Peter Minshall

A Voice to Add to the Song of the Universe

an interview by Richard Schechner and Milla C. Riggio

14 February 1997, Port of Spain, Trinidad

Interviewers’ note: For the most part, Peter Minshall speaks a crisp Etonian English. But from time to time, out of excitement, delight, and choice, he breaks into Trinidadian. In editing the interview, we have tried to keep those locutions.

MINSHALL: The other day just outside the mas’ camp I was talking to someone who had come down from Jamaica, and in the middle of a very relaxed conversation she said, “But your accent doesn’t sound Trinidadian.” And I said, “I have two languages. The one in which I am expressing myself now—and my native language.” I think in both these languages, though when I am most excited, I revert to my native tongue both in thought and in speech. I guess what you’re seeing comes out of the natural animation that goes with speaking Trinidadian.

In 1974, a year of revelation and change for me, I was with a colleague of mine I’d known since I was a schoolboy, Arnold Rampersad, who wrote a biography of Arthur Ashe [1993] and also a book on Langston Hughes [1986]. He was revisiting Trinidad, and we had played Joujouy. So we decided to go for a ride up near Maracas. There we met by chance a 92-year-old woman, Elise Rondon, who sold sugar cakes and pickled pomseeat [a tropical fruit]. She had a grace and a language of the body that... There in a little rum shop, sheltering from the rain, drinking a beer, this lady, brightly garbed, golden earrings, with her tray of fruit. Conversation starts up, and I remember her sayin’ that she had a “Chinee” husband from Venezuela. And I will never forget this action: “And he did used to write me letter!” [Minshall demonstrates, emphatically slapping his right index finger against his left palm.] Absolutely the action of an old Trinidadian woman. I became fascinated with her. In the meantime, TTT [Trinidad & Tobago Television] asked me to do a half-an-hour program on a subject of my choice, and my mind went, Ping! Idea! I visited Elise Rondon about four or five times—and she started to tell me stories. She had an extraordinary presence and sense of theatre. The reason why? She had been a bélé queen all her life. The dance called bélé is like a minuet to...
African drums, mainly a women’s dance, utterly Carribean. Here is a young man who had gone away in 1963, believing his life lay abroad, coming back in ’74, understanding that this woman knew “attitude” in her way as much as Olivier did in his.

SCHECHNER: Did you play mas’ when you were a kid, and if so, who did you play it with? I ask because clearly you’ve lived several lives. Your early life, then your life abroad, then your life as a person who chose to return to Trinidad—but who lives also an international/intercultural life.

MINSHALL: It starts when you’re a child, mindless, you don’t know why you’re doing what you do. But at the age of 13, with a cardboard box and Christmas tree bells turned inside out as eyes, and some silver and some green paint that I begged from the Chinese man who ran the grocery at the bottom of the hill, and some grasses from San–San, which was the name of the hill behind the house, and bits of wire, and bones the dogs had left around the yard dried in the sun and bleached, I prepared all by my precocious little self a costume for the Saturday afternoon children’s competition.

I called my mother to the balcony. “Mummy, mummy, mummy! Come see my costume!” “Oh, very nice, darling! Tell me, what is it?” “But, mummy, I’m an African witch doctor.” “Oh, but darling, you’re the wrong color. Here, come.” And she gives me a dollar, sends me down to Ross’s drugstore on Frederick Street for “animals charcoal.” That’s all I remember. To this day I don’t know what “animals charcoal” is. So I get the stuff, and I am transformed into a black that is as deep as velvet. Then I go down to the Savannah and dance my mas’ and I am awarded the prize in my age group for “the most original.” So I suppose the die was cast there and then.

Now, three years later, at age 16, still a schoolboy, I do something which was then commonplace. I assure you the Jouvay, the face of the Jouvay, the age of the person who participates in the Jouvay has changed radically. In those days, prominent figures in society—lawyers, doctors—would be seen in the Jouvay in their wives’ nighties or in corsets. Jouvay was about the ridiculous. It was also about Jab Molassie, which, when I think of the characters of Carnival, the Blue Devil [similar to or another name for Jab Molassie] as I knew him is one of the most—in all my experience of theatre—he is one of the most powerful pieces of theatre.

