

Carnival-Literature Performance

"Characters"

The Novelist: Earl Lovelace

The Poetsonian: John Agard

The Poet: Amryl Johnson

**The Steelband: Ebony Steelband including Russ Henderson &
Stirling Bettancourt**

**The Calypsonians: Vivian Comma aka The Golden Cockerel
Ashton Moore aka The Mighty Tiger
+ Calypso Band**

**The Masqueraders: Members of TRINBAGO, GENESIS,
MISTY, MAHOGANY**

Structure

Part One

Scenic Image 1

Opening:

The auditorium is completely dark. Only the closed curtain is slightly illuminated.

We hear a male voice reciting Derek Walcott's Mass Man. The voice is technically transmitted by the sound equipment, therefore it is not ascertainable where it comes from.

When the recitation finishes with the line: *Someone must write your poems*, we hear the sound of African drums from very far away.

While the curtain opens slowly, the sound of the drums dies away. Silence.

Spot on the centre of the stage where the novelist sits, face to the audience, on a chair at a table.

On top of the table: a book and a glass of water.

The rest of the stage is completely dark and empty.

A conventional literature reading.

Earl Lovelace reads the PROLOGUE of his novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*:

THE HILL

This is the hill tall above the city where Taffy, a man who say he is Christ, put himself up on a cross one burning midday and say to his followers: 'Crucify me! Let me die for my people....

[we do not repeat the complete text here, but reading this structure it should be read in its complete length in the book]

... so that now, one hundred and twenty-five years after Emancipation, Aldrick Prospect, an aristocrat in this tradition, not knowing where his next meal was coming from, would get up at midday from sleep, yawn, stretch, then start to think of where he might get something to eat, his brain working in the same smooth unhurried nonchalance with which he moved his feet, a slow, cruising crawl which he quickened only at Carnival.

The light changes and we hear again the sound of African drums transmitted by the sound equipment, this time louder, nearer, coming from everywhere. The sound increases while the scenery becomes slowly visible by a special light effect: out of the darkness appears - first shadowy, then increasingly clearer - a motionless Carnival crowd which surrounds the novelist from all three sides of the stage.

[Technical annotation: The scenery is a perspectively elaborated assembly of black-and-white images of Carnival people, masqueraders and revellers, based on photographic material of the Notting Hill Carnival that has to be processed on computer and realised by a graphic artist and a set-designer. The scenery provides the illusion of a huge crowd surrounding the stage, like the choir in ancient Greek theatre. The black-and-white scenery will contrast effectively with the colourful costumes that will appear on stage later.

In the centre of the scenery, a rectangular space will be used for the projection of slides. The slides will show enlargements of individuals that form the Carnival crowd of the rest of the scenery. The slides will stand out from the rest of the scenery by a different monochrome colouring.

The set of the Carnival-Literature Performance and the use of slide projection refer to the interrelation between individual and mass which is essential for Carnival and popular culture in general, and also for literature. At the same time it will function as an extension of the stage into the auditorium and vice versa. The audience will face a kind of mirror of itself on stage. Some might even recognize themselves in the crowd.

Thus, the scenery offers the opportunity for the audience to feel like being part of the performance from the very beginning. But at the same time the fact that the scenery is in black-and-white is irritating and prevents rash identification. What we want to achieve: an ambivalent attitude of the audience as the condition for concentrated attention.]

The drums stop. Silence.

The novelist, now surrounded by the crowd, continues reading:

CARNIVAL

Carnival it is that springs this hill alive...

[...]

...They have the tune that will sing their person and their pose, that will soar over the hill, ring over the valley of shacks, and laugh the hard tears of their living when, for Carnival, they enter Port of Spain.

When the novelist stops reading, we hear a steeldrum solo from far away. The light changes.

