The Black Cultural Center Explores Carnival in Trinidad & Tobago

In six days filled with research, master classes, tours, performances, lectures, food and fun the BCC Performing Arts Ensembles traveled to the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago to study our fall semester theme “Unmasking Blackness: Through Rhythm, Culture & Celebration.”

The October 10-15 tour serves as a “map” which Artists-In-Residence and performers will use to share the tour experience at the annual Cultural Arts Festival on Friday, December 5, 2014 and throughout the semester. The tour participants included BCC staff, ensemble members, Artists-In-Residence and Purdue photographer Mark Simons.

On the first night ensemble members were able to enjoy a performance by Carnival Institute of Trinidad & Tobago at Queen Savannah Park. Queen Savannah Park is a former sugar plantation which was purchased by Governor Woodford in the early 1800s. It is the location for Carnival and other cultural events.

Research Tour participants pose in an area in Port of Spain, Trinidad with a fantastic view of the city. It is also where people often gather to purchase food from vendors.
While visiting the Trinidad Theatre participants were able to listen to an engaging lecture by Dr. Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool, faculty from the University of Trinidad & Tobago and also participate in a workshop on Carnival characters. Dr. Raymond Ramcharitar, of the University of West Indies, also lectured.

Dara Healy, founder of IDA-KEDA, is conducting the “Anansi and the Drum” master class. This class included dance, theatre, sing and drumming. Anansi and the Drum is one of many Anansi tales. Anansi is a spider, and a major character of West African and Caribbean folklore. Eintou Springer, the creative force behind IDAKEDA, also served as instructor and prepared a traditional Trinidad feast for our lunch!

One of the favorite characters of Carnival is the Moko Jumbie. The moko jumbie is a stilt walker and dancer. This character is a Caribbean Carnival icon that was originally brought from West Africa. The word “moko” is derived from the name of a West African God and “jumbie” (which means ghost) was added by the liberated slaves after Emancipation. The Keylemanjahro School of Arts and Culture is one of the primary places in Trinidad where the tradition of the Moko Jumbie is taught to youth as a means of keeping them connected to the practice and Carnival community.
Samba School at the BCC

Over 40 students from all over campus gathered in the BCC Multipurpose room on a cool Thursday evening with one goal in mind; to feel the rhythms and beats of Samba. The Black Cultural Center hosted its first ever Samba School. The event was a part of the fall theme “Unmasking Blackness Through Rhythm Culture and Celebration.”

Attendees came with a desire to learn a new form of dance and expression but left with so much more. Yaasha Abraham, one of the instructors from Chicago, discussed the importance of understanding more than the physical movements. As she explained the history of Samba, students learned of the Afro-Brazilian diaspora moving from the northeast of rural areas of Brazil to the cities of São Paulo, and Rio. The music and dance was once used in religious rituals as a way for enslaved Africans to keep their traditions alive without the knowledge of the masters. During this time the samba dance was somewhat underground. With the migration to the big cities, more elements were incorporated. Abraham said “Samba isn’t samba without the influences of all of the different cultures that are living together with Afro-Brazilian culture.” She explained how the costumes’ sequins and feathers are from European and Middle Eastern influences. According to Abraham, Samba shifted from “something that was associated with being low-class to being one of the most popular representation of dance and Brazilian culture around the world”

The music and dance of Samba are intrinsically intertwined. Abraham offered students an opportunity to either be dancer or musicians during the workshop. Abraham explained how she was able to become a much better dancer by understanding how to play the music because the music and dance is so intertwined. “The rhythm tells the body how to move,” said Abraham. Jahari Dance Troupe member and Purdue senior Shayna Abel commented on how the workshop provided something for everyone. “My favorite part was when we split up into two groups and each group learned something different,” she said. “One group focused on music, and the other focused on dance. The best part was after we completed those workshops and came together. Everyone got really into the music and dancing. It was energetic, charismatic, and enjoyable!”

Liana Hakobyan, a second year PhD student in Latin American Literature, was excited to see workshops like this at Purdue. “I think such programs are eye-opening to many people who haven’t had a lot of exposure to diverse aspects of cultures from around the world,” said Hakobyan. “Although Purdue is a very diverse school statistically, by the number of international students, I feel like such programs are helpful in that they bring this diversity from the pie-chart to the college experience.” Hakobyan noted that this was her first time visiting the Black Cultural Center and that she is looking forward to her next visit.

By Ebony Barrett-Kennedy, staff writer
America still needs to continue the fight for equality despite the progress that has been made in the past 50 years, according to Julian Bond during a speech on November 4 in Loeb Playhouse.

A major activist during the civil rights movement, Bond studied under Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and led protests against racial inequality and Jim Crow laws. He has also served as a Georgia state senator, National Chairman of the NAACP, and is currently a distinguished professor at American University.

Bond noted the accomplishment of having an African-American in the White House, but he also noted that America has a long way to go to reach total equality.