And another thing about the Jouvay then was the mud. Sometimes when I think of people putting mud on their bodies in the predawn, when I try on my own to figure out what the Carnival’s about, I say: The ritual of putting mud onto the body for Jouvay is about the myth of man being made from that mud. It is returning to the source, it is being one with the universe. That mud is of the earth, but it is also of the Milky Way. That river of people is a river of stars, it is not your everyday.

OK. Into that Jouvay this schoolboy, having tied a pillow to his backside, and having stockinged every inch of his body, including his head with a T-shirt, over which there is a mask, over which there is a hat, in one of his sister’s discarded dresses and a pair of old slippers, goes into town quite unconsciously as a Dame Lorraine—but totally disguised. To be disguised is not to be hidden. On that Jouvay morning that schoolboy was liberated from race, from age, from gender. It was total liberation.

And then a Mrs. Burnett, a good friend of my mother, a black Trinidadian, while visiting said, “Jean [Minshall’s mother], why doesn’t Peter design a cos-
The Legacy of George Bailey

In 1962 Trinidad and Tobago gained independence from Britain, culminating a process begun by Eric Williams in 1956, the year that the Mighty Sparrow sang, “The Yankees gone/ And Sparrow take over now” in his famous calypso “Jean & Dinah.” George Bailey, who hailed from Woodbrook, the same predominantly black lower-middle-class suburb from which Williams came, had taken up the mantle to carry the mas forward. He was following in the footsteps of big mas men like Harry Basilon and Ken Morris, who had been developing the concept of the historical band with breastplates of metal, real armor, and majestic plumes. In 1957 Bailey created controversy with his winning band Back to Africa, thus pioneering with Harold Saldenah a seamless blending of the African masquerade tradition with the ornate representational pageantry of the European Carnival.

Back to Africa was as much a watershed in mas as Minshall’s later Paradise Lost (1976), challenging Trinidadians’ self-perception of whether they were of African descent or not. Bailey added cloth, color, and dignity to portrayals of Africa. Until then African mas had been interpreted with an assortment of beads, spears, and body paints, forming bands of Ju Ju Warriors. These comparatively small bands used mainly blacks and browns (some white) and did not have sections linking each to another to create a sense of a multilayered whole—an innovation of Bailey’s.

By 1960 Bailey put, in Peter Minshall’s terms in this article, “a black Queen Elizabeth in a Golden Coach drawn by white horses” on the streets of Port of Spain in Ye Saga of Merrie England; in 1961 he gave us Byzantine Glory; and in 1962 (the year of Independence) he took us Somewhere in New Guinea. With George Bailey alone, by this time there was a sense of self and place. In 1963 he saw a restlessness and a general uneasiness with the restrictions of historical portrayals, a form of mas inherited from Basilon and Morris. So that year, with The Realm of Fancy Bats and Clowns, Bailey ushered in a new genre of mas dubbed “creative/fantasy,” pushing the traditional Bats and clowns into dimensions of colour and splendour unimaginable. This connects to Minshall’s Carnival of the Sea (1979), in which that extreme surreal statement, the traditional Fancy Sailor, is pushed to such an extreme that one commentator wondered whether Minshall was satirising the traditional pretty mas or simply employing the tradition to move forward.

In 1969 Bailey brought a new movement to his treatment of Africa with a Bright Africa. Before Bailey came on the Carnival scene, nobody had the strength year after year “to create and see destroyed something entirely new and different each year” (Ganase 1979:n.p.). Bailey
was able to articulate, for the new nation, not only a spirited and dignified perspective of Africa but a sophisticated relationship to the canons of good old Imperial England and at the same time ways of seeing and developing the traditional roots of the Carnival. Just when there were shouts of black power across the Americas and another new consciousness was dawning in Trinidad, Bailey presented his last band, *Tears of the Indies*. This was 1970, a few months before his death on 14 August at the age of 35.

The unique art of wirebending reached its zenith in the Woodbrook camp of the Bailey brothers—George, Alvin, and Albert. It was in this yard that Stephen Derek grew up, and today Derek’s mas camp, D’Midas Associates, is an obvious successor to the legacy of the intricate wirebending tradition associated with the Bailey tribal portrayals.

