

Transcript: Callaloo Carnival Arts 'Our Story' + 'Making Mas During a Pandemic'

Presentation by Marina Poppa at The Open Road Carnival Conference (North), 12th March 2022. Hosted by Callaloo Carnival Arts

I'm just gonna say hello and introduce myself properly visually because I didn't do that earlier. Hello I'm Marina Poppa, I am the Creative Director and Senior Producer of Callaloo Carnival Arts.

I am a white woman with short silver-grey-white hair and I'm smiling nervously at the moment and I'm wearing green on the whole, a green long sleeve shirt and a green tie-dye top.

I'm going to be talking to you today - first of all I'm going to introduce you to Callaloo Carnival Arts properly because although some of you may know about us and may have even been part of Callaloo, there are people who here who have known us a long time, many of you won't know anything about Callaloo so I'm just going to very quickly go through a brief history of Callaloo.

You can find us on Facebook or Instagram if you really want to know more but I'm going to keep it to a couple of minutes because you know time, time is tight.

This slide just has our logo on it which is a black and turquoise butterfly on a circle of hessian against a white background. We chose a butterfly because Carnival, which is at the heart of our work, is about transformation - of people, places and spaces.

The hessian is a nod to our Old Mas roots, so we started out as a J'ouvert band. It's also a reminder of our eco ethos so we've sort of rehabilitated the hessian as part of our branding because it's still important to us, we still use it and it's an eco-friendly textile so that's what that's telling you.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead* said, "Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." and that's what we try to do. I'm trying to remember that today as well because my head is still spinning!

*American professional tennis player Arthur Ashe (quote incorrectly attributed to Margaret Mead)

I'm sure it'll settle as the day goes on but please forgive me if I am slightly not quite with it today and if things don't make sense please come and ask me afterwards if there was something you didn't understand.

I'm not seeing the second slide now because I haven't done anything - Glen, can I give - oh, you've done it, good, so now this is the second slide which looks suspiciously like the first slide but says, 'Callaloo Carnival Arts, an arts and well-being organisation'.

So Callaloo began in London in 1995 when a group of us made, a group of friends, made a Mas for Notting Hill Carnival. Most of the group's founders were from Trinidad and Tobago living in London. One of those good people was Glen and others, other friends of ours at the time.

Our aims back then were just to have a great time, share Caribbean Carnival culture and with our 'Mudda Earth' Mas we painted our bodies, wore hessian simple, J'ouvert-style costumes and there would be a picture of those here but we didn't take any pictures because we just had a great time and we didn't think about posterity or standing here 27 years later and doing a slideshow presentation about what we did.

So, moving on. Yes, next screen for you and the next screen for me fantastic, we're getting there now. So yeah, in 1995 we were joined by family friends neighbours - everyone brought somebody - and our costumes were still quite basic but as you can tell from these images we did make quite an impression on the road.

Some of our group were at that time too living with chronic illness including ourselves or impairments, we did have them back then but we had a Medical Model understanding of disability.

Our politics were more concerned with race and gender equality at the time and we made minor adjustments but really, playing Mas wasn't very accessible in those days for anyone other than us and we didn't really think about it if I'm honest but over time obviously we've been put in a position by our own experiences and because we're now a professional organisation where we have thought more and want to think more about it.

So the text across the top of this slide reads, "Notting Hill Carnival 1996". Sorry, I said '95 earlier but I meant 1996, "Wassi Warriors" which was the name of the Mas and the first image shows a diverse, ethnically diverse group of people of different ages standing in a yard in Notting Hill preparing to play Mas.

They're wearing simple tunic-style costumes in brown and white fabric printed with West African symbols. They're painting themselves and each other with paint and cocoa from a large tin or two large tins on the ground.

The second image shows a very crowded West London street packed with Callaloo masqueraders playing Mas with hands raised in the air, hands and spears in fact raised in the air whilst a crowd looks on.

I might even be good at this by the time we get to the end of the day! Okay so this, is this slide is about developing our craft in response to diminishing capacity. As the years went by our lives moved on, some moved away, others sadly passed away and Glen and I moved North.

We experienced significant health challenges, we still loved Carnival and so did those people who came and joined us as we continued to play Mas but increasingly we were finding it really difficult to keep up.

