

Carnival Theatre:
An Empowerment and Transformation Model for Long-term and Lifer Inmates
at Trinidad's Maximum Security Men's Prison, Arouca

Abstract:

The paper explores the usefulness of Carnival Theatre as an empowerment and transformative process for long-term and lifer inmates in Trinidad's Maximum Security Prison. Carnival Theatre is an umbrella term for a process that includes the techniques of ritual, carnival, and theatre as well as the insights of restorative justice, mediation and transpersonal psychology. It is culturally-based, drawing on Trinidad's J'ouvert Carnival traditions as possible role models for agency and self-determination. Through engagement with traditional moves and speeches which both acknowledge and mock the social order and the status quo of the day, long-term and lifer inmates explore and evaluate notions of justice, identity, empowerment and transformation. The restorative justice, mediation and transpersonal psychology strands facilitate functional intra- and interpersonal relationships. Together the strands become part of a journey towards authenticity and individuation. The Carnival Theatre process exposes and underlines the need for strategies and techniques designed to explicitly address the *fundamental intra-personal base* of the Restorative Justice Policy. Its present application is not adequate for the particular needs of long-term and lifer inmates who, as the offenders, rarely if ever meet with the victims and/or larger community.

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Off Stage

During the 70s and 80s my Trinidad Tent Theatre Company gave a free Theatre of Carnival show every Sunday evening during a regular season aimed at children and young adults.

The intention was to preserve the characters and rituals mostly lost from the commercial extravaganzas of Trinidad's modern carnival. I wanted to demonstrate ways in which these same traditions and rituals could be used as tools for empowerment, transformation and authenticity. I also wanted to render our J'ouvert carnival traditions relevant to present experience. I did this through productions which incorporated local and global story lines. These Old Mas' shows paralleled the power struggles, fights, competition, threats, deceits and evasions of the Pierrot Grenade, the Midnight Robber, the Jab Jabs and Jab Molassi, the Dam 'Lorraine, Baby Doll etc.

What emerged, as well as Theatre of Carnival productions for the public, was the realisation that, while putting on a costume and engaging with the traditional moves and speeches which acknowledged and mocked the social order and the status quo of the day, performers could explore and evaluate conceptual frameworks and constructs, i.e. justice, identity, empowerment and transformation.

Eventually, by the late 80s/90s, a process emerged that I call Carnival Theatre. This is an umbrella term for traditions, methods and insights which include

1. Carnival/Folk Traditions which foster freedom, release in the body, voice, imagination and emotions and which allow the expression of the dark underside of a person (Gross 1986, 127-132).

2. Modern dramaturgical theorists who believe that doing (beginning internally) provides an experience that allows recognition, change and transformation (Buys, Thomas & Roy 1991) off as well as on stage. Stanislavski (1967, 2004) places emphasis on analysis through physical actions (reaching the subconscious through the conscious); Artaud (1993) insists on the primacy of the spoken word over the written; Brecht (2001) focusses on historical stories to illuminate our own social ills in order to attain a critical perspective; Grotowski (1991) demands a method of preparation that actually compels actors to be truthful/authentic (inmates should play their J'ouvert characters by playing, by exposing themselves); Boal (1992) insists that theatre is conflict, struggle, movement and transformation; Brook (1972) believes that truth emerges from any occupied space.
3. Psychosynthesis, which helps identify blocks and enables the exploration of the unconscious gradually retraining psychological functions so as to produce permanent positive change and transformation. Modern psychology recognises “the will’s central position in man’s personality and its intimate connection with the core of his being, his very self... (And) the will’s function in deciding what is to be done, in applying all the necessary means for its realisation and in persisting in the task in the face of all obstacles and difficulties” (Assagioli, 1984, 6).
4. Mediation which is the putative conflict resolution tool for the transformative process that is Restorative Justice (Bush, Baruch and Folger 1994, Kruk 1997).
5. The Enneagram Personality Inventory and Profile’s system of personality types, a psychological typology, and a way of understanding human personality while offering recommendations for improvement (Aspell and Aspell 1997).

