



Podcast discussion: transcript

The Arts of Carnival

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Discussion Panel:

Ansel Wong – founder of Elimu Mas Band, former Chair of the Notting Hill Carnival Board.

Ruth Tompsett – writer, academic and founder of Carnival studies at Middlesex University

Tara Hobson – Director of Carnival Village Trust.

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RICHARD INGS: My name is Richard Ings. I work here at the London office of the Arts Council with the combined arts team and I've taken on the lead for Carnival. The 50th anniversary of the Notting Hill Carnival seems a very good moment to celebrate and take stock of this extraordinary and enduring festival, the biggest of its kind outside Rio, with over a million visitors each year. It's also an excellent opportunity to look more widely at what carnival has become in England over the last half century, everywhere, north and south, from the Isle of Wight to Stockton-on-Tees, and what lies behind that popularity. I am joined by three authorities on carnival. Ansel Wong, who, amongst other things, founded the Elimu Carnival Band, was the former chair of the board that runs Notting Hill Carnival and works with the Windrush Foundation. Ansel, what are you hoping to cover in this conversation?

ANSEL WONG: Well, my key concern is really in relation to the development of carnival as an art form, in terms of creating that platform for excellence in the arts.

RICHARD INGS: We're also joined by Ruth Tompsett, a writer and academic who taught carnival studies at Middlesex University for many years. Ruth, what's your perspective on this and what's your background in carnival?

RUTH TOMPSETT: Well, it's a shifting perspective, I'd say, at the moment. From the 1970s onward I had a passion both for carnival but also for the culture. Carnival itself was presented as a disorder event far too often. As a teacher, I was aware of being a teacher for everybody, so getting it onto the curriculum at Middlesex University, on the performing arts, was a key move. I want carnival and carnival arts to move forward, and I love the way that it's influenced – it's British culture. It's really at the heart of British culture. And it is clearly rooted back to a Caribbean history, and that is our history, too, and people should know it.

RICHARD INGS: Thank you very much, Ruth. That's great. And finally we're joined by Tara Hobson, who runs Carnival Village Trust, London's two venue centre for the development of carnival. Tara, hi.

TARA HOBSON: Hi.

RICHARD INGS: What's your angle, if you like, on carnival?

TARA HOBSON: OK. Well, my background is one of event and venue management, so, with this experience, myself and the team helped develop and support our two venues. We have The Tabernacle, which is our trading subsidiary within the heart of Notting Hill. It's in a fantastic location, just off Powis Square, comes alive at carnival time. And we have the Yaa Centre, which is in Maida Vale, which is our carnival arts and development centre. Now within our organisation, within the trust, we have our partners, who are the Association of British Calypsonians, Ebony Steel band, Mangrove Steel band and Yaa Asantewaa Arts. So we're here to support our partners but also to support all carnival arts and all carnival organisations, and the way we can do this is by bringing those organisations, artists into our venues, working with them, working alongside them and just giving them that opportunity and that space in order to do that.

RICHARD INGS: That's great. Thank you. Well, there's a lot to cover here, clearly, but let's begin with the 2016 Notting Hill Carnival, and I want to know just what did happen in 1966?

ANSEL WONG: Or 1965, as the case may be. As, I think, like many things in carnival, it's contested, and behind that contested terrain are a number of issues, because the question is 'what is a carnival?'

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah

ANSEL WONG: Because if you want to talk about the birth and the origin you have to define it in terms of its essences. At the very beginning one is talking about what had happened in Trinidad and Tobago in terms of its carnival and the opportunity for people to reinterpret and to realign that in the metropolitan centres, cities where people from Trinidad and Tobago settled, and they brought with them that culture. They brought with them that desire to do so. And as communities settle here they recreate, reinterpret aspects of their culture and their art, and it take different forms. Whether it's at the Coleherne pub in Earl's Court where a lot of those things also happen

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yes.

