia, says he was disappointed boutique buyers did not appear to be in attendance. However, Hanlon argues while there seemed to be a lack of emphasis on the trade side of things at KLA FW 2005 – including buyers – this was probably due to the fact the event was supported by the Malay tourism office and not the country's trade office.

Kuala Lumpur has great malls with every top international brand name boasting their own retail store, which is why the event has such a heavy retail focus, says Hanlon. "This is what Singapore does with its Singapore Fashion Week. If more governments were able to fund the showcasing of independent fashion designers throughout the region, there would be a rapid rise in the growth and development of Asia Pacific designers and the industry in general."

ae'lkemi: one of the standouts at KLA FW.

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