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CREATIVE ARTS: GRENADA'S BEST PRACTICE



Report From the Second UNESCO Caribbean Symposium on Arts
Education for Societies-In-Crisis – University of the West Indies, Trinidad
Suelin Low Chew Tung

There has never been a sweeter time for the creative arts in the Caribbean, and never a sweeter time for Grenada, where we have a huge hidden cache of artistic talent. At the Second UNESCO Caribbean Symposium on Arts Education for Societies-In-Crisis, held last week at the UWI campus in Trinidad Grenada was well represented by members of the Grenada Playback Theatre (GPT), and by the Grenada Arts Council.

The audience was packed with top regional and other visiting educators who opted to view the GPT presentation over several others running concurrently. About 80 arts educators and practitioners from Aruba to Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago to the UK and South East Asia also presented papers. The

draft summary recognized that societies in crisis (SIC) cannot be solved without the immediate global implementation of arts education, inside and outside of the school curriculum to prepare our children and our young people to take their place in global society without losing their sense of individuality and cultural heritage.

It was recommended that the creative arts be implemented throughout the education system as a positive alternative activity, in collaboration with artists and arts-trained teachers, a position on which many artists, teachers and parents agreed. Used as an interdisciplinary approach, creative arts education develops taste, care and respect for differences in culture and artistic works students will come into contact with, broadens their possibilities of expression and communication, which will be used to effect enormous political and social changes, imperative for the development of a nation's human resource.

Ms Tracie Rogers, the ARD consultant who arranged for the group to do this presentation, presented a paper entitled "De Day we See Wind, Playback Theatre in Grenada" during the panel on *Arts in Social Therapy*. The paper touched on the positive benefits that the "therapy" that expressive arts have had on the members of the Grenadian community who have interacted with the group. Incidentally, the draft summary from the conference recommends that the Grenada Playback Theatre be recognized internationally as a UNESCO 'Best Practice'.

Hollis Liverpool, PhD, aka Chalkdust gave a resounding call for the involved use of the expressive arts to counter the rising tide of what ails the islands of the Caribbean and the wider world – societal ambivalence, violence and disharmony

that puts our societies in crisis. After all, he queried, “*do you know any artists who are criminals?*” He went on to cite a case where five ex-cons are now top Trinidadian calypsonians because of their involvement with the carnival arts as a positive alternative to their previous lifestyle. We were also informed of a proposal put forward by the Bahamas businesses to utilize the carnival mentality – the joyful commitment to a team effort – to triple productivity in the workplace.

Dr Pat Bishop alluded that “art, the well making of what needs-making”, involves the mastery of all skills ancient and modern, local and foreign, to build our people through arts education. She proposed that all people, especially our Caribbean people, need their “specialness”, and it is our arts that should tell us who we are and connect us to the rest of the world. The panelist spoke of weaving the expressive arts into healing products for our prison populations as well as other oppressive situations, to help restore their voices and their specialness. This was especially resonant in the face our Caribbean history where inherited systems are stubbornly substituted for people and the punishment to the psyche is as much an imprisonment as being physically bound.

The feature address by Alwin Bully of UNESCO touched on using Caribbean myths as a medium to solve problems, at a time where our schools are frequently places of violent conflict, and it is clear that students find it difficult to face their differences and solve their daily life conflicts. It was found that the inclusion of arts educations from the primary to secondary school level reduced the students’ learning and social anxiety quotient enabling them to think openly,

and to better communicate what they feel with their peers and teachers. Of course this skill is only truly effective in an environment that suspends judgment and listens openly. And at a time when our cultural gods die – when Anansi is replaced by Sponge Bob, Mr. Bully indicated that the Caribbean as the first pluralistic society has no alternative but to turn to our arts for survival in this globalize environment. Our arts and our society are inseparable outgrowths of each other.

Several panelists bemoaned the lack of ‘elder practice’, leading to a crisis of inheritance, where, in this post-independence era, we still lack cultural spaces dedicated to the arts; where we are still without legislation or a national arts policy, where we forget that our people and their resources are our capital. The consensus of the symposium was that arts education makes it possible to grasp the abilities that make the understanding and transformation of the realities of imagination, creativity and criticism, possible. Our artists, our government and our civil society must engage in discussions about the public value of a national policy to stimulate, preserve and diffuse the traditional art productions, in a society that encourages, supports and promotes individual creative expression. In truth, the transformative power of the arts to sway perceptions and change attitudes rests in arts education and cultural programs.

The World Conference on Arts Education is in March 2006, Lisbon Portugal.

Some of the many artists currently active in the Grenadian Arts scene include:

Agnes Flemming - acrylics, abstract

Chris Mast - sculpture from found objects

Elinus Cato - oils

Ethelstan Friday - oils
Frankie Francis - oils
Freddy Paul - acrylics, oils
Jim Rudin - sculpture from found objects and photography
John Pivot - sculpture, wood
Joseph Browne - oils, figurative, landscapes
Lilo Nido - batik
Lyndon De Vega - acrylics, abstract
Marie Messenger - raku sculpture
Maureen St Clair - acrylic, semi-figurative women
Michael Paryag
Oliver Benoit - acrylics, abstract
Rene Froelich - sculpture, wood
Richard Buchanan - acrylics, 2D and 3D works
Roger Braithwaite - oils, and photography
Sadna O'connel - oils on fabric, poet
Suelin Low Chew Tung - acrylics, expressionist
Susan Mains - acrylics, oils, figurative
Trish Bethany - oils, realism/figurative and photography
Victoria Slinger - oils, figurative