

Shoe by Stuart Weitzman, one of the designers indulged by footwear fanatic Imelda Marcos.



Imelda's artistic licence

Everyone always thinks of the shoes first, but there is more to Imelda Marcos than her collection of footwear that was once rumoured to number 3,000 pairs. Otherwise, how could her popular appeal have survived accusations of and trials for corruption to the extent that she is now, in her 80s, an elected member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines, and how could she have become a cult figure in a wide variety of artistic fields from New York to Australia?

Just over a year ago, shoes (size 8.5, US) made by iconic designers, including Salvatore Ferragamo, Charles Jourdan, Roger Vivier, Bally and Stuart Weitzman, all owned at one time or another by the woman who was the first lady of the Philippines from 1965 until 1986, went on show in a luxury boutique in Brisbane. The shoes were part of a display called *Imeldarific* at Jean Brown Gallery, a store specialising in bags and accessories from high-end fashion houses.

Around the same time, Scottish-born musician David Byrne, the founder of Talking Heads, was putting the finishing touches to *Here Lies Love*, which he describes as a song-cycle, but which he hopes will become a stage

Imelda Marcos's love of shoes had an impact on her commitment to leave a legacy of beauty for her people.

musical one day. The title comes from the phrase that Mrs Marcos says she would like to have as her epitaph. In a recent BBC radio programme about the former first lady's artistic influence, David Byrne said he was more inspired by Imelda Marcos's love of music than her love of shoes. He said: "She loved music and dancing and going to New York clubs, such as Studio 54. She even had a glitter-ball installed in her New York town-house and the roof of her palace in Manila was turned into a night-club. This is a person in power who brings their own soundtrack with them. I thought there might be a connection between that heady, frothy music and having so much power."

And it's not just music. Film-maker Fenton Bailey, who has made a documentary about the Marcos regime in the Philippines, told the programme that Imelda Marcos's sense

of style, including the shoes, holds a powerful attraction for all artists. "She dresses incredibly," he said, "in traditional costume that is part-westernised with these butterfly wings that, for me, evoke Joan Collins in *Dynasty*. Imelda Marcos was culturally plugged-in; she was a taste-maker."

Los Angeles-based Asian-American theatre company East West Players (EWP) has already beaten David Byrne to the idea of a stage musical about Imelda. Its artistic director, Timothy Dang, says the Mrs Marcos's story is a classic rags-to-riches tale, plus there is beauty and glamour all the way through, not least in the main protagonist's love of high-end shoes, and plenty of scandal, making it excellent musical material. *Imelda—A New Musical* opened in Los Angeles in 2005 and later transferred to New York.

One of the numbers in this show has the title *3,000 Pairs of Shoes*, a classic case of artistic licence. With her husband, Ferdinand, Imelda Marcos fled revolution in the Philippines in 1986. A report soon afterwards in *Time* cataloguing the first lady's extravagance said the 3,000 pairs of shoes were a myth. The government's inventory of her possessions in 1986 listed a mere 1,060 pairs, including one fitted with batteries to make the shoes glow in the dark. The EWP production received mixed reviews but a popular reception among Filipinos living in the US. Timothy Dang says people wanted to relive the glory years of their country when Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos were their version of the Kennedys. But when Mrs Marcos heard about the musical, her only comment was to say: "Nobody can fill my shoes."

Carlos Celdran is a performer from the Philippines who aims to take a one-man show about the great woman, *La Vida Imelda*, to North America later this year. "It's an eternal story," he explains. "This story resonates with the international community, whether the extravagance is seen as a negative or not. When people say, 'I love shoes, I'm like a little Imelda Marcos', I really don't think they're saying it completely negatively."

Speaking to the BBC for the radio programme, Mrs Marcos herself said she loved the music David Byrne had composed in her name and took it as a great compliment. The Fenton Bailey film focuses on another aspect of the two decades of

the regime that Ferdinand Marcos ran in the Philippines. When the film-maker met Mrs Marcos, she showed him a two-hour presentation showing slides of buildings she had built, projects she is still proud of, including the Technology Resource Centre, the Heart Foundation of the Philippines, and a village for children. "When Marcos became president, Manila had nothing," his widow told the BBC. "We had no basic services, no water, power, food, shelter, medical services, education, no hospitals ... we had nothing because after World War II Manila was levelled to the ground like Warsaw. Architecture is frozen music and it has to be beautiful. Marcos said he was going to build a strong house for the Philippines and that my job was to make it into a home."

Other building projects were more outlandish, including a palace made out of coconut in Manila in 1978, which is now a museum. The programme explained that the first lady was trying to show in projects like this that you could construct beauty out of humble materials that people had to hand in the impoverished country. "She forged an idea that physical beauty is connected to spiritual beauty," Fenton Bailey said. "She saw it has her mission to bring beauty everywhere."

Carlos Celdran's belief is that this is the side of Mrs Marcos that makes her still relevant to Filipino people today. "A lot of people tend to stop at the shoes," he explains, "and wonder how the Philippines could allow a woman like this to come back and to be voted into office. But there are achievements that still keep her relevant: arts and culture and infrastructure in particular."

She makes no excuse for spreading beauty around. "I plead guilty to being greedy for the good and the beautiful," she says. Perhaps this explains her love of shoes, and perhaps her love of beautifully constructed shoes inspired her to spread that love around in the shape of beautifully constructed buildings. 🌸

New York, 1985. Imelda Marcos (centre) with the wives of the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Pérez de Cuéllar Marcela Temple Seminario (left), and of the President of the US, Nancy Regan.

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