



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Artistic traditions perspective: Susie West

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I would definitely see the Notting Hill Carnival in a really holistic way as one great performance and I think this begins as we see backstage when the different bands are preparing their costumes, they're thinking about the stories they want to enact, and how they're going to achieve that. This is all about social communication and it's these little individual acts of communication that build up the bigger messages. There are formal messages, of course, and we heard about these from the two bands who are concerned to put over the historic stories that have evolved over the centuries in carnival performances. But of course there's also the much more contemporary message that we hear about from other interviewees about the black presence on British streets. That's a highly performative claim to make that walking down a street is also a performance about your identity, your right to be seen on this place at this time.

Part of the current Notting Hill Carnival's contribution to fostering a positive sense of multiculturalism probably comes from its amazing ability to break down the barrier between formal audience and formal performers, and I experienced this at my day in carnival when I moved from staying with the band that I was slipped into and following them along the route. The point where the division between audience and performers on the route breaks down completely, the barriers are removed, the crowd can flow wherever it can find room, and it can pick and mix what you want to do, if you want to hang out with the band that's fine, if you want to dive off into some street stalls for some food that's good, and if you just want to shuffle along at the same speed as everyone else in the crowd that's fine too. And that means actually a lot of the inhibitions that certainly I'm aware of, being brought up in England in a very English way, they all slip away. You start making eye contact with strangers, you're laughing because you're, you know, people are stuck at the same point, there's a bottleneck, people suddenly start talking to each other, you know, it's a very relaxed atmosphere and if you go to work every day in a big city you'll certainly know that that's not normally the case. So I think that's part of the quality of stepping out from people's daily routines that carnival does more than encourage it, it actually imposes on you, and that's a great thing, and it's very liberating, and I think it's that sort of play space, if you like, that carnival creates that is really what people find so encouraging and so refreshing, and that's why they come back.

Carnival is a very strong example of heritage as performance here. We discuss this in the course when we look at the case study of people who process around the town of Glastonbury and we've used Glastonbury because it's become a very important spiritual centre for a variety of world views. Well, in a sense Notting Hill Carnival has almost that sense of a similar spiritual centre for people who identify with the Afro-Caribbean community that settled in Notting Hill and see the importance of place as being important to that identity. Performance draws in all of these issues and we talk about performance in a wider sense as an act of social communication in the course, and this links well with the discussion that we have around notions of intangible heritage as well, because a lot of the intangible qualities we identify are those that are communicating verbally but also non-verbally, either within a group or from one group to another. Notting Hill Carnival does this because it has its own messages from its explicit content and we see this in the historic carnival characters that are played out in roles within the performances of the different bands, but also in the interaction between performing groups and their audience, and the interaction between different groups as well. So the carnival is highly performative but we don't mean that just in the perhaps more conventional approach way to saying 'oh well, it's a piece of street theatre', it's certainly that, but it's performative in the wider sense of being highly socially communicative.