

Hello BBS Alums!

The Alumni Highlight is a monthly newsletter that aims to highlight the philanthropic, academic, entrepreneurial and professional achievements made by our thriving BBS Alumni community.

Najeeba Hayat graduated from BBS in 2008 to pursue an undergraduate degree in Government from Wesleyan University. She then moved to Milan to study technical shoemaking at the industry standard Ars Sutoria school. She most recently launched the very successful and whimsical footwear line called Liudmila. Her creations are currently stocked in Al Othman, Farfetch.com, and London's Browns Fashion, among others. .



Why did you choose footwear as your design medium?

My choice of footwear was not a very rational decision. It is notoriously the most difficult field in fashion to enter, compete in and sustain a brand in. I loved the challenge. From a passion perspective, I have always been a complete obsessive. At shoe school they called me the "Wikipedia of shoes." I knew everything about every design: Victorian boots, Springolator pumps, Patrick Cox, Prada 2003 sandals, you name it! When I was in class (for about a decade and a half), I would draw shoes, when I couldn't sleep, I would draw shoes. Essentially, a shoe is a very restrictive item of clothing. It is bound by rules and functionality. I loved finding ways to translate all of the crazy ideas in my head while keeping in mind all of those rules; it was a game I never stopped playing with myself.



Explain the name, Liudmila, what does it represent?

The brand was named after Liudmila Rutilova, my favourite character from Russian literature. I took a lot of literature classes in university as reading is an enormous part of my life. It was a snowy, dramatic day in my Russian Literature class and we were discussing *The Petty Demon* (a very dark, twisted novel) by Fyodor Sologub. There was a particular passage in which Liudmila cried out against the restrictions of living in her vindictive provincial village and basically gave this beautiful and simple ode to life. She launched into a despairing speech about her love for life as it is felt, for sparkles, for colour, for perfume and sensory joy. Her character was all passion, all drama and all escape. I identified with her implicitly and rejected a career down the opaque and compromising path of politics (however much I loved my study of it.) I chose the life she reminded me I love most and so I named my project after her.

How difficult was it to break into the footwear design world?

It has been incredibly difficult. From finding the right connections, to producers (who are most certainly not online), suppliers, showrooms, PRs and the buyers to actually take a chance on me (especially in the beginning where I knew no one and spoke no Italian) I think I have aged a decade in the past two and a half years. On top of this, I entered as a novice without a single connection to my name in a country where as a 23-year-old from an oil state, you will not be taken seriously. My factory refused outright to produce some of my styles, saying they were impossible. It took a lot of personal skills and late night technical sessions with the patternmakers to convince them it was, in fact, possible to execute my vision. I would sometimes send out over three hundred emails to buyers and receive only two or three responses, mostly negative. These were just the tip of the iceberg. I had many, many struggles and many dealing with the flakes, gypsies, tramps and thieves that you will inevitably deal with in this industry and somehow survived! Don't ask me how.

Although it is just the very beginning of my career, I have been quite fortunate in the reception I have received. I never allowed myself to compromise on my product for convenience. I forewent my vacations for almost two years, stuck to my designs and did whatever it took to realize them and execute my vision across the board in the most authentic way possible. I think people respond to that. I have been very lucky to have Al Othman on board from the absolute beginning, giving me an amazing anchor in the Middle East. All of my shops after that have been outside Kuwait in Italy, Saudi Arabia and now London. Additionally, quality publications like *Vogue Italia*, *Style.com*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and quality foreign press began to feature my shoes quite early on. I didn't believe it when I received an email by the Victoria and Albert Museum asking to meet. I thought it was a joke. When Browns came along, however, it was the ultimate validation. I had contacted a million stores around London but not them. It was just a fact in my mind that Browns is impossible, it is a closed door and you just can't make it in unless they choose you. Apparently they had discovered me on social media and loved the shoes!



There is still a long road ahead. I couldn't have done it without the support of my mother and her trust in my abilities. I hope I can build this into a viable business and make her proud. It will be a long time coming but I am optimistic for the future!

To browse the collection yourself and keep up with Najeeba's latest designs, check out her Instagram @LiudmilaHQ and the official website <http://liudmilafootwear.com/>

We're on social media, tag along!

 @bbsalumniclub
  @bbsalumni
 @bbsalumniclub
  @Bayan Bilingual
 Al Bayan Bilingual School (BBS) Alumni