In 1997 George’s brother Albert, who still lives and works out of his mas camp on Buller Street in Woodbrook, finished a trilogy of bands on the Zulus, followed in 1998 by *Color Me Trinidad, Color Me Carnival*, a historical tribute to the great masmen of the past. Today Albert, the maestro, works with his son Alrick to carry on the Bailey tradition not only in Trinidad, but wherever mas is played.

—Tony Hall
tume for my daughter?’ Now this is the unconsciousness of a young growing-up-person; you don’t know what you are doing or why. But as I look back I find it plain to see. His first costume as an African witch doctor is for his white self, and then I take this black girl and send her up as a Gothic stained-glass window. So I think the business of playing mas’ is about being other than yourself.

RIGGIO: You skipped over the time between age 12 and 16.

MINSHALL: In the meantime I am going to school, I am involved in theatre, I am designing for the Trinidad Light Opera...

SCHECHNER: What made you want to go to the UK—what drew you away, and what then drew you back?

MINSHALL: My father did the most romantic thing a would-be artist can do. I forget what age he was, but he threw up whatever career he had and decided to be an artist full time. My parents were divorced, I was living with my mother, but my father made sure I had at my disposal an easel, oils, and canvases at age 12. I was painting, I was making costumes for Carnival, I got involved with the Light Opera Company’s yearly Gilbert and Sullivan. This flair for set design emerged. Having left Queen’s Royal College, I went straight into a job at Radio Trinidad—

SCHECHNER: That’s where you learned your second language?

MINSHALL: No, no. It started with a very strict Scottish grandmother. “No, child, not ‘dis dat dese dose,’ ‘this that these those.’” But you’re right—you speak on radio, you act a voice. And so here am I, a household name on radio on an island. Television ain’t come yet. And the meantime, some of my schoolmates are going away and coming back saying, “Minsh, boy, you really have to come up there, you know.” And not only that, this artist thing is niggling at me. And I fancy that working in radio is parasitical. I don’t want to read news about what other people are doing. So it enters into my head that I am going to go away and be a painter. But my father takes me aside and advises, “It would be saner to go away and be a designer for theatre.” Well, passing over all the details, I was admitted to the Central in London [The Central School of Art and Design, now associated with St. Martin’s]. At Central I was taught by the likes of Ralph Koltai. To see London fresh and new at the age of 21! I arrived at a most extraordinary time, the beginning of the ’60s, the year of the Beatles, I saw Olivier’s Othello, went to the National Gallery and saw that sepia-tinted cartoon done by Leonardo himself. Any art I had seen before had only been in books.

And the World Theatre season! A Zulu Macbeth, Umabatha, with this army, this wall of warriors, coming from the furthest back wall of the theatre down to the edge of the audience. That awesome production of A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream by [Peter] Brook. And then his Marat/Sade. In London I saw my first opera, a baptism of fire, Götzersdammernug.

Bit by bit I learned—without sounding too grand—what art is. And amidst all of this, for reasons that should need no explanation, my thesis at the end of three years is on Trinidad Carnival. The more my eyes were being opened the more I was able to see. My thesis deals with the Bat, and with the Fancy Sailor—which, in its time, in my knowledge of world costume, was the most surreal statement I have experienced. Imagine a man coming down the street in Port of Spain, and where his head should be is a giant slice of paw-paw [papaya], or a cash register with a drawer that actually works, or a tree with three barking dogs on it, or made out of cottonwool and swansdown and little bits of silver paper, a great delta-winged warplane—utterly surreal. But surreal with
that kind of basenote truth of Magritte. So honest yet so fantastic. And then, I can’t remember how it happens, somebody says, “Get off your ass, child,” and I take my portfolio to a producer who says, “I know who you ought to see, Peter Darrell.” It just so happens that Peter Darrell and Colin Graham are collaborating on Beauty and the Beast for the inauguration of the Scottish Theatre Ballet at Sadler’s Wells. As I am showing them my work from Central, I turn the page and there is a costume for the now-defunct J.C.’s Carnival Queen Show called “Once Upon a Time”—in my mind it’s Titania coming down to the ground with great butterfly wings—and Darrell looks at this thing and says, “You’re the person we’re looking for.” That was 1969. So I designed the set and costumes.