6. The DJ Assessment which facilitates the recognition of patterns of functioning particularly in relation to problem solving, to power, choice and interpersonal relationships (Jones, Vinton and Wornick 1999).

Music and Curtain Up:

In July 2011 the Commissioner of Prisons, John Rougier, granted me permission to test the Carnival Theatre process as an empowerment and transformative model for a group of long-term/lifer inmates in the Maximum Security Prison in Arouca. We both believed that “In an attempt to facilitate personal transformation (and thus precipitate institutional transformation) we must honour the principles of equality, relationship and justice” (McCormick 1999, 306). He also stressed that “Best practice shows that inmate-run programmes are more effective than consultant programmes. The understanding of inmates by inmates is critical to turning one’s life around” (Address at Opening Ceremony of the Carnival Theatre programme at the Women’s Prison, Golden Grove, 2009). I believed that the Carnival Theatre process could afford the more institutionalised inmates the opportunity to re-visit and re-evaluate their stories and experiences as possible springboards to empowerment and transformation. I also put forward the possibility that reliance on “outside” facilitators could in time be transferred to the inmates and officers, thereby making the programme self-sustaining.

September-December 2011 saw the completion of the following participant entry points: the Enneagram Personality Profiling; the Don Jones Assessment; and an Initial Entry Questionnaire and a Basic Entry Record - both structured so as to gain facts regarding family, education, and courses completed outside and within the prison as well as the nature of the crime, entry and expected exit dates.

January-June 2012 saw a further development of the techniques, traditions, rituals and insights of the Carnival Theatre process through the compilation of a manual/workbook. The manual covers areas such as personal reflection for insights into self-esteem; offending behaviours; self-improvement; values; transpersonal qualities; the psychological development of caregivers and children; lifelong-learning; goal-setting for re-integration; self-management and self-reliance; nutrition/diet and exercise; hygiene; coping with stress; sexuality; sexually transmitted infections (STIs); drugs; HIV/AIDS; non-verbal communication; verbal communication; image; leadership; team-building; anger management; and dealing with abuse.

During September-December 2012 the programme participants trained in specific practical skills including camera, positioning, lighting, sound, staging, performing, story boards etc., under the direction of theatre and film/video professionals from *Sasi Caribbean*. This company also offered video commercial internships to two of the officer participants.

What began basically as a research project morphed into The Maximum Security Prison Brown Cotton Outreach Film/Theatre Programme (hereafter MSP BCO Film/Theatre Programme). We decided from the onset that I, as producer/director, along with my assistant Wayne Lee Sing, the assigned prison officers and inmate participants would be the performers and the researcher/subjects of the programme.

Together we worked out a constitution and I brought in the equipment (financed through private donations) for recording and filming, as well as cloth, dyes/glitter for the construction of basic brown cotton costumes, costume bits and pieces, books, light backpacks complete with folders, paper, pens and pencils. We also structured rituals around greeting, eating together (I would bring sandwiches etc. or a birthday cake, or an inmate's family might add to our humble celebration) and parting. We also expanded the experiential work through interaction with

specially invited mentors/facilitators. These experts in their fields facilitated theatre movement, stick fighting and choreography, voice training, composing and extemporising, calypso, patois chants, costume design, construction and embellishment, focusing, performance, filming and editing etc.

As a group we began a collaboration that produced a Theatre of Carnival musical called the *MSPappyshow: The Mas Partnership or the Costume Coalition or Playing Mas with Shakespeare*, rooted in local J'ouvert carnival ritual and folklore with appropriate quotes from Shakespeare for each character. My role was to outline the concept, choose the appropriate traditions, speeches, moves and calypsos while my colleague Wayne Lee Sing, with suggestions from the other officer and inmate participants, completed a satirical rhyming script.