Pan players enter the stage from left and right, pan around their neck, and stand in front of the scenery, motionless, quiet. A semicircle around the novelist who continues reading:

CALYPSO

Up on the hill with Carnival coming, radios go on full blast, trembling these shacks, booming out calypsos, the songs that announce in this season the new rhythms for people to walk in, rhythms that climb over the red dirt and stone, break-away rhythms that laugh through the groans of these sights, these smells, that swim through the bones of these enduring people so that they shout: Life! - Slide projection: enlarged individual in the centre of the scenery. In the following abbreviated by H - They cry: Hurrah! - H - They drink a rum and they say: Fuck it! - H - They walk with a tall hot beauty between the garbage and dog shit, proclaiming life, exulting in the bare bones of their person and their skin. - H -

Up on the hill with Carnival coming and calypso tunes swimming in the hair of these shacks, piercing their nostrils, everybody catches the spirit and these women with baskets and with their heads tied, these women winding daily down this hill on which no buses run, tramping

down this asphalt lane slashed across this mountain's face, on their way, to Port of Spain city, to market, to work as a domestic, or to other menial task they inherit because of their beauty; - H - these women, in this season, bounce with that tall delicious softness of bosom and hip, their movements a dance, as if they were earth priestesses heralding a new spring. - H - The children dance too, - H - coming home from school in the hot afternoon when the sun has cooked the castles of dog shit well, so that its fumes rise like incense proper to these streets. They dance, - H - skipping along, singing calypsos whose words they know by heart already, - H - swishing their skirt tails, moving their waists, laughing, their laughter scattering like shells into the hard flesh of the hill. - H - Dance! There is dancing in the calypso. - H - Dance! If the words mourn the death of a neighbour, the music insists that you dance; - H - if it tells the troubles of a brother, the music says dance. - H - Dance to the hurt! Dance! - H - If you catching hell, dance, - H - and the government don't care, dance! - H - Your woman take your money and run away with another man, dance. - H - Dance! - H - Dance! - H - Dance! - H - It is in dancing that you ward off evil. Dancing is a chant that cuts off the power from the devil. Dance! - H - Dance! - H - Dance! - H - Carnival brings this dancing to every crevice on this hill.

The steelband starts playing a Calypso. The lights change. The novelist closes his book, stands up and leaves the stage in direction of the audience. He sits down on an empty seat within the audience.

While the band is playing the poetsonian appears on the stage.

John Agard performs his poem *Beat it out* along with the steelband tune.

*Beat it out man
beat out the hurt
beat it out
to the riddum of steel/
[...]
beat out the burden
of history
sound
beat it / heal it / shape it
confound
wounds
with vision*

[Annotation: John Agard's form of performing differs from the attitude of the novelist. It is interactive: directed simultaneously towards the pan players and the audience.

The integration of music and poem has to be elaborated in collaboration between the musical arranger and the poetsonian.]

The poem and the Calypso finish simultaneously. The lights go out. Dark stage. The curtain closes. The poetsonian remains in a spotlight in front of the curtain. He addresses the audience directly with the poem
Poetry Jump-Up:

POETRY JUMP-UP

*Tell me if ah seeing right
Take a look down de street
Words dancin
words dancin
till dey sweat
[...]
Dis is poetry carnival
dis is poetry bacchanal
so come on everybody
join de celebration
all yu need is plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration
plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration*

After finishing the poem, John Agard disappears behind the curtain.
The curtain opens.

* * * * *

Scenic Image 2

The stage is lighted. The scenery is still the black-and-white Carnival crowd.
In the centre stands the poet.
Amryl Johnson performs the poem *Far Cry*:

*FAR CRY
Loud voices in the market place
barter with wily vendors in head ties
The ample hips sway to an awareness
of their sensuality
The touch and feel of their own
uniqueness
The memory plays tricks
and I saw them
 coming out of the frightened jungle
 still coming
 coming
[...]
All heads turn to listen once again
to the sound which had them swaying their
hips but only one may feel the filaments
which tease the comprehension when she
finds herself
 coming when the drum mutation calls
 *still coming**

*coming
to gyrate on the streets
on Monday and
Shrove Tuesday*

The poetry performance is combined with the appearance of *costumes*: historical costumes of the Trinidad Carnival enter the stage and surround the poet, silently, in slow motion. After finding their place they stand motionless, like statues.

After the lines: *...to gyrate on the streets on Monday and Shrove Tuesday...* steelband music starts from backstage and the costume statues begin to dance: historical dance forms that correspond with the respective masquerading.