Four years later my mother is in London and says, “Now Mr. Designer, I want you to design a costume for your little adopted sister.” The heart skips a beat. “Furthermore, I want it to be a hummingbird.” Oh dear. The happening young London designer returns to the island to design for children’s Carnival. And of course there is no way out. So I must make the best of it. I must’ve spent off and on about five months just fiddling—in between whatever jobs I was doing—putting into this diminutive little work all my theories about playing the mas’ and its energy: it’s about performance, it’s about mobility. It was Christmas Eve night I came [home to Trinidad] with £100 worth of fabric, which was a lot of money back then. On New Year’s Day we start to construct the costume. It took five weeks, 12 people. It was totally meticulous, 104 feathers, each one made of 150 different pieces of fabric, the blue to the purple to the green, stuck with transparent nail varnish over bits of plastic over a pattern. All pinned up, then finally assembled. I got ill during the thing. The doctor pumps me up with antibiotics. My limbs, my
A Timeline of Some of Peter Minshall’s Mas’ & Other Works

Mas’ for Trinidad Carnival
1972  Josephine Baker, individual mas’
1974  From the Land of the Hummingbird and The Little Carib, individual mas’
1976  Paradise Lost
1978  Zodiac
1979  Carnival of the Sea
1980  Danse Macabre
1981  Jungle Fever
1982  Papillon
1983  River
1984  Callaloo
1985  The Golden Calabash
1986  Ratrace
1987  Carnival Is Colour
1988  Jumbie
1989  Santimanitay
1991  Tantana
1993  Donkey Derby
1994  The Odyssey
1995  Hallelujah
1996  Song of the Earth
1997  Tapestry
1998  Red

Mas’ for Other Carnivals
1973  Mas’ in the Ghetto, Notting Hill, London
1975  To Hell with You, Notting Hill, London
1986  Drums & Colours, St. Paul’s Carnival, Bristol
1986  Caribbean Baroque, Brooklyn Labor Day Carnival
1989  Tan Tan and Saga Boy, individual mas’ guest performances, Miami, Toronto, Jamaica
1991  Tan Tan, Saga Boy, and Mr. and Mrs. Merry Monarch, individual mas’ guest performances, Jamaica

Stadium Events, Concert-Spectacles, and Festival Performances
1987  Segment of the Opening Ceremonies, Xth Pan American Games, Indianapolis
1990  Part of Paris in Concert, a Bastille Day Spectacle, Paris
1992  L’Homme et Le Toro, a group mas’ work for the opening procession of the Feria de Musique de Rue, Nimes, France
1992  The Hola segment of the Opening Ceremony of the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games; the massed-group elements of the Mar Mediterrani segment
1994  *The Dance of the Nations* segment of the Opening Ceremony of the World Cup Finals (soccer), Chicago
1995  Theatrical characters for *Concert for Tolerance*, a citywide event for UNESCO, Paris
1996  Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 1996 Olympic Games, Atlanta, including *Summertime: A Song of the South*

**Theatre and Visual Art**
1969  Sets and costumes for *Beauty and the Beast*, full-length ballet, world premiere by the Scottish Ballet, Sadler's Wells Theatre, London
1971  Set and costumes for *Cannes Bruites* by Trinidadian director/choreographer Beryl McBurnie, Commonwealth Institute, London
1972  Sets and costumes for Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Crewe Theatre, England
1973  Sets and costumes for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, England
1974  Costumes for *Play Mas’* by Mustapha Matura, Brighton Festival, Royal Court and Phoenix Theatres, London
1974/75  Set and costumes for *Man Better Man*, written and directed by Errol Hill, Dartmouth College
1976  Sets and costumes for Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*, costumes for Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, Dartmouth College
1979  Sets and costumes for Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*, the Ballet Metropolitan, Ohio Theatre, Columbus
1985  *The Adoration of Hiroshima*, Washington, DC, mas’-style street theatre antinuclear presentation, performed on the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima
1987  *Peter Minshall: Callaloo, an Exhibition of Works from the Carnival of Trinidad*, 19th International Biennial of Sao Paolo
1989  *The Coloured Man*, paintings, drawings, and renderings, Gallery 1 2 3 4, Port of Spain
1990  Part of *Seitgenössische Kunste aus Trinidad und Tobago* (Seven Artists from Trinidad and Tobago), IFA Gallery, Bonn, Germany
1991  *The Spirit of the Savannah: Jou’vert—The Rising Sun*, 18’ x 15’ mural for The Mutual Centre, Port of Spain
1995  Part of *Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture*, traveling exhibition
joints all go. It has to be finished. She misses the first competition, she misses the second. It has to be finished. Finally, I make the decision. We haven’t slept for three nights. One person is holding the thing onto Sherry standing there like a little girl crucifix—there’s no time for zips [zippers]—while we sew her into it.

