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Sher’Niah Freeman Takes the Crown at 70th St. John Celebration Queen Pageant

Freeman captivated with a vibrant tribute to Celia Cruz, featuring Afro-Cuban dances and a dramatic reenactment of Afro-Cuban history; Squiabro impressed with her elaborate Guatemalan-themed performance

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Sher’Niah Freeman was crowned 2024 St. John Celebration Queen By. DEPT. OF TOURISM/DIVISION OF FESTIVALS/RUDY LAPLACE

The 70th St. John Celebration Queen pageant show kicked off with a spirit of keen competition on Saturday night as two contestants, J’Naiya Squiabro and Sher’Niah Freeman, took the stage in identical silver dresses adorned with fringe.

Squiabro, an enlistee in the United States Army and recent graduate of Ivanna Eudora Kean High School, introduced herself as “the chosen one.” Freeman, a sophomore at the University of the Virgin Islands, followed, declaring she possessed “the undeniable essence of a queen.” Their presentation speeches, worth up to 25 points, set the tone for an evening filled with poise, talent, and anticipation.

The second segment was swimwear, in which the contestants could score up to 50 points for poise, modeling technique, fit, and stage presence. Ms. Squiabro’s “Platinum Jubilee” was a white monokini in a sequined fabric, accented with gems placed to highlight her figure. Ms. Freeman opted for a blush-colored maillot in what appeared to be a crushed velvet fabric, designed with a mesh cutout and a spray of deeper pink gems at the waist.

Contestants then had to display their performing talent, while wearing their interpretation of “international wear”. Scoring for this segment was out of a total of 100 points, awarded for costume originality and design, stage presence, accuracy of depiction, and their talent presentation.

Besides a “Welcome to Guatemala” backdrop, Ms. Squiabro stepped out wearing an elaborate costume centered around a wide, sculpted back-piece meant to represent the country’s National Palace of Culture and the Museum of Archaeology. The yellow fabric of her floor-length skirt was hand painted with abstract designs, while its flared hem was held in place seemingly with wire. Atop a green ruffle at the waist, Ms. Squiabro’s top half was loosely wrapped in the same yellow fabric, to which a border of red and green sequins were applied. The ensemble was topped off with a white winged headpiece.

For her talent, Ms. Squiabro performed “Dance of the Conquest”, shedding the bulky outer layers to reveal her dance outfit - a sleek sequined bodice and a swiny skirt with afroth of mesh ruffles around her knees. Interspersed with her creative dance were stints on a pair of drums and the marimba. Not done yet, Ms. Squiabro emerged in yet another costume, the one a fringed red bodysuit, to cap off her performance with what the announcer dubbed a “traditional Mayan volcano dance.”

Meanwhile, Ms. Freeman chose to pay homage to the Cuban woman dubbed “Queen of Salsa”, Celia Cruz. Clad in a vibrant yellow-orange ombre long sleeved duster, complete with matching orange wig and gem-encrusted sunglasses — a look pulled straight from Ms. Cruz’s music video for the song — Ms. Freeman performed “A Negra Tiene Tumbao”, one of the legendary singer’s most popular modern hits. She followed with a dramatic reenactment of the general arc of history of Afro-Cubans like Ms. Cruz, explaining how enslaved Africans brought their religious and musical traditions with them while clad in white, flowing garments with a matching headwrap. Her third outfit change, into a pale blue shimmery dress, was meant to accompany her performance of one of the dances of the Tumba Francesca genre of music, a uniquely Afro-Cuban creation. However, the fastenings of the dress kept coming loose, showing flashes of the final outfit and distracting from the performance. Ms. Freeman nevertheless persevered, closing with a salsa performance, clad in a sequined ball gown styled like the Cuban flag.?

Those energetic performances were followed by evening wear, another 100-point segment. Contestant #1, J’Naiya Squiabro, opted for a royal purple gown encrusted in columns of crystals. Designers included an array of features, including attached collar and tasseled off-shoulder sleeves. Sher’Niah Freeman, on the other hand, was dressed in a white column gown of translucent fabric, glistening with sequin and fringe placed strategically for coverage.?

Eveningwear was quickly followed by the question and answer segment, worth 25 points. Ms. Squiabro responded to a question about what steps can the community take to support young people's mental wellbeing by saying that she would "definitely" open a clinic that could provide companionship to young people, encouraging them to share their emotions. "They don't have to open up right away, but they could open up," she hoped. "I will make sure that the young folks come and partake in my activity."

Ms. Freeman called for community seminars, where attendees "can learn about the different warning signs" of mental health conditions, "or knowing the symptoms of a mental health crisis." She also suggested that classes on mental health and wellbeing be incorporated into school schedules.?

Having previously completed a personal interview, the contestants could only await the judges' determination of their fate. After twenty minutes of nerve-wracking anxiety, the scores were in; Sher'Niah Freeman was announced as the 2024 St. John Celebration Queen, to the rapturous cheers of the audience.