One inmate used his excellent “extempo” skills to introduce the piece as the J'ouvert Bookman character. An inmate of 30 years, thirteen spent on death row, played our Midnight Robber and introduced himself as follows:

“I am the dreaded Midnight Robber and I have come to instill horror, plague and devastation into the mind of every mortal animal be he man, woman, child or beast. I come from the direction of the rising sun. Heralding nothing but darkness, death and destruction. I fear no one but all fear I. I am more venomous than the Cobra! More vicious than the panther, fiercer than the tiger and faster than the Toyota! Cool!

And now in de words of de Immortal Bard Shakespeare I declare like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*: Act 5 Sc. 1 and Sc. 3”

‘Oft have I digg’d up dead men from their graves,
And set them upright at their dear friends’ door

Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have with my knife carved in Roman letters
 ‘Let not your sorrow die though I am dead.’
 Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
 As willing as one would kill a fly;
 And nothing grieves me heartily indeed
 But that I cannot do ten thousand more.’
 As you can see we vex too bad!”

Shifting institutional protocols within the Maximum Security Prison meant that ultimately, the performance never took place. Disappointment precipitated a lively questioning and debate (peppered with ‘we told you so’ remarks) about the future of the programme. Consequentially we moved on, painfully, from reliance on institutional approval to a consideration of the Carnival Theatre process as a spiritual journey towards empowerment, transformation leading (hopefully) to self-realisation and individuation. A brief video was completed for the ICOPA¹ conference as well as an Independence advertisement for television.

We determined that The MSP BCO Film/Theatre Programme would depict a collaborative (interpersonal), integrated (inner and outer, transpersonal and philosophical, mind and body, emotions/reason and will), radical (gets to the root of power), unconventional (two media) work

¹The YouTube links to: 1) A piece done for the ICOPA Conference held here a few years ago at the UWI <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJEwHTrUO1c> and a 50-second short "film" done as an entry to the Trinidad Film Festival's competition for T&T's 50th Anniversary of Independence. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgIMyWaKVik>. These links are not open to the public.

of what Mi-Jean (Walcott 1970) called ‘big knowledge’ troubling (interrogating) knowledge itself in the service of restoration, empowerment and transformation. We would trouble established knowledge by ‘performing’ it. We believed with Freire that “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption” (Freire 1970, 54). As a collective we set out to use our four hours on a Friday to identify discourses and practices that affect empowerment, restoration and transformation. We set out to demonstrate to the greater prison population and their families, prison authorities, and hopefully, general audiences throughout the region, how the Carnival Theatre process troubles labelling, stigmatising and gender stereotyping and affects agency, transformation and individuation.

We wove theories, philosophies and methodologies as subtexts (laid out in Acts 1, 2, 3, 4 and their scenes) to the plot, music, lyrics and rituals of rehearsals and performance.

Act 1

We begin by acknowledging our lack of power (Batliwala 2007, 557-65) recognising the ways in which as a result power is sought; how it might be expressed pathologically, explicitly through violence, manipulation or coercion, implicitly through passive aggression and half-heartedness.

Scene I

We identify the phenomena of exclusion, victimisation, alienation, marginalisation, and labelling with the question of ‘recognition’. We understand that when an individual does not

experience him/herself as a fully recognised (validated, legitimated, accepted) member of society, he/she may then turn to violence; violence expressed in a failure or refusal to adequately harness social and institutional resources to advance her/his own interests and ends; or violence expressed through the development of a psychological identity and public persona of both victim (of the social structure) and aggressor (of those in his/her social world).

Most seriously, we identify this lack, this violence or lack of care with a reduction in both inter-relationship and collective agency.

We understand that the phenomena of exclusion etc. are extenuated, not ameliorated, by experience of the correctional system (Braswell, Fuller and Lozoff 2001, 72-75).

Scene II

We identify the problem within the prison system as one of recognition. Our retributive justice system mostly perpetuates dysfunctional forms of recognition. It gives rise to a 'them' versus 'us' bias and bigotry played out dramatically through power play - power sustained through the domination/subordination matrix within practices, institutions and technologies. We identified the life skills of most of the inmates as those crystallised around survival through street-smart and so-called deviant activities, making the possibility of a better and crime-free life post incarceration nearly impossible. (Howe and Rennie 1981) Inmate stories illuminated the fact that disempowerment precipitates and enables further disempowerment (Foucault 1977).

