

Charmaine's Diary

16 August 2010

Monday

My first real fashion shoot and it's with Coast, a brand that specialises in women's occasion wear, accessories and evening dresses. Coast have been supporting this year's Irish Roses in giving them a generous discount to buy dresses for Tralee. Between the make-up, hair-do's and outfit changes, it takes over five hours to take six photos – a real eye-opener into the world of modelling and fashion. Interesting experience that definitely gives me an appreciation for the amount of work that goes into fashion photos.

Tuesday

Attend a Rose of Tralee dinner in the Carlton Hotel in Dublin Airport where I meet for the first time all 32 Roses participating in this year's International Rose of Tralee festival. Fabulous night.

Wednesday

Beautification and organisation for Tralee.

Thursday

Pack my lovely Volvo C30 for the last time and it is so full with ballgowns, cocktail dresses, day dresses, shoes, handbags, hat boxes that I do not think that I could fit another sock in the car. Drive to Kerry and take a detour before Tralee to do a surprise visit to the biggest fan of the Rose of Tralee, Adele. She is the niece of the London Rose Centre coordinator, Shilagh McCarthy. But I am the one who is really caught by surprise – Adele has made the most magnificent memory book for me that includes all the clippings from the Kerry newspapers throughout the year and she even recorded some of my interviews on the radio. A memento to treasure.

Friday

My first official duty during this year's Festival is to welcome the 32 Roses to Tralee. They have been on Rose Tour for the past five days taking in Guinness Storehouse, Kilmainham Gaol, Newbridge Museum of Style Icons and the Cliffs of Moher, to name but a few. The atmosphere is one of anticipation, excitement, nerves and the Roses are in for a treat over the next five days. Next duty is to pull the tickets for the draw in aid of 3T's, Turning the Tide of Suicide, a charity dedicated to helping prevent suicide through research, intervention and support. The Escorts have adopted this organisation as their partner charity and have been raising money through the sale of raffle tickets. The Escorts are meeting the Roses with whom they've been paired for the first time today and I cannot contain the giggles as I see them prepare for the big moment - straightening their ties, brushing down their suits, tweaking their

quiffs, using breadth mint-spray and, of course, uttering manly words to encouragement whilst giving each other burly claps on the back. Absolutely hilarious. Later, am very excited to be attending the Gala International Rose of Tralee ball in the Festival Dome. Hard to believe that we are in a tent in the fairytale setting of magical lights, majestic candelabra and beautifully dressed tables with the sound of Vivaldi and excited chitter-chatter in the background. An eclectic mix of people are in attendance including former President of the GAA Seán Kelly, Philippine Ambassador to Ireland His Excellency Ariel Y Abadilla and fashion designer Fiona Whyte. But the most notable guest is a little girl Sarah who has been honoured as the 33rd Rose and is in attendance with the Share a Dream Foundation.

Saturday

Rose-mania takes over Tralee during the Festival and autographs and photos are order of the day for me. Am charmed by the number of children who have made notebooks with cut-outs of all the Roses and spend hours trying to seek out each and every one of the Roses in order to have their notebook autographed. First official call today is to blow the whistle for the Rose swimfest cup – a swim down the canal from Blennerville Lock Gates to Princes Quay Tralee. I admire the hardiness of the participants, who are swimmers from Kerry Swimming clubs. Next stop is Fenit to cheer on the competitors of the Navigator Triathlon that has been organised in association with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Climb aboard Irish Navy vessel LE Aisling at Fenit Harbour where the Roses and I are hosted for lunch by the crew. Visit the town park to attend the children's fancy dress competition and am particularly taken by a creative young lady dressed as a mad scientist. Later have dinner with the Roses, Escorts and new presenter of the Rose of Tralee, Daithí Ó Sé, before what for me is one of the highlights of the Festival – the Saturday Night Parade with the Roses. Marching bands, majorettes, costumes, dancing, circus tricks, street entertainers, floats... and in the midst is yours truly perched on a beautifully decorated float beside Daithí Ó Sé. Travelling the parade route from the Carlton Hotel Tralee down Denny Street to the Ashe Memorial Hall, I am overwhelmed by the number of people lining the streets exuding goodwill, cheer and celebration. Fabulous. Of course, the biggest cheers went to Daithí whom I'm convinced is a Kerry hero – one banner read "Our Granny loves you Daithí, will you meet her for a cuppa?"