ANSEL WONG: Whether it's at the nursery or whether it's the adventure playground in Ladbroke Grove, with Barry *Passard*, and others, who created that kind of ambience for Trinidadians to meet; whether it's the clubs that Junior Telfer managed, that played the calypso on the sound system and everybody went there to get their roti and to get their food back home, all of these things created impetus and a push for somebody to say, 'why don't we do this' or 'what about this', and it really created that osmosis and metamorphosis around things that eventually erupted in 1966. That is where the question becomes as what are the essences as part of that event that you can make sure has a link to what developed later on into the Notting Hill Carnival.

RUTH TOMPSETT: In some ways the fact, whether it's '64, '65, '66, whatever, it's got its roots so firmly in that historical event of slave trading. If you have a society where you exploit, you transport people away from their own area, what you find is that after, that clearly in the yards, wherever slaves were, they were still growing their own cultures. But you've got a model of carnival from French plantation owners in Trinidad, but you actually got a mix of other things celebrated in yards, at Christmas times, whenever. So you got a whole mix. And after emancipation it can come on the street and you bring the folk culture, you bring the dance forms, the music forms. So we've got something which in a way is replicated – you've got people who'd chosen to come to England from Trinidad, years later, and find they're not made welcome. So in a way you've got a resurgence. You've got a kind of, an event which, again, is 'right, we need to identify ourselves very clearly for ourselves', and I think the '59 carnivals right through to '64, that Claudia Jones instituted indoors, were very much doing that. They were reasserting a sense of identity and culture, so you can also see carnival in that way. It's a community coming together and being proud and needing to assert their identity and their pride, and I think that's something which for many people still exists but it also exists in the places where the arts have been taken to. They're using the arts to celebrate their own place, whether it's Bridgwater or Barrow-in-Furness or whatever. So those are some of the elements, too, I think.

RICHARD INGS: Thank you. Looking back, then, over those 50 years, what would you identify as the key moments of change and development in the festival, turning it into the international event that we now know? What were the milestones, do you think?

ANSEL WONG: I think the issues around governance and who owns the carnival, because, remember, the Notting Hill Carnival is the only unregulated public event in the UK and that in itself make us quite distinctive – and that’s why nobody can sue the carnival! (*Laughter*) So, for me, along that pathway there are a number of milestones, there are a number of things that happen, the resistance of some of the young people on the streets against police presence and brutality, the issues, ongoing issues that the artists have all the time to cope with, the intervention of the Arts Council in terms of this funding, particularly replacing the Community Relations Commission funding at one stage, so that is also very important because that kind of support is important from the Arts Council, and the opportunity in the way in which new developments are beginning to happen, the introduction of entrepreneurial attitudes. So you can see the complexity of that relationship and the way it is developing as an art form, as a major event.

RUTH TOMPSETT: The other big change I would point to is the way in which carnival groups and carnival artists and designers have been invited out to other celebrations which may or may not have actually been carnival. It may be the Lord Mayor’s show in Norwich or it might be a much more national event in Belfast or whatever. I think Margate gives a very good example of that. If you’ve got the scouts and the local nurses, or something, and then you’ve got Paraiso –

RICHARD INGS: - The samba band, yes.

RUTH TOMPSETT: – Brazilian drumming and a samba band, boy. So I think that spreading out is a very big, very influential and very ongoing change and influence.

RICHARD INGS: For all the noise and colour and crowds, Notting Hill Carnival is still just a two day festival. Most other carnivals around the country are a single day a year. Is that it? Is that all there is to carnival or...

TARA HOBSON: No.

RICHARD INGS: What is the stuff the average punter doesn't see or know about?

TARA HOBSON: Yeah, carnival is not two days a year at all. Carnival is all year round. Obviously there's peaks in activity at the moment. And there's so many different elements of carnival, from the masqueraders, the calypsonians and the steel bands. Now at the moment at both of our venues, Tabernacle and Yaa Centre, Mangrove and Ebony are practising ridiculous hours for Panorama competition, which takes place on the Saturday night. So carnival isn't just –

RICHARD INGS: This is not BBC Panorama –

TARA HOBSON: No.

RICHARD INGS: Can you explain a bit what Panorama is?