We assess the implications of the prison's acceptance of Restorative Justice as a philosophy and a process that acknowledges that when a person does harm, it affects the person(s) they hurt, the community and themselves. We examine the usefulness of this philosophy of restoration, this adjunct to the Retributive Justice System, for long-term and lifer inmates. Mediation

is its conflict-resolution tool and in its present application is useful as an interpersonal negotiation process between offender and victim. It is not adequate for the particular needs of long-term and lifer inmates who, as the offenders, rarely if ever meet with the victims and/or larger community.

The Carnival Theatre process exposes and underlines the need for strategies and techniques designed to explicitly address the *fundamental intra-personal base* of the Restorative Justice Policy. We see the need for a dialogue between the various sub-personalities and ‘voices’ within the individual (Assagioli 1986). By deliberating questions such as “what gives me unity as a person?” we initiate vivid and powerful experiences, which remind us that we are infinitely more than whatever we *think* we are; more than criminal, poet, teacher, mother, father, or insurance salesperson.

Scene III

We set out our methodology, which is *intersectional* in its inter- and multi-disciplinary approach, particularly in describing disempowerment; *individual* in focusing on *intrapersonal* transformation in the inner life of the individual; and *inductive* in its empirical, bottom-up approach.

Scene IV

We spell out the umbrella term Carnival Theatre as a process which engages with theories and methods already outlined in the Offstage/Introduction i.e. Mediation, Carnival/Folk Traditions, Modern Dramaturgical theorists, Psychosynthesis, The Enneagram Personality Inventory and Profile, The DJ Assessment etc. These methods are ‘put into practice’ through engagement with our MSP Film/Theatre Manual/Workbook and through interaction with specially invited mentors/facilitators for theatre movement, stick fighting and choreography, voice training,

composing extempo and calypso, patois chants, costume design, construction and embellishment, focusing and performance, for example.

Act 2

We define key concepts and critical terms required for an analysis of the Carnival Theatre process and its relationship to personal transformation. We begin with power, “the moving substrate of force relations which...are always local and unstable” (Foucault 1990, 3).

Scene I

We turn to the social sciences looking to power as resource and as a process of inter-relation between parties and not as a simple measure of force (Blalock 1989, Ellis and Anderson 2005). While process theory does not underestimate the challenges in engaging with large established institutions and their accompanying discourses i.e. law, correctional services, education and so on, its *raison d'être* is that all is not lost. Transformation is possible and this transformation is capable of social expression and instantiation. It takes the emphasis off the accumulation of resources onto their skillful deployment.

Since the lived reality of the inmates is almost complete disenfranchisement from authorised forms of power, developing the notion that “I am a powerful, capable and authentic human being” became the important function of the MSP BCO Film/Theatre Programme. We looked to a *process* theory of power, which entails *performance* resulting in *production*. We saw *Performance* as a developmental process that facilitates re-empowerment. *Production* is where the skills emerge that can later be deployed in the market place i.e. specific skills emerged as we developed, wrote and taped educational life skills interactive pieces.

Scene II

We move to the MSP BCO Film/Theatre Programme's engagement with ritual. Rooting everything in the physical, we 'jump up' using elementary ritualistic sensory-motor experiences such as up and down, in and out and left and right; we use calypsos, which urge us to 'move to the right, move to the left', 'put your hand in the air', 'get something and wave', or 'jump, jump' which become mantras inducing a meditation on the basic experiences of the body. Such meditation Campbell asserts is a persistent feature of human civilisation and Geertz discusses as an interpretative tool for the explanation of human society (Campbell 1976, 135-298, Geertz 1993, 27-29). The Carnival Theatre process deploys and appropriates the symbolic content of ritual critically to facilitate growth, development, transformation and autonomy. Using Rorty (1988, 257-282) who suggested a post-modern liberalism in which autonomy was simply the best argument at the moment, and Ricoeur's (1969, 349-350) emphasis on a place 'beyond' the critical to a 'second naiveté', we argue that our local myths/stories around a J'ouvert experience can be deployed and engaged in the service of individual autonomy and identity.