The poet recites the last two lines of the poem:

*and be silenced
on Ash Wednesday*

The music stops. The dance of the costumes *freezes*: the costumes stand, spread out on the stage, as *sculptures*.

Only a boy in a Fancy Indian costume (we suggest: *Roland Noel*) continues dancing in silence: a slow *pantomime* between the sculptures.

The poet performs the poem *King of the Band* :

*KING OF THE BAND
Between the iron, the steel and the ding-o-lay
I see
the king of the band
Only so high
but already a professional
in motion
[...]
The world lies easy at your feet
For today you are king
The king of the band*

With the last lines of the poem a soft and melodic steeldrum solo begins. After finishing the poem the poet leaves the stage. The boy continues his pantomimic dance, completely lost in his motion.

He touches the sculptures one after the other and they become alive again and join in dancing in slow motion to the steeldrum tune.

[Annotation: This "scenic image" has to be choreographically elaborated in order to combine the dance of the costumes with the rhythm of the poem. For the production of the historical costumes the costume designers will need scientific advice.]

The light dims. The curtain closes.

* * * * *

Scenic Image 3

While the curtain is closed the steeldrum improvisation continues

The projection of a *dragon* appears on the curtain.

While the curtain opens the music fades away.

The scenery has changed.

Spotlight on the novelist who is sitting on his chair at the table at the right side of the stage.

The left part of the stage: the hint of a dark room. The only light comes through the half open door. Two shadowy figures: Aldrick and Basil are working on a dragon costume. The parts of the costume are spread on the floor.

Earl Lovelace reads from *The Dragon Can't Dance* :

THE DRAGON

With the door of his little shack half open, Aldrick worked solemnly on his dragon costume, saying nothing to Basil, the little boy of ten who came from somewhere in the neighbourhood of Alice Street...

[...]

...'Take it easy!' Take it easy: the words with which he answered every salutation and made every promise and consoled everyone. Take it easy, worked now into his dragon and its growing story of lives of miracle and manness and faith.

The light at the left side of the stage changes during the reading, illuminating the two slowly working figures and the costume which is bit by bit assembled to its full size.

When the novelist finishes his reading, Aldrick puts on the costume.

The novelist leaves the stage and goes back to his seat in the auditorium. His side of the stage becomes completely dark, while the opposite side is illuminated in a way which brings the now erected costume to its full brilliance. Basil stands motionless, watching the dragon.

Steelband music starts from backstage. The dragon becomes alive, tries to move with the rhythm.

Suddenly it breaks out of the rhythm and makes some quick steps towards the audience, aggressively. The music stops abruptly. The dragon's dance *freezes* in a gesture of threat. The lights go out. The curtain closes in complete darkness.

Spot on *Amryl Johnson* in front of the curtain. She performs the poem *J'Ouvert (The Setting)* :

J'OUVERT (THE SETTING)

*Morning is a conspiracy
in which the king
rules the roost*

*Beaked for a first crow
he is shocked off his perch
by the pulse
of a steel drum
[...]
The people slaved for it
now guard it carefully
release it
with liberation
without reservation

for J'Ouvert*

When the poem ends the steelband starts playing a Calypso from backstage.

The curtain opens slowly. The poet has turned and looks, with her back to the audience, at the stage.

* * * * *

Scenic Image 4

The stage is completely lighted. The scenery is the black-and-white Carnival crowd.

A group of dancing masqueraders is surrounding the poet.

After a short while the music becomes silent. Only a solo steeldrum continues a melodic improvisation. The lights dim down, the movements of the costumes become slow, but keep on being rhythmically accentuated.