We lift her up onto the jitney, drive to the Savannah in a dream, in a daze, mindless. Helen Humphrey says, “Hurry up, hurry up! The Queens are onstage!” We lift her out of the van, put on touches of makeup, she’s a little iridescent tent. What a sense of theatre, that child! God, talk about how to get into it offstage. This little 13-year-old girl is going up the path. I’ve rehearsed with her with canes and an old sheet and told her, “Forget you’re a bird. You’re a flag woman. Wave your flag, dance, you’re not flying, these are not wings, you’re a little girl enjoying yourself.” And she goes onto the stage, wearing, I tell you: a face of steel! This little thing exploded like a joyful sapphire on that stage, and 10,000 people exploded with her. On that afternoon, a moment of revelation. “Christ, so this too is art!” I did not choose the mas’—it held me by the foot and pulled me in. Three weeks after that experience I met Elise Rondon. Put those two things together. I was finding myself. I was so proud to be from where I was. I understood it, not completely, but much much better. There was an art that we knew how to make. We have a voice to add to de song of de universe.

So back to London, started doing things in the Notting Hill Carnival. In ’75, because of the Hummingbird and because he has fallen out with one of my first gurus of the mas’, a great artist, Carlisle Chang, Lee Heung rings me up in London and says, “How would you like to design my next band?” At the time in Notting Hill I am doing a band of devils called To Hell with You. I remember one day driving across one of those Westbourne highways, and it just comes to me. While Braf [Hope Braithwaite, one of Minshall’s teachers at Queen’s Royal College, Port of Spain] was teaching me all about The Tempest and Othello, my other English teacher, Mr. Laltoo, was teaching me about Mr. Milton and his Paradise Lost. So these many years later, I think, “Mr. Lee Heung wants me to do his band...what do I do? P A R A D I S E L O S T‼️ I’m already makin’ devils, all dose fallen angels!”

Paradise Lost was a watershed in the context of Carnival; it was epic. It was a visual thesis of many of the things I would do in years to come. Just as my
mother’s request to make a hummingbird for little Sherry put the fear of God in me, so was I on trial with *Paradise Lost*. A band? How do I do a band? What is a band? A band is the closest I know to live visual art, a band is symphonic, you can’t see the whole of it all at once. I approached *Paradise Lost* as a symphony in four parts.

SCHECHNER: What year was it?


And then there is another family falling-out, and as a result a group assembles itself and says, “OK, Minshall, come. You’re not going to be working for any other bandleader. You’re going to bring your own band.” So 1978, return to Port of Spain to do *Zodiac*.

Discipline, not a damn sequin, not a piece of braid! Primary colors—red, blue, yellow, black, and white—spinnaker nylon. It started with a section called “Fire” in *Paradise Lost*. [One of Minshall’s first uses of things attached to the feet, the technique upon which almost the entire band *Zodiac* two years later was based.] It’s incredible how things happen. Sitting in the tube in London, trundling through the Underground, all these damned Americans with their great backpacks. I’m sitting there: “Mas’, mas’”—it’s never far away—I go into de sporting goods shops, lookin’ at all de backpacks. *Zodiac* was aluminum backpacks, extensions here, spring-steel wires there, and great shapes attached to the ankles. As [George] Balanchine said, “I want you to ‘see’ the music and ‘hear’ the dance.” So the whole band is coming down, and every step to the music moves the fabric ten feet in the air and you get this kinetic madness. And *Zodiac* amazingly came second [prize]. You’re challenging people, de band don’t have no secrets. You’re saying, “Come on, let’s stop being so quaint.”