Scene III

We move to a transpersonal conception of transformation and acknowledge that human existence consists of multiple layers of reality, the physical, the organic and the symbolic. Our agenda is to use transformation, understood in this way, to search for hypocrisies, double standards, and conscious or unconscious exclusions hidden by ideology. A starting point in interrogating these disguised contradictions is in the area of gender.

Scene IV

We take on board Barriteau's (1998) description of gender as a social construct. We look to the work of Butler (1990) and identify with her insistence on identity through performativity, applying this insight as we perform the J'ouvert characters. Butler also provides an opening for

subversive action. The ‘inversion’ displayed by the J’ouvert carnival characters depicts one example of how Trinidad’s ole’ mas’ and J’ouvert carnival traditions themselves trouble gender.

Scene V and V1

We remember the subversion of the early J’ouvert characters. We remember, through enactment, the jamettes, the stickfighters, prostitutes, chantuelles, matadors and dustmen who lived in appalling conditions in the barrack yards of East Port of Spain; who played their mas’ disrespectful of the mores of polite society and found in Carnival a necessary, empowering release from their daily struggle.

We perform the jamette/J’ouvert characters to challenge entrenched identities of victimhood and postponed responsibility. Performance allows us to occupy a space in which to see ourselves and our situations in a new way that involves choosing and debate. Performance allows the possibility to experience transformative ‘moments’ as we make conscious and examine the discourses and practices that affect empowerment (Mosedale 2005, 243-257). We look to Gebser (1985, 37) and his insistence that many of the structures of consciousness are made explicit in the process of theatre.

Empowerment and transformation through the Carnival Theatre process mean appropriating our local archetypes as an opportunity to understand how “carnival offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (Bakhtin 1984, 34) and to see, perhaps, that "A culture, imperceptibly deviating from empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes frees itself sufficiently to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones" (Foucault 1989, xxii).

Act 3

Scenes 1 & 2

We examine an intersectional model of personal identity, an integrated account that pays attention to the phylogenetic/collective (Habermas 1997; Rasmussen 1990, 9-12), and the ontogenetic/individual elements of personal identity (Taylor 1991, 32-3). We see a person as an historical being, grounded in and formed by memories, traumas, repressed fears and historical injustices. With Gebser we believe that we are co-authors of our struggles in life, dismissing concepts of ‘chance’ and ‘destiny’ (Gebser 1985, 41). We replace them with the idea of manifesting inner intentions (Wilber 1981, 1996, 250).

Act 4

Scene I

We describe the Carnival Theatre process philosophically as post-modern in rejecting foundationalism, natural law, essentialism etc. and Kantian in embracing autonomy and dignity.

Scene II

We draw on Assagioli (1984), Jung (1983, 87) and Wilber (2007, 120-122) to describe the Carnival Theatre process as transpersonal, setting out the relevant aspects of a transpersonal approach in its rejection of reductive materialism, its re-imagining of the role of thinking and its reconsidering forms of logic.

We look to Wilber (2000), Murphy (1992) and Thompson (1981), who make much use of contemplative traditions often referring to Murti (1960, 211-212). Murti, in his classic study of “Middle Path” Buddhism, explains why thinking - intellectual processing - does not yield full insight into a matter of personal transformation “thought does not exhaust the modes of our

cognition” (Murti 1960, 330). There are understandings and ways of knowing that exist beside and complement disciplined thinking i.e. intuition, hunch, and the sub-conscious and dream work.

Scene III

We define authenticity as the quality of relationship to self, other and process (Sartre 1984, 93–94). We see authenticity as being closely linked to transformation, the central theme of our programme, but also distinct from transformation. Although there can be authenticity without transformation, particularly in its outward political expression, there is no healthy transformation without authenticity.

