Report from exchange to Trinidad and Tobago
Mari Pitkänen
Norwegian Theatre Academy

I am a second year acting student in Norwegian Theatre Academy, and my exchange took place in spring term 2017, from early January to March. I travelled to the southmost of the Caribbean islands, to Trinidad, to explore Trinidad Carnival, complexity of Caribbean culture and local performance arts. I jumped into a whole new sphere of perceiving culture, the body and the streets. It has broadened my understanding of arts, as it simultaneously has lead to confusion and new questions that drive me forward in my artistic research.

My exchange to Trinidad and Tobago consisted of various fragments of local culture and performance arts. I got the pleasure to be in touch with multiple approaches to Caribbean art, such as dancing, acting, fine arts and photography amongst the Carnival. I succeeded to create a firm network of artists that is still very much alive and kicking, and hopefully heading towards future collaborations. My regards for the enriching and powerful experience is directed to my professor in Norwegian Theatre Academy, Karmenlara Ely and my Trinidadian professor, playwright and founder of Lordstreet Theatre company, Tony Hall.


Carnival bands passing by on Ariapita avenue



Meeting the Mas players (masqueraders) on rainy Carnival Tuesday

My first touch to Trinidadian theatre scene was in a production called Carnival Medea. I was part of the cast and participated to rehearsals in the beginning of the process. Later on I had to drop out from the production, but luckily the time I got to spend with the group was very interesting and fruitful for me. The group consisted of international artists from Barbados, Venezuela and Canada together with Trinidadians. The venue was Little Carib Theatre in Woodbrook, Port of Spain. Carnival Medea revealed an interesting meeting point of cultures: The ancient Greek tragedy (Medea by Euripides) put into a context of Trinidad Carnival. The play had been re-written into Trinidadian context, and the characters of the play were playing traditional Carnival characters (such as Midnight Robber, Fancy Sailor or Baby Doll). The director of the play, Rhoma Spencer, felt the necessity of articulating feminist statements through the play.

My accommodation was organized within private sector. I rented an attic room with access to common kitchen and bathroom in Petit Valley, Diego Martin. The distance to the centre of Port of Spain is not too many kilometres, but as the Trinidadian traffic system is not very fluent, it took me at least 45 minutes to reach anywhere by public transportation. In Trinidad there is no railway, but only Maxi Taxis, and busses that drive constantly on the main roads at the daytime. By night the public traffic quiets down, and then transportation has to be organised other ways. Many people have their private cars, and major traffic jams are part of the daily life. Also, I needed to pay a lot of attention to security when moving around. Trinidadians kept on reminding me, that the situation of the country is unstable due the violence and criminality, which is unfortunately a big issue at the moment.

Living in Trinidad asks a lot of patience, because the perception of time is very different to what we in the Nordic countries are used to. Therefore surrendering to sudden changes and people being late is necessary. But not only as an unfortunate thing, but as an opening to something unplanned to happen. I understand that big part of my experience is not only when reaching the planned destination, but also very much in these moments and spaces in-between, like moving from one place to another or generally waiting for something. Trinidad kept on surprising me, and every day could turn out to be an adventure with its delights and discomforts. Trinidadians appreciate 'liming', which means enjoying time spend together or hanging out, weather it is a party or waiting for a taxi on a street.



View to Port of Spain

I was lucky to have the opportunity to participate dance classes with Belmont Freetown Folk Performers. This is a dance group that masters many Afro-Caribbean dance styles from traditional (Calypso, Bel Air) to more modern dance styles (Soca, Dancehall). Freetown has its roots in Afro-Trinidadian legacy, so many of the dance styles have evolved from African dances. Therefore Freetown dancers rehearse with live drummers, which for me was an immersive and unforgettable experience.

Carnival season in Trinidad is the main event of the year. It is hard to tell, when does it actually begin, as people are preparing their masquerade costumes for many months before Carnival Tuesday. Carnival was obviously in the focus of my exchange and research. Coming from Finland I felt totally foreign with Carnival tradition. Trinidad Carnival takes place both in the streets and in policed event areas, such like stages build in Queens Park Savannah, where Carnival Kings and Queens perform in their huge costumes. It is said that there are two Carnivals: the chaotic one in the streets, "the peoples Carnival", and the other, that is more policed by the government and happens inside closed areas.



Stilt walkers, *Moko Jumbies* ('Tall Spirits') training at Henry street, San Fernando. Cars are giving away the street for the stilt walkers.

The streets in Port of Spain are very special due the Carnival. Me and my Trindadian collaborator, actor, director and theatre-maker Tafar Chia Lewis, and my classmate from Norwegian Theatre Academy Kaja Mærk Egeberg composed a street performance at Tragarete road, by the Lapeyrouse cemetery wall. The piece was called 'The Land of the Free' according to the mark we found written to the wall. In the long duration performance where we researched what happens in our performative bodies, when camouflaged against the painted-white brick wall with beautiful mouldy black patina on it. We wanted to research the people's response to our uncommon perception of our *mas* (masquerade) in Carnival season, as well as our own experience of melting into that wall. Maybe the wall also changed temporarily due our art piece?



'The Land of the Free', street art action by Mari Pitkänen, Tafar Chia Lewis and Kaja Mærk Egeberg

At Carnival time, I took part to a workshop called Jouvay Ayiti – *Return of the Black Jackobins*. Jouvay comes from the French word J'ouvert and could be translated to 'breaking of the dawn'. Jouvay is a celebration that takes place in the Monday morning before Carnival, in the moment of dawn. It is a celebration of freedom, and the key moment is in the dawn, when it is neither day nor night. That moment in light emphasizes the constant change and uncertainty of life, and in that moment there is a possibility to realize a temporary "I" or "the other" in the performative space. Especially in Jouvay, transformative moments with bodies and streets are possible to merge unlike anywhere else. In Joyvay Ayiti workshop we built cardboard masks with assistance of local sculptors in Studio 66, in San Juan. The masks were inspired by heroes who we recognise as important in our personal lives, weather it is one's sister or a character from one's own folklore. With our masks we danced in the procession of Jouvay morning, and dissolved for a moment, accompanied by the constant thumping of Soca music.



Jouvay Ayiti. Finnish mas player in the moment of transformation with her mask '*Aino'*

As I hoped, my journey to Trinidad was not only an once-in-a-lifetime experience, but a more profound opening which seems to lead to surprising and unexpected choices for me as an artist and as a human being. Being touched by Carnival has lead me to research other sources to make art from, which I would have never get in touch without it: the playfulness of making Mas (masquerade) and playing it in intensified Carnival space, articulating "me" and the "other" together with the band, the transformation in the bodies in the pleasure of dancing, just to mention some. Somehow Carnival in its playfulness leads us to deal with something essential, something necessary for that time, space and body, which will evaporate soon after that moment is gone. What unfolded, is impossible to put into words. As an action it is echoing still, and resonating today and tomorrow.