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EVENT REVIEW

Carnival Roundup: Inspiration, Challenges, and Blunders

“...we believe God is the source of all that is creative and good” Canon Richard Jacob, 2019

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

The 'Pretty Mas'

This has been a year of rapid change and discourse in the carnival arena; in simple terms, there has been a shift away from the norm and a different kind of newness has emerged in carnivals. I attended carnivals in Trinidad and Tobago and Luton, the East Midlands Caribbean Carnival Arts Network (EMCAAN) King and Queen and Junior Prince and Princess event and parade of the bands in Nottingham, and finally Notting Hill Carnival. Each of these events present their own versions of carnival by adapting and adjusting to economic, local, and international contexts. I should add a disclaimer here that although the Trinidad and Tobago carnival is celebrated in both countries, I was only able to witness bands crossing the Queens Park Savannah stage.

I also acted as a carnival costume adjudicator (adding up the scores of the other judges, ensuring marks were given, tallying scores, and checking for any discrepancies). This was a new experience for me as I am normally a costume judge. This time around, I was able to indulge in an appreciation of the designs, creativity, innovation, and presentations from a different perspective and observe how the costume judges interpreted the different presentations, designs, innovation, and craftsmanship through their allocation of marks.

Children's Parade of the Bands

I have the utmost admiration and respect for the children's costume designers who brought to life themes and creativity that all told a story while at the same time making the mas' enjoyable and appealing to the young masqueraders who paraded through the streets and on stage. I will start with the Trinidad and Tobago carnival.

The children's parade was held on Carnival Saturday, and seeing the children in their costumes brought me so much joy. I was tempted to jump onto the stage to wear the costumes myself or take pictures capturing all the energy, movement, excitement, colour, and 'wow' moments of the children's parade. The limited use of feathers and beads, the use of other materials and fabrics, and the lightness and fluidity of the costumes that were on display made me feel hopeful for the future. One band in particular that will stand out in my memory is a band with a sailor theme; the sailor tops, skirts, and trousers were all crocheted, which was something I had never seen before. The order and flow of the bands across the stage and the soca music played for the children were age-appropriate and child-friendly. I still keep singing 'DNA' by Mical Teja and 'Contract' by Bunji Garlin to myself.

The hospitality we received in the judge's enclosure was professional and efficient; the drinks were refreshing; and the food and snacks were delicious and served throughout the hot, sunny day. I was fed and watered by the National Carnival Commission (NCC) caterers for the children and adult parades. I would like to thank the NCC, the Head Judge, and the other judges who made the day a comprehensive, enlightening, and rewarding experience for me.

Carnival Monday and Tuesday

Some bands were truly dynamic, colourful, radiant, ethereal, and majestic; the masqueraders jumped, 'chipped', and danced to enhance their performances, which left me feeling emotional as this took the performance to another level.

Then, there were other bands that highlighted another story as adult masqueraders, especially women. I was left feeling uncomfortable as 'nudity' appeared to be a recurring agenda in the costume designs, as I had seen in the past, with some costumes leaving nothing to the imagination. My question is, who will speak up and say

enough is enough? I understand the desire to feel 'free and unrestricted'; however, the traditions of costume design are being lost and superseded by a lack of censorship, especially with women, who are supposed to be role models for our young people. Notably, women must remember that there is life after the carnival. We have to ask ourselves what legacy we are passing on through costume design, creativity, and innovation; at this rate, we will have nothing to judge as there seem to be fewer and fewer elements in the costumes worn by the masqueraders.

Panorama Steelband Competition

The musical arrangements that rang out from the steel bands on the final night of the panorama transported the audience and fans into a musical frenzy and excitement. I chose not to go into the seated area of the Grandstand as I wanted to experience the atmosphere of the food vendors and stalls and listen to the steel bands while standing on the 'drag' (a paved area that was previously grassed over) so that I could engage with the steel bands as they rolled onto the stage. I was taken aback by the behaviour of the security staff and officials at the barricade, who were rude and disrespectful to fans and supporters of the steel bands. The history of pan started in the poor and deprived communities of Trinidad and Tobago and as the fee for attending the panorama competition becomes more expensive every year, it excludes some supporters, families, and communities from listening to their bands perform as only the elite and affluent can pay to listen to the performances. Pan Trinbago needs to work with the communities to come up with a way to allow everyone to hear the national instrument being performed at the largest steel band competition in the world; all eyes are on you.

UK CARNIVALS

Luton

The children in Luton enjoyed themselves, and although the weather was unapologetic, bringing rain, chilly temperatures, and only occasional sunshine, the children still danced and performed in their bright, colourful costumes. There were also some guest troupes/bands from other cities. Some costumes were designed and made by community groups and costume designers, showcasing various cultures, and there were also moko jumbies (stilt walkers) and some costume floats. I tried my hand at DJing as I was in the DJ tent assisting with selecting child-friendly soca songs; this was my first DJing experience.

Nottingham

I was a costume judge in Nottingham for the EMCAAN King and Queen and Junior Prince and Princess. The costumes were impressive, with participants performing individually before the costume judges and the audience at the Albert Hall Conference Centre in Nottingham. The costumes had various themes and were made with various materials, including silk printing, beads, and feathers. You couldn't fail to appreciate the research and hard work put in by the costume designers.

The Nottingham Carnival Parade started at Victoria Embankment. Bands/troupes from Nottingham and touring bands from Leeds, Derby, Luton, and Leicester streamed into the Carnival Site and had refreshments, before performing on the carnival stage. It was an exciting, sunny, wonderful day, and the event was well attended with lots of food stalls and activities for all. The bands/troupes had one or two costumes that stood out as the themes were very well researched and brought to life through their creativity and performances.

Notting Hill Carnival

The 'Mas'

The children's parade was held on Sunday, and there were some colourful and vibrant costumes. However, there seemed to have been a change in the local communities, with fewer costumes displayed and an increase in the number of T-shirt-wearing teenagers and adults performing behind the children's bands.

There seems to be a growing number of bands wearing T-shirts ('dutty' mas), which is an emerging element among the costumed bands. I am yet to figure out if this is a way of coping with difficult economic times or represents a loss of meaning and understanding of carnival costumes at Notting Hill Carnival.

The adult costumed bands included Brazilian and Samba bands that stayed true to their origins and the carnival traditions. However, other costumed bands wore a mix of costumes with feathers, beads, and skimpy costumes, while others had used other rich, colourful, and vibrant materials. As a costume judge, I could see the effort that had gone into researching these and the focus on a theme, showing an act of creative genius.