Scene IV

Since the Carnival Theatre process seeks to be politically emancipative we draw on the Frankfurt School and critical theory. We link its Marxist understanding of the collective with Jung’s conception of the collective unconscious. We address both believing that by facilitating *intrapersonal* change à la Jung, *interpersonal* change à la Marx occurs.

Scene V

We examine what it means to be epistemologically embodied. The Carnival Theatre process focuses on and is located in the body. We reject a dualism that historically prioritises the “mind” over the “body.” We recognise the body as the venue for and conduit of emotional trauma and transformation. We believe that all personal change is embodied change.

Act 5

We move beyond, below and above the theory to the practical, to experiential work. Each session begins ritually with individual greetings until finally we all sit in a circle. This may lead to engagement with a particular section of the manual/workbook, or to the need for clarification about

some theoretical, philosophical or methodological point already presented and discussed i.e. responsibility-taking in spite of life circumstances and problems. (Glasser 1999).

At some point there is physical engagement which will entail learning or rehearsal of movements, chants, calypsos, monologues etc. If some teaching vignettes around perhaps anger, violence, best communication practices, empowerment, authenticity or transformation are worked out they will be filmed/taped. Indeed each session is taped and downloaded onto the programme's computer.

Homework is set out for the next session and we conclude with more informal discussions around national and world news and issues as we eat the sandwiches/snacks provided by me.

In September 2016 we began a new two-year programme. Three inmates and one Officer have moved on to become trainee facilitators. They take participants through the manual, help develop appropriate scripts for performance in venues outside the prison and run necessary rehearsals on Monday and Wednesday. This is the main way in which we can establish the programme as a self-sustaining one for long-term and lifer inmates. The new Superintendent of Prisons is now in the process of allocating specific spaces for storage, filming and classwork. Some basic funding has been promised to replace/upgrade our donated equipment. We have also been promised our own compact sound system with six (6) body microphones.

Epilogue

Thus far we conclude that the Carnival Theatre process is uncomfortable with happy endings, resolved outcomes or anything that smacks of easy results. Instead, we recognize that the most authentic life still has ephemeral, fallible and incomplete aspects and elements. We are in good company. T.S. Elliot said that there is no being 'right' about Shakespeare; the best we can

hope for is to be wrong about him in a new way. In this sense, the best possible outcome of the Carnival Theatre process is to get things ‘wrong’ but in a fresh and illuminating fashion. In the same vein, Samuel Beckett enjoined us to ‘fail again, fail better’. The Carnival Theatre process attempts just this, trying to fail better than before.

The Carnival Theatre process, like the Trinidad Carnival itself, is characterized by offerings, attempts, initiatives and efforts that, once used, are strewn by the side of the road. There is only looking forward, trying again, showing up. This is perhaps the first reason for focusing the process in the prison system. It is because in prison, the main freedom the incarcerated participants, and indeed the officers and this writer have, is to ‘show up’, to be present in mind and body, to attend with our senses.

This gives us a second reason that helps explain this focus on some inmates and officers at the Maximum Security Prison. It’s here that the Christian-inspired ethos of revenge, punishment, rehabilitation, forgiveness and redemption mates with the modern secular imperative of social order, coercion, predictability and stability. The Carnival Theatre process offers no religious solace or guarantee of safety. It does not hope for an order of things. From this perspective it comes from hell. Jab Jab.

A third reason for deploying the process in the prison setting is that the inmate/officer/director participants identify with and legitimise the struggle that the process itself experiences for acceptance, integration, inclusion, belonging and recognition. Obviously the notion that the performance, that the work itself, troubles knowledge must also embrace the fact that it is itself troubled by its plight to be embraced, acknowledged and recognised, while also insisting on its autonomy.

Our conclusion then is no happy ending, just the next thing. No dramatic outcome, just the promise to try to fail better this time. No cure, just radical self-acceptance and unconditional regard of the other. We hope this is enough.

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