



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Notting Hill Carnival: artistic traditions

Clary Salandy
Mahogany

Clary Salandy:

That ability for the African spirit to always rise up - you step on it and it come back over here to the steel band, and you step on it here, it comes back up here, as back to you just originally step on it, it come back over there as the Baptist religion comes back as Shango, and so it doesn't die, it comes back in reggae, it came back in jazz, comes in the blues, you know you can't kill the spirit of the original spirit of a nation, you can't kill that.

Pat C. Jaggs
Elimu

Pat C. Jaggs:

For all those people there's this yen to want to do, build something, make something, be part of something. If you are in a mask camp, even just sticking a sequin helps with the big picture.

'Mas camps' are the masquerade bands' working groups.

Clary Salandy: Carnival itself is a language and that's very contemporary to the time that it's in, and so it's very important that you use it and in so doing you are sticking to the tradition.

Michael La Rose
writer and publisher

Michael La Rose:

It seems to me that especially carnival art is ignored in England and that's a very serious problem. So that carnival is talked about in two ways – either as a great street party, or as a public order problem – and it's neither – it's much more than that.

Elimu
Ansel Wong

Ansel Wong:

Elimu is Swahili for knowledge or education. We sought to engage with the young people, many who were very much disaffected with school, with society, and in conflict with the police, and bring them in, into an Arts project, that had Carnival as its focus.

Pat C Jaggs: This year's theme Canboulay – it's the patois version of Cannes Brulées – two French words meaning burnt cane or burning cane. When there was a fire on the large sugar estates in the Caribbean, their managers would go around to ask the, for the slaves from the other estates to help at putting the fires out. After that was done they would then have a bit of a jolly time really, they might sing or dance. That then was taken further and the abolition of slavery people would do through the town at night with lighted candles which were symbolic of the burning cane, and they would be parodying the masters, and some would be dressed up in and having high airs and so on, and so it's quite a powerful thing really that people who were seen as disenfranchised really were hanging onto something that meant a lot.

Pat C Jaggs: This mask here is for the boiling pot. When I said to you it gives you the differences and so on, and it is worn like this and you get the sense of flame.

Mahogany

Clary Salandy:

Although Mahogany, we use a lot of contemporary themes in our work, we actually use a traditional method to explore that theme. Bling is a word that's used by young people. It's about how, what they look personally, how they improve their appearance personally, and this year is a very special year for England because we're actually receiving the Olympics, the Olympic flag on children's carnival day. So what Bling is – Bling is saying to young people that here you are, very interesting what you look like, and for the next four years you need to be very interested in what your skills are like, and how you express that, and in developing that, and blinging that up.

Clary begins her designs on paper.

Clary Salandy:

The story is told in a very dramatic way. I'm thinking about the way that people see the story unfold, like a tableau, and the design is worked out in a range of ways, not only in terms of the story, but in terms of the scale of things and the way colour works so if I start with very bright colours at the beginning do I take them through something very different at the end, end with bright colours, do I have a build-up of colour from white through to red, through to, I'm thinking of it in that manner, and I'm imagining the whole process as it snakes through the grove.

As Mahogany and Elimu take to the streets they are stepping out in a long tradition.

Clary Salandy: Everything about us is as a direct result of things that happen in history. I'm in England and I'm allowed to be in England because the British went to Africa, they got the slaves to come to Trinidad, then Trinidad became....there's a circle that has happened in, and I understand that history, and I know that history, and I feel very, very strongly that if I don't step out on the street I do not pay homage to those people who've fought for their freedom.

Ansel Wong:

The origins of carnival very much was rooted in mimicry where the slaves who tended to mimic the slave plantation owners and hold these celebrated events whether it's a balls or what, and therefore the tradition of the use of the mask, the face mask, was very much an important feature because that mask hid your identity and therefore you can do anything behind that masque.

Clary Salandy:

In the Caribbean there's a whole story around the devil that appears in lots of carnivals. The face of that devil is a snide, big-nosed face of, really the slave-owner. And so we look today and we say, oh look, there's Lucifer, and we look at the book, and if you don't know anything about the history you just think that that's Lucifer. But those of us who know know that that represents a slave master, that the slaves have said the worst thing which you have taught us that exists in the world is the devil, and you know what, that's what you are, you are the devil. That is why telling the story who's in carnival is very clever, what you see is not what is.

Claire Holder:

Then you've got the steel band music, that very much, there's a great story behind that, how young black boys in their own country, in the Caribbean, were forbidden by the British authorities to come together and yet still they managed to come together and inadvertently discover that if they tuned an oil drum in a particular way, it can make a marvellous sound, and so when they are playing the music all of that history and that heritage is put into the development of that particular art form in carnival.

Carnival performances blur the dividing line between performers and audience.

Clary Salandy:

As a designer, I have a story that will have a relationship with a spectator, but I don't particularly want the people in the band to be performing for other people, I want them - if they could perform with their own spirit that is what will transcend and make a powerful statement to the person looking on, that's what's important about the performance of carnival, it's spontaneous, and it needs to come from within.

Chris Mullard:

It does oscillate between the most refined statements of high culture actually, real operatic culture, if you like, and the rather vulgar burlesque kind of statements that you might find in a striptease club, you know, I mean yes, it does oscillate and move across all sorts of class-based notions of culture, all sorts of status-based notions of culture, and that's what's so beautiful about carnival, it actually integrates culture. It sees culture as an holistic thing, something that relates to everybody, irrespective of class or race, gender, whatever it is. Everyone can get something out of carnival.

Michael La Rose:

The uniqueness of carnival is that interaction between the spectator and the artist, and it's like the key, the secret of carnival. The spectator can not only appreciate and praise and be part of it, but it also can defend it in that political way outside of the carnival.

Clary Salandy:

Unlike going to the theatre and sitting down and somebody's dancing on stage and you're sitting, the dancers' energy should make you dance, and if I stand in front of you dancing and you stop and you look at me, I don't think I've achieved something. When I dance and I look at you, and you start dancing, we've done it.

Vox pop:

If you feel right, whether you're wearing a costume or not, you still feel like you're a part of the whole family.