TARA HOBSON: So Panorama is a steel band competition. Its origins are in Trinidad, where, I don't know how many bands take place, a lot – hundreds – and it goes on for days. Here it's Saturday night at Emslie Horniman's park. There's normally about eight to ten bands that take part and play. So there's the practice that is happening at the moment, but that's every week. That happens every week. The artists behind, the masqueraders, there's workshops that are always taking place, the calypsonians, there are shows that take place. We have the Tents that happen at The Tabernacle with the association of the calypsonians. So it's not just these two days, and I think a lot of people don't appreciate the blood, sweat and tears that really does go into carnival, so, yeah.

RICHARD INGS: One of the things that struck me is, about carnival, I suppose with many other walks of life, there's a whole language around it and not everyone gets that language. There's extraordinary – 'jump ups' and 'moki...'?

TARA HOBSON: Moko jumbie.

RICHARD INGS: Moko jumbie!

TARA HOBSON: Yeah.

RICHARD INGS: I still don't know what that is! The one common word that you hear a lot, which, people may not know quite what it means, is *mas*, if I'm pronouncing it correctly.

TARA HOBSON: Yes.

ANSEL WONG: Yeah.

RICHARD INGS: M, A, S. Can anyone explain that to me?

RUTH TOMPSETT: Well, I think the exciting thing about it is that mas is not merely costume. Mas is... a costume is only a costume. Mas is the putting on of the costume and then the playing of it, the animation of it. The way you play that character, where you play the theme of the band through what you put on.

RICHARD INGS: So mas comes from 'Masquerade', then?

RUTH TOMPSETT: It comes from masquerade, but it certainly isn't just about putting on a costume and dancing down there in it. It's a way that you animate and you make something of – you give life to what you're clothed in.

ANSEL WONG: I certainly agree, and the thing is it's just not just a constriction of the word masquerade. It's also with it in a way in which it's been developed as a unique, distinctive form, art form.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yes.

ANSEL WONG: And the chief proponent of this is Peter Minshall, who, as you know, done a lot of work with Barcelona Olympics and so on, and what he has done is to create a distinctive definition as opposed to *carnival*, so what we have

now is oppositional interpretations of carnival versus mas. So for, my band, for example, is known as a mas band, not a carnival band, because we have embraced that concept of mas as a totality of the presentation, the theatrical presentation in the public realm. So therefore you're using the human body, to festoon that human body in a theatrical way with costumes, and it's the performance of that person, which, in the streets, because that's our proscenium arch – the streets, and therefore that performance that happens there is the masquerade, is the mas. And as he called it, he said what it is, it's 'a Dionysian explosion', and that is an explosion that you see as a member of the audience that passes in colour, in form and in kinetics.

RICHARD INGS: Fascinating. While we're talking about defining these things, one of the other things that we occasionally fund are melas – 'M, E, L, A, S'.

ANSEL WONG: Indeed.

RICHARD INGS: Now where does that fit into this picture?

ANSEL WONG: Well, I think the mela obviously has a very distinctive root within the Asian community, and it's also similar in its articulation in terms of its component elements, in terms of presentation, staging, the masquerade and music. What we have with the mas and the carnival is a processional element on the streets, and also, as Ruth has already alluded to, it's deep political, historical resonances that are different from the mela.

RICHARD INGS: Very interesting. That leads perhaps well on to looking at what this is about, the art and arts of carnival. There are five, what are they called, five schools, five types, five kinds of art?

TARA HOBSON: Arts arenas.

RICHARD INGS: Arenas? Now can you walk us through what those arenas are and what they mean artistically?

ANSEL WONG: So it's the masquerade, as we call, mas, and this is the costume bands. Then there are, accompanying that will be the sound systems, and there are two types of sound system, the one that are mobile, moving with the masquerade, and the ones that are static, who are sedentary, in one place within the carnival area.

RICHARD INGS: These are speakers with DJs?

TARA HOBSON: Yeah.

ANSEL WONG: Massive sound systems, boxes and so on, so they are the static sound systems, and the other one is the calypsonians, who are the troubadours, the songsters of the calypso as an art form, and then the final one is the steel band. And then, of course, there are other constituencies, which is obviously the residents, and then the stallholders, who are equally important because they provide the sustenance and the food and everything else along the route. And then there are local traders and social enterprises.

