

# Best Foot Forward

WOMEN THE WORLD OVER MELT AT THE MERE MENTION OF THE NAME JIMMY CHOO, BUT THE MAN BEHIND THE FAMOUS FOOTWEAR IS A PROUD MALAYSIAN AND A NATIONAL ICON. **NICK ATKINSON** CATCHES UP WITH HIM FOR AFTERNOON TEA AT THE RITZ-CARLTON RESIDENCES TO FIND OUT JUST HOW HE BUILT HIS SHOE EMPIRE AND WHAT HIS FUTURE PLANS MAY ENTAIL.



**I**t is fair to say that Prof. Dato' Dr. Jimmy Choo, OBE, is one of a kind. From a humble childhood in Penang where he observed his father making shoes, Choo set out for London to study and has subsequently gone on to become one of the most famous and most sought-after shoe designers in the world. His creations may have made it onto the feet of some of the world's leading fashion icons, but his own feet are very much planted on the ground. So how did today's trendsetting shoe designer evolve from such an unassuming beginning?

#### What were you like as a child?

I would get in from school and watch my father and my uncle making shoes, and I found it quite interesting. Young boys nowadays have their computers and iPads, but in those days there were no such games to play.

#### Was there an expectation that you would follow in your father's footsteps?

All my father said to me was that if I learned some skills, regardless of where I went in the world, I would not have to fret or worry that I couldn't get a job. He understood the importance of learning a skill. During my school days, I worked in the family factory and, as a result, gained a better understanding of the market. When I decided to set up my own place in London, my mother put in the money and my father came over to help.

#### What was the first Jimmy Choo shoe?

I went to the local market there in London and looked at what and how they were selling. They were selling sandals, so I went back to the factory and my father and I designed our own sandals. I then started selling my sandals to the market stalls!

#### I understand one of your first famous clients was the late Princess Diana?

I was very lucky, not just to work with Princess Diana, but that I had the opportunity to create each pair of shoes for her, and she came back to me again and again. I even had the pleasure of designing her shoes for the Royal tours that she went on in Japan and Korea. I was very proud.

#### What is the starting point for a new design?

Many of my designs are for a specific purpose: an event or a wedding, for example. We are creating a shoe to fit the customer as well as the occasion. I have always insisted on holding the customer's foot in my hand and making it balance so that I can create the shoe in my mind before I put pen to paper.

#### Considering all your success, what is the incentive to keep working?

I am still learning. I am still working and, to be honest, I still have so much more to do. I am happy with where I am now, but I can't get away from the fact that I love designing and I love shoes! Even when I am in Malaysia, I still wake up and go to my workshop. It's a habit, but it's also a way of life, and I always want to share my skills and my passion.

#### You are based in the UK now. Are there aspects you miss about Malaysia?

When I am cold, I think of Malaysia, and, strangely, when I am hot, I think of it too: 'Where is the air con?!' London is a



beautiful place to stay. Foodwise, London has got everything: it is multicultural and the food is always good. I don't eat much spicy food though, and I do have a bit of a passion for fish and chips.

#### What has been your biggest challenge in your life so far?

One of the hardest challenges I have faced is being the Tourism Ambassador for Malaysia. Our Tourism Minister is very hardworking and always looks into everything in fine detail. It has been like learning a new skill. This is my second term so I must show them what I can do. Being Jimmy Choo does make things a bit easier when meeting with people, but it also means my time is very much in demand. But people appreciate what I do, so that makes me very happy.

#### Do you have any regrets?

I have always been saddened that I didn't spend enough time with my children when they were young. I was always working, working. I would take my little girl to school early, but was in the factory at 8am and sometimes not back until the early hours of the morning. Everything was about making shoes and, although the money was there to give them whatever they needed, it was not the same.

#### What would you like to do that you haven't yet had the chance to?

I suppose my dream is to be more involved in the education side of things. Maybe I just want to pass on my knowledge. In London, I have been working with a lot of youngsters who want to develop their skills in the shoe trade. I am a hard teacher to them: I insist on them being good and working hard. It is my name that they may one day represent, so they must understand it is all or nothing. It gives me great satisfaction when they succeed.

#### What piece of wisdom could you share with us?

Even the smallest thing is worth saying 'thank you' for. It is why I have been working with the British Council for over ten years. They asked me to travel around the world promoting education and it was a wonderful opportunity to visit new places and make new friends in areas where they may know my name, but have never had the chance to see me. I am only too happy to share myself and my skill. It all comes back to appreciating what I have achieved and sharing it with those who are in my life now.

