



Carnival and the performance of heritage

Artistic traditions perspective: Ruth Tompsett

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In carnival today you do sometimes see a political point being made. Perhaps a band who do look specifically to draw on a political theme is the band Yaa Asantewaa, and Yaa Asantewaa have created bands that critique our society today. They also near abolition time told the story, if you like, of abolition and they had interesting twists – it lasted for three years, it was a trilogy – now, for example, when you saw coming down the street a section in this band who were white or black, they wore wigs, and had 18th century costume on, you immediately looked and smiled. They were wearing garments, which you associate so much with the white, 18th century colonisers and here we have black and white wearing these. The colouring is orange, gold, cream, white in a way that would never have appeared, I think, in the 18th century so you're given a whole new kind of colour palette, bright, carnivalesque, and they are dancing sort of minuets and so on. When they stop they're giving us a short performance of something minuet-ish and so on, and you cannot but smile as you see it, partly because of the mixture of the black and white players, partly because in their dancing there is mimicry.

There is also the telling of a story – here we are, we're looking at abolition – who were the people who were in charge then? And we're getting a play of it, giving it other twists, using a new carnival palette, and characters are often complex in that way. A very remarkable example I think is a mas, and if I may just say that a mas – a costume is only a costume, it cannot be a mas until it is put on and played because a mas is both what you're wearing and then the playing of it, the giving life to a character, and that life has to come from inside the player, the player has to feel it to play it, very much as Clary Salandy speaks of herself. In 1989 Clary was preparing a band, not in fact her own band, it just pre-dated her having her own band and she still worked with Stardust, and nearer to the time of carnival the Tiananmen Square, the massacre at Tiananmen Square happened, and she talks of how this impressed her. She felt I must this year in carnival reflect that, I cannot go forward only with the theme we have. She created a gigantic carnival puppet, and a carnival puppet is a gigantic character which is worn through a backpack on the player and often the player themselves disappear because the character will be as tall as the player again, or even twice as tall, and this was the case with '*Shadow over Tiananmen Square*', that was the title at the time of this character, this mas.

It was a towering masquerade. When I came up Ladbroke Grove and then caught sight of it I was gobsmacked, I was, again it was one of those circumstances where your mouth falls open and you gasp, you forget to breathe. What she had done was to create an obviously Chinese character, scowling. This huge head and face towering up way above everybody, and then a costume that this character wore was a chequer board, it was black and white squares, and this was Clary saying this is rigidity, there is no colour here, and his hands and arms were manipulated by the mas player, the mas player right down at the bottom looking tiny was all in colour, and to Clary this was the people, this represented the people whose lively imaginations could embrace other futures, other ideas. This scowling Chinese character, his hands had rods coming out which the little character below held, so you're first looking at it, it looked as though this towering character had a puppet, a little colourful puppet he was manipulating, but then of course you saw that it was the mas player who held these sticks, so that wonderful irony that, even though in Tiananmen Square the people were overcome, in some ways they weren't, it went worldwide, we all know of that event, it still resonates and in her masquerade Clary had the player representing the people manipulating the great Tiananmen Square government character. This is what carnival does.

Now there were people who saw this who said whoa, that is one hell of an angry Chinese man and there were people who perhaps said what is it? And somebody may have said to them '*Shadow over Tiananmen Square*', and they'd said 'hang on'. Now what carnival is about is not carrying a banner beside that with an arrow going hey everybody, this is Tiananmen Square. Carnival making something that is meaningful to the player and around, making something you can interact with, but not pushing it home. In essence we have something which is art and spectacular, and we have something which is really social action, and they interplay, and as a participant or somebody watching, or somebody dancing alongside you take from it what works for you.