RICHARD INGS: Is carnival, then, about celebrating and preserving those traditions from different cultures, from the home culture, if you want to call it that, or is it partly about developing it? Where does the development lie?

ANSEL WONG: Well, I think Notting Hill is developing as something quintessentially British

TARA HOBSON: *Indicates agreement*

ANSEL WONG: In terms of the carnival. It has its roots, it has antecedents, it has its political connections and nuances, but what we're having over the period of time is something that is really distinctively British, because when you look at, over the last 20, 30 years of the Notting Hill Carnival and look at who are the performers there, you would see some really interesting things. We had the Rock n' Roll club from, I can't remember where they're from.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Folkestone, was it?

ANSEL WONG: Folkestone, yes, complete with a pink Cadillac joining the carnival.

RUTH TOMPSETT: It was fun.

ANSEL WONG: And you have preachers with their mobile systems preaching and telling you about damnation and so on, and right behind them you have Mangrove Steelband beating songs and music, and so there's that kind of diversity and that is unique.

RUTH TOMPSETT: There is a creative tension. It's still held and owned and led and organised by Caribbean communities. There's a very passionate feeling in those communities to hold on to it, to know that it owns it, in a way. However, there is no doubt that actually it is quite in a central part of British culture.

TARA HOBSON: *Indicates agreement*

RUTH TOMPSETT: This is partly because it has actually been pulled into certain kinds of events like the Queen's jubilee. So you find where there are national events or national celebrations of key importance, you do find carnival featuring there.

RICHARD INGS: It is really across the country, isn't it, as well?

RUTH TOMPSETT: But, apart from that, it is actually, it has completely permeated Britain. But when you go out to other places in Britain or you go to Berlin or Rotterdam or quite a lot of others, diversity is what they are taking from Notting Hill, and they are taking it as a model for creating something where if the Turkish people in Berlin want to come not in mas or masquerade but in their, the costumes with which they dance at weddings, that's cool, that's fine.

ANSEL WONG: *Indicates agreement*

RUTH TOMPSETT: So people can present their culture through this kind of festival. You can't even estimate the influence that Notting Hill Carnival and the art forms of Notting Hill have out there.

RICHARD INGS: It is striking, yeah, thank you, it is striking to see where it's happening. Isle of Wight may not be everyone's thought, but that's a thriving...

RUTH TOMPSETT: It's become a centre, in fact.

RICHARD INGS: A thriving centre.

ANSEL WONG: A major centre.

RICHARD INGS: I've just come back from Stockton, at the International Riverside Festival, which is a lot about outdoor arts, but there's a carnival there, and that was interesting because carnival is sometimes hived off by funders, or whoever, as a separate thing, but obviously it shares, literally it shares ground with the resurgence we've seen in outdoor arts activity and spectacle. I'm just wondering what you might think about its influence more broadly on other, on the other arts and maybe whether it's brought influences from those arts into carnival. Is there that kind of diversity, as well?

ANSEL WONG: Yes, it, certainly in terms of what we're trying to do with Carnival, is to also meet that influence and go forward. So techniques of costume making, whether it's vacuum forming or whatever, using the skills, for example we worked with English National Opera, and because the people who work backstage are the artisans, the people who are influential, and those Trinidadians and those Caribbean people who work behind the ENO are able to work with us. So we were engaging with those individuals, individuals who were making the puppets for, what's the puppet show? I forgot. Spitting Image! Were engaged, involved in working with us.

RICHARD INGS: Really? Spitting Image?

ANSEL WONG: Yes, in carnival, because we drew on the expertise of those individual artists, and if, they were excited by the fact that their craft, their work can find a home in carnival, because you don't think instinctively that that is something that you can participate in.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah.

ANSEL WONG: So we were opening doors, and I think more and more that is happening, and we try to link up with institutions. London College of Fashion is important in terms of bringing couture, fashion and green issues in terms of creating the costume.