“Almost every social indicator, from birth to death, reflects black-white disparity,” said Bond. The median wealth of white households is 20 times greater than that of black households. Compared to white Americans, black Americans have a 134 percent higher infant mortality rate, 570 percent higher chance of imprisonment, 493 percent higher rate of death from homicide, are 33 percent more likely to have a lack of health insurance, and the average white American will live 4 years longer than the average black American.

Bond also drew similarities between old literacy test laws and current voter identification laws, which aim to prevent African-Americans and other minorities from voting. This served as a reminder that America is still making an effort to move away from slavery and explicit racism. “We are such a young country, so recently removed from slavery, that only my father’s generation stands between Julian Bond and human bondage,” said Bond.

As seen in the civil rights movement, social change does not stem from a few powerful figureheads. Bond recited many anecdotes that highlighted the effort of many foot soldiers in the fight for civil rights. Most of whom we will never know by name. He called on the audience to take action in order to further the progress made toward equality.

Audience members were very moved by Bond’s words. “I liked how he spoke about how black people need to step up to the plate, especially young people,” said Alissa Franklin, an undergrad in the School of Agriculture.

Some feel that the black community has slowed down efforts for change after the civil rights era and more needs to be done with the changing racial landscape in America. “I believe that it’s starting to get worse. People are running around the fact that we’re in a post-racial era of America, and that’s not true at all,” said Phil Taylor, an undergraduate in the School of Liberal Arts.

Bond claims that the work toward equality follows the pattern of triumph then tragedy, where one step forward is followed by two steps back. “There’s been a lot of backlash because of the progress,” said Dr. R.J. Stephens, professor of Interdisciplinary Studies.

By Michael Sullivan, staff writer
Purdue alumnus, Larry Nath, hosted tour participants at the Trinidad & Tobago Diwali Festival. A little over 40 percent of the republic’s population are ethnic Indians. The Diwali celebration, one of the largest outside of India, is uniquely flavored with a Caribbean influence. Mr. Nath is currently Deputy Chief Officer of Citizens Bank. He is a graduate of the Purdue Krannert program.

At the D’Lime Inn tour participants were treated to a panel discussion moderated by local radio personality Vanessa Fou-tune. On the panel were steel pan artist Clyde “lightening” George, and Extempo artists “Short Pants” and “Lord Superior.” Extempo is a lyrically improvised form of calypso that is predominately practiced in Trinidad & Tobago. Ex-tempo artists improvise on a given theme given to them by the audience as they compete against each other. Audiences decide who is the wittiest and best performer.

Ensemble members also visited Rain-O-Rama-home of Calypso great Lord Kitchener. Kitchener, born Aldwyn Roberts, was an internationally known calypso singer. The home serves as a museum honoring his life, career, and the calypso tradition of Trinidad & Tobago.
After an early morning “Culture & Creativity” workshop in Tobago, with Mrs. Eintou Springer, we spent several hours on a glass bottom boat cruising the Caribbean Sea. Participants were able to snorkel, swim, and ride a jet ski! Viewing the Buccoo Reef though the boat was a highlight of the trip. The Buccoo Reef is one of the most accessible coral reefs in the Caribbean and is a protected marine park.

Drumming and rhythms are the heart of so many forms of Caribbean music: calypso, soca, and careso. IDA-KEDA drummers offered participants a chance to learn and practice some basic rhythms.

At a “Culture and Creativity” workshop led by Eintou Springer, on the grounds of Kariwak Village, ensemble members assembled in groups to create their own dramatic versions of an Anansi folktale.
PEEPIN' CALYPSO
IT'S CARNIVAL TIME!

DEC. 5TH
LOEB PLAYHOUSE
7PM

Purdue BCC
Performing Arts Ensembles
Tickets: $5 Students, $7 Public
“I can’t explain the excitement I felt meeting all the carnival characters in real life. My favorite were the Jab Jab and the Moko Jumbies. I loved their costumes and how portraying a character is a family/village line. I had such great fun and it was the perfect way to start my time in Trinidad & Tobago.” - Lindsey Mitchell

“I am loving Tobago! The island is very beautiful, and the food is fantastic. Today has been a relaxing, yet super fun day at the beach, as we took a boat ride and swam in the Caribbean Sea. The best part: working with groups in workshop today. It was great to work with other ensembles to bring a story performance together” - Donica Owlesly

“I found the Hindu holiday celebration to be extremely interesting. It is one thing to read about and learn of a particular religion through a book or documentary. It is another to experience it. This celebration was very eye opening and a bit overwhelming for me. I learned much of the religious practices and beliefs of the people. It was a blessing to be able to attend the Diwali festival.” - Jasmin Reid

“Today was such a tremendous experience with the IDAKEDA workshop. I feel as my creativity was challenged and I feel a lot closer to my culture. I love it here!” - Kimberly Graves