The poet moves within the group, reciting the poem *J'Ouvert (We Ting)*, accompanied by the steeldrum solo:

*J'OUVERT (WE TING)
So many people in de ban'
we movin' like sardine in a can
Calypso vibratin' in we head
we arm, we back right down to we leg
[...]
Dis abandon to pleasure is drawin' we
to one conclusion of unity
Freedom was bought wit' dis in min'
a full expression ah liberty
so
dey cahn take dis from we
J'Ouvert is 'we ting'*

When she ends with the last line of the poem: *J'Ouvert is 'we ting'*, the music starts again with full orchestra volume. The lights go to full brilliance. Frenetic jump-up. Wining. The poet dances with the masqueraders. On the screen an image of a dragon is slowly fading in. When the image becomes clearer the atmosphere changes: The light changes. In the orchestra, African drums take over the rhythm while the melody fades away. The dance changes its character: from Carnival jump-up to ritual. Every costume performs its specific dance, slowly and accentuated, directed towards the audience, but all together move in the same rhythm. The poet leaves the stage.

The movement of the dancers slows down and stops at last in a *frozen dance / sculptures*.

While the lights dim to total darkness the drums stop.

Complete darkness. We hear the sound of chains.

The lights go on: cold blue. The same motionless sculptures on stage. The dragon image on the screen has disappeared. Instead a real dragon costume (Aldrick) is moving slowly, in trance, between the sculptures. The sound of chains.

Stage right, separated from the sculptures on stage : the novelist, sitting on his chair at the table.

Earl Lovelace reads from *The Dragon Can't Dance* :

TO BE DRAGON AND MAN

Up on the Hill Carnival Monday morning breaks upon the backs of these thin shacks with no cock's crow, and before the mist clears, little boys costumed in old dresses, their heads tied, holding brooms made from the ribs of coconut palm leaves, blowing whistles and beating kerosene tins for drums, move across the face of the awakening Hill...

[...]

...And he thought, Aldrick thought: 'You know, tomorrow is no Carnival.' And he understood then what it meant when people said that they wished every day was Carnival. For the reign of kings and princesses was ending, costumes used today to display the selves of people were going to be taken off. What of those selves? What of the selves of these thousands? What of his own self?

During the reading the dragon is wandering between the sculptures. Sometimes, according to the text, the sculptures change their position. The light changes with the ongoing of the text.

When the novelist ends with the words: *What of his own self?*, the dragon stares motionless towards the audience. The novelist looks up from his book and stares at the dragon. It is the first time that he takes notice of the stage. And it is the first time that the whole stage, i.e. including the novelist's place which has been separated from the rest the whole time, is lighted by the same light. The lights go out. Only the dragon is illuminated for some seconds. Then the theatre falls into total darkness and total silence.

The lights in the auditorium go on. The poetsonian appears in front of the closed curtain and announces a break.

* * * * *

- End of Part One -

While Part One of the Carnival-Literature Performance tries to make transparent the historical roots and the social significance of Caribbean Carnival by emphasizing *Earl Lovelace's* novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* which is the central work of literature in this respect, the second part of the performance would focus on the phenomenon of migration and culture transfer, the life and cultural activities of the immigrants during the fifties. The stage action of this part would include existing documentary film material, poetry and Calypso. Key figures of the implantation of Caribbean-style Carnival in London would appear on the screen and on stage: the musicians *Russ Henderson* and *Stirling Bettancourt*, the legendary *Golden Cockerel*, *Vivian Comma*, who would perform some of his classical Calypsos and present parts of his instructing and stimulating text *Carnival in London*, the designers *Lawrence Noel* and *Vernon Williams*. The poetsonian *John Agard* could play the role of the presenter who would perform some of his poems from *Man To Pan* and *Limbo Dancer in Dark Glasses* and *Palm Tree King* and at the same time pass in review the history which led to the Notting Hill Carnival. In contrast to the first part of the performance which was constructed with dramatic seriousness, the second part would present the serious topic in a more humorous and entertaining way.

The third part of the performance would focus on the development and the arts of the Notting Hill Carnival. A part of *Amryl Johnson's Rainbow Dragon Trilogy* could be used as a narrative basis on which the trinity of Mas, Pan and Calypso could be performed.

We would elaborate the basic structure of Part Two and Part Three under the condition that our proposal of Part One finds the acceptance of the participants of the project.

It has to be repeated once again that the final production of the performance can only be elaborated in collaboration with all participants.

C

Wolfgang Janzer, Marta Galvis de Janzer 1995