RICHARD INGS: So 'upcycling', they call it, yeah.

ANSEL WONG: Yes.

RUTH TOMPSETT: I think, too, that there are companies like Emergency Exit Arts, Walk the Plank, lots of those kinds of companies, which weren't carnival companies, but you find them now joining up with carnival artists to produce, to broaden the skills, to broaden the scope.

TARA HOBSON: Yeah. The workshops that we've been running at the Yaa Centre with Elimu are, so we've had a mas, a large scale mas making, a moko jumbie workshop, which has been the most popular.

RICHARD INGS: What is a moko jumbie?

TARA HOBSON: It's stilt walking, so at a carnival it's the big stilt walkers. It has mainly been, I would say, carnivalists coming to the workshops, but I think perhaps that's the way we've promoted it, as well, so when we look at, for next year, to just push it a little bit further out.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yes - I think so.

TARA HOBSON: This was, this year was the first time that we've done this, so it's something we want to develop on. It's important to give the opportunities to the carnival community, but we do need to spread that out to absolutely anyone who wants to have a go.

RUTH TOMPSETT: I really believe there would be.

RICHARD INGS: Fantastic. So we've looked a bit at the artist and the art. Now let's look at the other side of it, the audience. Now Rhaune Laslett famously had a dream that led to the first Notting Hill Carnival, of all, quote, "races dancing together in the street". And a colleague of mine said at a recent carnival education conference that carnival, quote, "mirrors the population in a way that other arts don't." What do you think the audience takes from carnival when they're watching it and what perhaps do they take away in the rest of their life?

RUTH TOMPSETT: I think that, I think it's a very important question. We talk in carnival of spectators, but we, traditionally in carnival we also see spectators as participants, and although there are people who come, for example, to Notting Hill to watch or to go straight to the food or the sound systems, or whatever, and party, really, it's crucial that mas players interact with people who are watching and passing by, that there is a strong sense of participation. I think it was, Nadella Benjamin was being interviewed for the radio and she was asked to describe the experience of carnival, watching or in, and she said, 'oh, it's, if I hate you, that day I love you!' There is an amazing sensation whether you're there to go to the sound systems or you're, whatever, it really can be transformative.

RICHARD INGS: Now carnival is usually free at the point of delivery, a multidisciplinary arts event there on the streets for everyone of all characteristics, protected or not, to enjoy. Now, as with the NHS, this is clearly 'a good thing', but it shouldn't obscure a) the fact that many carnivalists and carnival companies struggle to make a living, while b) carnival can bring considerable economic benefits to the places it appears in. The Notting Hill Carnival is estimated to bring in around £100m, I hear, through food, drink, merchandise sales and so on, but how do we square that circle?

ANSEL WONG: That's a key -

RICHARD INGS: It's a bit of a poser, sorry.

ANSEL WONG: No, it's a key issue, a key tension, because sometimes, without the support of the Arts Council in terms of the Grants for the Arts and NPO funding – National Portfolio Organisation funding – it's going to be very difficult for some bands. Other bands depend on their client population to continue, and there are elements of what I refer to as the entrepreneurial aspect, where they are actually making money, but that money's being made over a short period of time. The traders and people along the route or within the whole of the carnival footprint make substantial profit from their sales, but the vast majority of the artists and the artisans would get a commission or small fee for their work. Some don't do that at all. They do it out of the love of wanting to create something.

RUTH TOMPSETT: I think real difficulty, there's real difficulty for steel band and for mas and in some ways commercial sponsorship is needed. Commercial sponsorship came in, in a big way, Claire Holder first brought in Lilt. Lilt required that the carnival was called Lilt Notting Hill Carnival, and I think that was a big difficulty for the carnival community and for many of us to actually have to rename it in that way. But significant money came in that way and could be given in appearance fees, prize money and so on. So this business of funding is a tricky one. A small band will go to the wall because maybe they're not good at knowing how to get...

TARA HOBSON: Yeah, they don't have the commercial know how, or -

RUTH TOMPSETT: Nous.