RIGGIO: How many people in the band?

MINSHALL: About 1500.

SCHECHNER: What finally got you to move back to Trinidad?

MINSHALL: You begin to feel homeless. Around this time, Errol Hill, a professor [of theatre, now retired] at Dartmouth [and a Trinidadian], who I knew
since I was a little boy, gets in touch with me in London to design his *Man Better Man*. In the middle of winter, Hanover, New Hampshire, is going to be a place populated mainly by whites. This is a problem I am trying to solve.

White linoleum on the floor, mirrors on either side, I create a Barbados beach, a white gingerbread cottagey thing, and white fucking costumes on everybody. All of these ladies with great white cotton skirts, and it’s as though bits of the scenery, and the gingerbread, and hibiscus had bits of color printed on them as differentiation. And one character, Minnie, had a black silk headtie. Errol was having conniptions because I am providing him with a contemporary Broadway set, not West Indian charm. Errol, his heart in hand, turning a blind eye, unwillingly says, “OK, do it.” I shall never forget at the dress rehearsal, Errol Hill dancing like a child, bubbling over with joy. It worked! It didn’t matter the color of these people, the whole thing was the suspension of disbelief. Errol asked me to give the first lecture I ever gave on the mas’.

The success of *Man Better Man* led to an invitation to return to Dartmouth to design *Blood Wedding*. I want to do it here, after Carnival, with The Callaloo Company [Minshall’s mas’ performance company], in our language, so that Lorca’s heat and vibrancy will live. I have loved this play for so long!

SCHECHNER: You will direct?

11. Working drawings for *Blood Wedding*, designed by Peter Minshall at Dartmouth College in 1976. (Courtesy of Peter Minshall)
MINSHALL: Direct and design, in collaboration with my Callaloo family. At Dartmouth, I did the design, for a wonderful director, Rod Alexander, who gave me a tremendous amount of freedom. *Blood Wedding* is the nearest thing to Greek ritual that I know.

SCHECHNER: After that you came back to Trinidad for good?

MINSHALL: I don’t remember the exact date. At a certain point, I thought, “Enough is enough.” I rented out my London apartment and decided Trinidad is where I am going to be.

I start doing the mas’, even as the mas’ is undergoing certain social changes. It used to be very much a male thing, but at the point of my return it was becoming what you now see, very much a female thing. It was also going through all kinds of visual changes. There are a whole pile of different reasons why this was happening. At this point, I really come into it saying, “This is a theatre of the streets.” Which is obvious to me, but no one here understands the terminology. “Oh, you’re trying to turn it into theatre.” “Oh my God, don’t you realize it’s always been that?” When the *Midnight Robber* makes a speech, when I run away from a Blue Devil, when George Bailey brings a black Queen Elizabeth in a Golden Coach drawn by white horses. All of this happened when I was small.

It’s not easy. I suppose that not-easiness came to a mighty crescendo with the experience of *Hallelujah* [1995], where nothing I had done in my life had prepared me for two and a half months of daily diatribe in the newspapers, every single day, the most extreme Pentecostals saying it is sacrilege to use the word “hallelujah” in Carnival—“the mother of all rot” they called it—and columnists, editors, politicians, bandleaders, priests debating the pros and cons. But of course you can call a band “Hallelujah”—Ella Fitzgerald sings, “Hallelujah, come on, get happy!” What are you talking about? But not just the Pentecostal point of view, but others too. “Why don’t you change the name of the band?”

I went through my own spiritual transformation. I am sitting right here one day, I hear a rustle over there in the heliconias, and I look: there is the cat, Missy, having just missed the hummingbird that was about to touch the heliconias. In a flash, I understand that the cat, the hummingbird, the heliconias, and myself are one. I can explain it no other way. And I was paralyzed. This is my life’s work, I want to bring celebration back into the mas’. This is the only way I know. Hallelujah! Curses were heaped on people. “If you play in this band, the island will be cursed.” And so people began to pull away, and the band became smaller. Then Carnival—and people had a joyful experience, both those who were part of it, and those who watched it. The lesson to be learned from all this: It is a week after the *Hallelujah* [which won Band of the Year], and I am on the north coast, by the sea, alone. The rocks, the crashing waves, the horizon. Everybody has their version of communication with the higher self. Mr. God says to me, “It was a beautiful Hallelujah. But what ever made you think it would be easy?”