Sunday

Attend an open air mass in the town park and delighted to be assigned the second reading that doesn't have the tongue twister name places of the first. After mass, I am again swarmed by children looking for autographs and photos. Quite surreal. Next is the Day Parade with the Roses, a shorter version of last night's parade, with the exception of being joined by the famous Garda Band. Join in on the fun at Kingdom Greyhound Stadium. Present the prize for the Rose of Tralee Race and judge best dressed lady, the winner being a visitor from the US wearing a lovely yellow and black number. Next stop is the town park to judge a Glamorous Granny Competition. I'd never heard of such an event before but transpires to be great fun, with each Granny being interviewed about their role as Granny by the very amusing compere and being forced into party pieces, one of which included naming the dates of birth of all her grandchildren. It is fair to say that there is something for everyone at the International Rose of Tralee Festival. Later in the evening view the stylish, spectacular and sophisticated new looks on the catwalk at the Irish Examiner Autumn Winter Fashion Show produced by the Holman Lee Agency. A host of premier

designers and boutiques from all over Munster and beyond are on show during what is for me one of the events not to be missed at the Festival. Some gorgeous pieces on show that makes me want to go shopping! Along with style-writer Annmarie O'Connor, I co-judge the Best Dressed Lady Competition and the prize of €1000 cash goes to Paula Gannon who dresses in simple elegance.

Monday

Seán arrives to the Tralee Carlton Hotel, looking a lot fresher than I had anticipated for a man who just flew from a wedding in Atlanta, Georgia. Shower and suit, and the poor chap is on escorting duty immediately. Visit the Kerry museum where amongst its exhibits is the 50 Years of Fashion Exhibition, a display of the dresses worn by the crowned Roses of Tralee over the past 50 years. The exhibition also details the story behind how each Rose came to wear the dress. Back at the town park, there is a Teddy Bear's Picnic taking place and I am given the task of interviewing the children on the subject of their favourite teddy bears, whose names range from I-Don't-Know to Puppy-Dog to Shirley to Fluffy. From picnicking with teddy bears to dancing with pensioners at the annual Rose Tea Dance, meet some lovely people who are enjoying the Festival. And already, we are upon the first Selection Night that is beamed live on RTÉ 1 television.

Tuesday

Wearing a dress kindly loaned from Dawn Fitzgerald Atelier's collection, host a dinner for the Roses of Tralee since 1959 – about 20 of the past 50 make the event. Very privileged to be part of such an exclusive sisterhood of vibrant, accomplished and genuine women in which it is clear, even to this day, why they were selected as a Rose of Tralee. Attend the second Selection Night which sees Clare Kambamettu, the London Rose from Athy, Co.Kildare, being crowned as the 52nd International Rose of Tralee. Sound familiar? Yes, Clare's home-house is about a mile away from my home-house in Athy. We were in the same tennis lesson as children and were also in the same school for some time – before the London selection, I had not seen her for about ten years. It just goes to prove that there are no politics in the Rose of Tralee judging process. And I am absolutely thrilled at the decision – I know that Clare will carry out her ambassadorship with immense sincerity, dedication and grace. Midnight Madness fireworks on Denny Street to bring close the 2010 Rose of Tralee International Festival and my reign as Rose of Tralee. I have been truly touched by the people I had met this year, left both humbled and excited by what I have experienced and enriched with a lot of life lessons. And while journeying through this magical year, I have had an absolute ball. Instead of mourning the fact that my reign has come to an end, I like to celebrate the fact that I've been lucky to enjoy such a fabulously random, excitedly exhausting, humbling and magical year. What a privilege it has been.