

Fulbright scholars/puppeteers find That cultural link

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EVEN outside of the context of T&T Carnival, Superior Concept Monsters (SCM) is a remarkable study of trans-culturation.

Their creations are born of a plethora of cultures, genres and themes and are annually paraded down one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the hemisphere. It's no surprise then that two delegates from the ensemble have found so much to marvel at during their six-month pilgrimage to our shores.

"We've always described the procession art as a distinct genre of art creation, but because we're in Trinidad where that art form is embedded in every aspect of the culture we felt at liberty to say that we're sort of mas artists," said Alex Kahn as he introduced himself and his partner Sophia Michahelles at the Caribbean Contemporary Arts studio on the evening of April 6.

Michahelles and Kahn are the chief artists and puppeteers of SCM, a New York-based group of performing artistes and pageant puppeteers that is best known for its contributions to the city's annual Village Halloween Parade.

The two have been designing massive puppets and processional presentations together for almost a decade, and have been studying Carnival in T&T since December as part of a six-month Fulbright grant.

The artists' presentation gave several fascinating insights into what they consider relatively universal practices that permeate T&T Carnival, but placed emphasis on those aspects that are either unique to the festival, or uniquely refined.

Describing the Village Halloween Parade as a "carnavalesque space," Kahn noted how similar the event's growing pains were to Trinidad Carnival's.

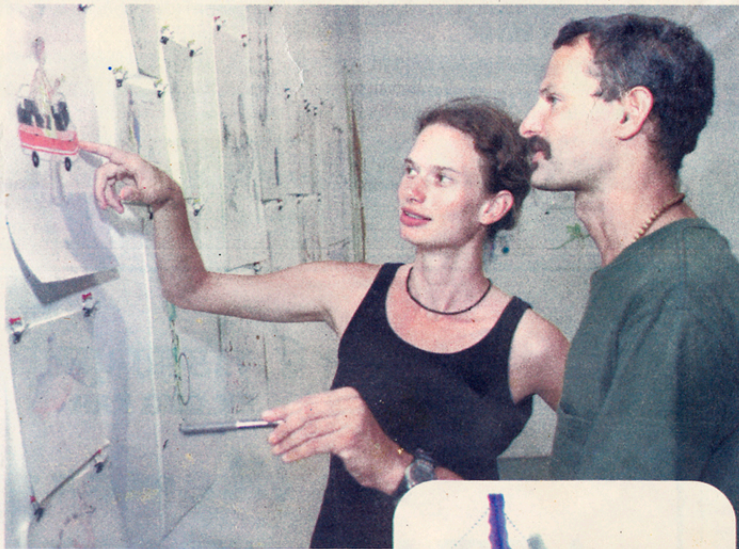
The parade was the brainchild of puppeteer Ralph Lee who, in 1973, celebrated Halloween by taking his show to the streets along with his peers and family. Over the decades, the procession grew to include tens of thousands of participants and over a million spectators.

"As it's grown, there's been a lot of protest from people who knew it in its earlier days. Like all events of this nature, it has its own evolution based on the zeitgeist of the time.

"Now there are traditionalists who want to maintain the parade as it was in its early days, and people who are looking forward towards where it might evolve," Kahn said.

The couple was somber but proud as they spoke about the Baby Phoenix that they designed for the parade in the wake of September 11, 2001.

"I remember distinctly feeling for the few days after September 11 how frustrating it was to be an artist. I wished I could have



ABOVE: New York-based artists ALEX KAHN and his partner SOPHIA MICHAHELLES.

RIGHT: KAHN adjusts one of his costumes.

been a doctor or something more useful. But I got over that pretty quickly when I realised that we were in a position to really do something for New York," said Michahelles. The positive response to the procession was heartening, and the phoenix became the centre of one of the city's first social rebirths.

"That year really confirmed that power that festivals have to bring people out in a situation of adversity," said Michahelles.

She noted that they had encountered similar feelings about Carnival, particularly in the wake of a series of bombings and an unprecedented, escalating level of crime.

For another ambitious project, SCM designed a 75-foot-long giant sandworm for the Sci-Fi Channel.

"When you have 40 people carrying something that big all at once, nobody really knows who's really in charge. There's this sense that the worm has a mind of its own and everyone is just following someone in front of them or to the side of them. A lot of people had this sense of instant community under the worm," said Kahn.

"One of the interesting comparisons we made in Trinidad is the very strong ethic of the solitary operator under the massive King costume or Queen costume. So it was very interesting for us to contemplate working in an environment where the collective 40-person massive puppet wasn't part of it direct-



ly," he explained.

Michahelles and Kahn discussed how they'd discovered the benefits of the "mas camp approach" to costume creation when a tight deadline forced them to seek outside assistance. They put out an online call for help, and "promised food and lots of work."

The turnout was larger than they expected, and it changed the way they approached their craft.

"A lot of these people were not artists, and maybe they just wanted to be part of some-

thing bigger than themselves. Others were artists who just wanted to be involved in a larger project," said Michahelles.

"We realised that it created a community of people that felt strongly about what they were doing. Over the years it has changed the focus of our work.

"Initially it was all about the end product, and now so much of it is about the process and the group of people. It creates an event throughout the (season)."

"We came with a lot of preconceptions about Carnival, and we had to do as much unlearning as learning. We benefited from our own naivete about the mas," said Kahn, a professor at the Maine College of Art.

The couple has long recognised Trinidad Carnival as a mecca of this art form, and their first few months here inspired them to create their own Carnival presentation.

"Our experience here had been one of frequently encountering boundaries that were frequently enforced by the prevailing environment of fear through the crime situation and the headlines in the newspapers," said Kahn who described how he and Michahelles were dissuaded from traveling in maxi taxis and visiting cultural grassroots areas like Laventille.

Experiences like these, along with a first reading of Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*, inspired the couple's own traditional dragon band, entitled *Rights of Passage*.

During their many interviews with leading mas men, the duo learned of the perceived reversal of present-day Carnival's status, with its exclusionary all-inclusive mindset, and the steady relegation of the grassroots community, which birthed the festival, to the sidelines.

"This was an interesting paradox to us, so we wanted to create a band that somehow captured that sense of mobility being inhibited in both directions," said Kahn.

Rights of Passage was the couple's own interpretation of the Dragon dance.

Corralled by beads-and-bikini-clad sirens, the barbed wire Dragon struggled for ascendancy. A Saga Boy-esque Bookman, whose body was comprised of pages from daily newspapers and phonebooks, recorded the symbolic struggle of our time. The experience, Michahelles noted, was enlightening, and broadened their perception of processional art.

"We took the same idea of using the mas as a deepening of inquiry and translated it to our attempts to grasp what Carnival is," said Kahn.

"I don't think we've fully grasped it. I don't think in ten more years we'll fully grasp it, but it was a very interesting experience for us to attempt to bring out our contemporary perspective on a traditional form."