So eventually after touring for a while and becoming more and more exhausted by that we started a Carnival in our own town, it's Mirfield Carnival Parade which is proudly presented by disabled people with access at its heart.

It isn't perfect but we've worked hard to make it welcoming and inclusive by doing lots of engagement work.

In fact a local resident, an older woman who's lived in Mirfield all her life, said, "It's like Trinidad Carnival's come to Mirfield!".

[audience laughs]

So, we'll take that! So on this slide there are two images from Mirfield Carnival. One is an image of a small blond boy looking down intently at the caterpillar on his arm and pretending to make that caterpillar nibble at the giant green leaf on the front of his costume and this is to explain the fact that we've tried to make the costumes interactive, especially for the young kids.

So this was a nursery group, a preschool group that we were working with and this interactivity in the costume itself helps them to be more occupied while they're waiting for the parade to begin and makes it more accessible for young kids and families.

The second image is of a group of young disabled people wearing dragon costumes dancing down Mirfield high street as the crowd looks on.

And I suppose, in case I won't say this later on in the presentation, this brings up the question of what some people consider 'hidden' disabilities i.e a disability that you may not know from looking at someone but as we've used the Social Model of Disability more and more we've found that, in fact, actually you never know from looking at somebody whether they're disabled.

You can't tell unless someone tells you that they're disabled or unless they're wearing a badge that says "Hello, I'm disabled!" or a sunflower lanyard which is often a visual cue because the actual impairment or illness isn't visible.

Sometimes the adaptations are but not always so really it's good to not make assumptions about who is and isn't disabled.

So this is nearly my last slide for this part of the presentation. These three images feature our work that we took on tour. They're a selection of images of people playing Mas in Callaloo at various places.

This top one is, sorry, the one the most left is from Preston, it's a young person in a skeleton mask carrying a skeleton puppet and the second image is two people in very bright orange - that was attribute to Yayoi Kusama - they're wearing pumpkin costumes and the third image is a giant Corbeau bird that we made for Holmfirth Carnival Parade some years ago.

We love touring and we'd still like to tour and we will try to tour again when we can but yeah the long day just became a bit much for us so we took a break from touring. I hope that we'll tour our 'Lost Creatures' Mas later this year.
Thank you Glen!

So, making Mas during a pandemic. This last slide is about what we've been doing since Covid happened. We have our own studio now where we design

and make the costumes and the parade art and we produce Carnival parades, including signature event Mirfield Carnival Parade.

Carnival's so spectacular so it really attracts lots and lots of people to come. It allows us to share our stories and engage with people in our own way and talk to people and perform for people who might not attend more formal arts events.

So the potential for inclusion at Carnival is really tremendous if we work together, learn about what works and embed access into our practice.

When Covid struck we did what we always do and actually what a lot of disabled people are really good at because we're used to having to dig deep and be creative and find ways to get through things.

So that's what we did, we continued to be creative, we continued to make Mas but we thought about how we might deliver it. So we delivered a virtual Carnival, we started to consider PopUp Carnivals in small spaces and eventually - it took a lot longer than we would have liked it to because of the length of the pandemic - but eventually we took our PopUp Mas into small spaces.

We took it to local care homes and to specialist schools and some of the schools nearby in Mirfield where we've been able to engage with people and continue to do that engagement to continue to keep Carnival in people's minds and their hearts and make a sort of Carnival joy, bring joy and hope to people and in the hope that eventually when we can get back out onto the streets those people will be wanting to come along.

Or perhaps it might be that we still continue to go and take it into those spaces if people can't access it on the streets then we will come to you.

These images show that we did manage to still make Mas - this one on the left is a young Black girl, she has her hair up in two bunches and a green headpiece on her head and she's playing out in the cricket field.

We filmed a Mas with people dancing in a socially distant way, we held Zoom dance lessons and then came together for one day to dance a piece and it was filmed and that went to a virtual Carnival.

This picture of myself wearing a butterfly, big green butterfly wings and 'watering' my colleague who's wearing a large, beautiful hoop skirt dress is from our Carnival performance which you'll see later on today and that is a ticket to our virtual Carnival which, yes, I'll talk more about that another time.