TARA HOBSON: Nous, know how, experience. And I think that's where steel bands, mas bands and the carnival community does need support. They're not, they're volunteers – this is what they're doing because they love it and it's their passion. They're not necessarily top end business people that are going to get loads of sponsorship in. Some are and some aren't. And I think that's an area that we need to develop on and help support the community.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yes.

ANSEL WONG: I think there's the opportunity, also, for some of the established art institutions to begin to become engaged in creating partnerships, creative partnerships with carnival bands and for the carnival arts arena to begin to look at ways of collaborating and developing. I think we should have a much more concerted structured approach towards artistic development among the artists and artisans.

RICHARD INGS: I wonder what the business, what a good business model would be for carnival, whether we're anywhere near it.

ANSEL WONG: Well, we – I think we're becoming increasingly, certainly there are certain bands that have really got it together in terms of their access to a demographic group that clearly have the money and are prepared to pay and can register online, don't have to see their costumes, so they'll see it on a picture at the launch and expect it to be delivered to them a week before in a box with all the, all-inclusive benefits that come with the costume, and that means to say you're buying into a performance and an experience on the road. So you get your costumes. You don't even come to a mas camp or anything like that. It's all delivered online to you.

RUTH TOMPSETT: But that doesn't necessarily, in some cases that doesn't produce an upgrade in the art form, shall we say.

ANSEL WONG: No, it doesn't. But it produces the money,

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah.

ANSEL WONG: For that band to carry on

RUTH TOMPSETT: So that is the creative tension I'm talking about, really.

RICHARD INGS: It's a question of quality. It's an interesting one, isn't it?

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah – it is.

RICHARD INGS: Because if you watch Notting Hill Carnival there are some bands you'd go, 'wow'. I saw Sunshine last year doing a theme around the oil trade, which was brilliant and is quite political, as well.

TARA HOBSON: Yes.

RICHARD INGS: On the other hand then there's another group that comes along basically twerking! Is that an issue, that quality issue?

ANSEL WONG: Oh, it is. It's at the core of what is happening at the moment in deciding what it is that's a development.

RICHARD INGS: The other big challenge, I think, for carnival is that first generation of carnivalists are getting older or have passed. What can be put in place to make sure there are future carnivalists that continue to develop, creating great art for as many people as possible?

TARA HOBSON: Um, even if it's something like a junior committee that then could influence into a board, but I think there needs to be more engagement on a serious level with the, with younger people

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah.

TARA HOBSON: Not just on a token level, as well, because that's where all the fresh, new ideas are coming from. Even the engagement with social media and digitally, that's going to come from a younger generation, and that's how you're going to reach out to people, as well, not just the workshops but you have to spread it in that way, as well, so I think it's, that's really important.

ANSEL WONG: Yeah. So, for example, we've got funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for our archiving of our carnival band, and we've created Key Stage 1 and 2 learning materials

RUTH TOMPSETT: Excellent.

ANSEL WONG: For schools around mas making and the arts. That is now available free to any school to be able to use.

RICHARD INGS: What for you is the defining feature of carnival? What makes it so appealing to so many diverse people?

TARA HOBSON: I think it is that, it's an accessibility of it. Anyone, if they wish to, can take part in carnival or they can watch carnival or they can be part of it, and it really doesn't matter who you are, where you've come from, what your background is. I think that to me is the essence of carnival.

ANSEL WONG: I think, I'm taking my cue from Minshall, as a 'Dionysian explosion', because what you see on that road, either as an audience or as a participator, is – you completely divorce yourself and you become something new and different, and what you're displaying is a grandeur and is a visual spectacle to an audience that you would not normally do in your ordinary life. It's positive, particularly around, we're in a period of austerity, a period of lots of social tensions, political tensions, and what it is on that road is a celebration.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Yeah. It's another place, it's a place where just for that short while you can be out of yourself. You can be anything and you can, you sort of, you exist in the moment at that time.

RICHARD INGS: Great. Well, thank you all very much. It's been a fascinating insight into carnival.

RUTH TOMPSETT: Thank you.

TARA HOBSON: Thank you.

END OF DISCUSSION