In dealing with the mas’, I and other people have had to deal with my whiteness. It has not been easy. It is not easy when the fear of AIDS seizes the place, and you read in one of the weeklies, “Don’t join the Minshall band, you’ll get AIDS.” It’s not easy. [Long silence]

The first trilogy [(River (1983), *Callaloo* (1984), and *The Golden Calabash: Princes of Darkness and Lords of Light* (1985))]. Derek Walcott has always been a champion of my work. Himself having received a Guggenheim Fellowship, he recommended me. There was this great battle. Derek saying, “They’ll only give it to you if you apply for theatre.” And I said, “No, it has to be for the mas’.” The difficulty being in making the application, you have to say both what you want to do and explain what the mas’ is. Miracle of miracles, I am
awarded a Guggenheim on the basis of the mas’. But even after that, I remem-
ber one art gallery person coming to me, “Ha, ha, ha, what a joke, you
and Carnival and the Guggenheim Fellowship!” My work is not to make
pretty pictures but to make you shed your self-contempt. The Guggenheim
people are treating me seriously, well let me treat the mas’ seriously now I
have a little money.

My father told me two little anecdotes. Once during one of his earliest Car-
nivals he saw a bunch of young boys coming along Tragarete Road, each
with two coconuts in one hand and a big piece of bamboo in the other sing-
ing, “Netty, Netty give me de ting you have in your belly!” And the other
thing he told me was a wonderful conversation he had with a Pierrot. Now
my father used to be manager of the Tourist Board, so he would be into all of
this. He was connected to the first steel band that ever went to London. I
don’t have the letter from my father now, but I remember the story so well.
“Well, suh, you just hang de clot’ from de costume and put little mirrors
underneet so as you dance de mas’, you does make de clot’ move and from
underneet de clot’ you does see a flash of dis and a flash a dat.” The expres-
sion, “to make the cloth dance.”

Now all of these connections—Paradise Lost, “Fire,” Zodiac—the thing
coming from the feet, how to make the cloth dance—and this is purely ab-
stract. The other thing, too: Yes, I adore the Robber, the Bat. But the Bat
was right for the ’50s, he’s quaint now because his competition really is Darth
Vader. Today it’s movies, television. So we have to learn what the Bat or
Robber teach us—that dance, that mobility—and not just re-create them, but
find their contemporary equivalents.

Mancrab [the principle male character, the king, of the mas’ River, 1983]. I
actually constructed the model, then realized that man normally stands like
that [demonstrates feet together], but you play mas’ like that [demonstrates
feet apart]—considering the distance between the ankles. Therefore, extend-
ing a man’s shoulders into a kind of rectangular armature with arms going out
at each corner perfectly angled and fiberglass fishing rods coming into the
angles so that one is going there, one there, one there—as he rocks his shoul-
ders all of those rods move. At the tip of each rod the corner of a 25 square
foot piece of silk, so that the dancing steps of the feet move the rods which
give life to the canopy of silk, a turbulent, billowing cloud. Yes, “to make
the cloth dance.” This is contemporary. This is our equivalent of what you see
now at the Museum of Modern Art. I feel comfortable with this.

Then a story begins to build. And you don’t get the final line in the story until
a week before Carnival, because that’s how it happens. You put parts into place,
you don’t know—then suddenly, “Oh, that’s the story, ‘Mancrab and
Washerwoman.’” He, a master of technology, all of man’s genius, all the more
powerful now because he has technology. She, simple love and beauty. She rep-
resenting Blanchisseuse, the pureness of the clear river water, also the pureness
of true love. She, dressed in white cotton organza, the simplest little costume, car-
rying two poles, and lines of silk washing just hanging down, and a laundry bas-
ket in her hand, so simple. He, Mancrab, the claws of the crab turned this way
[gestures upward] like so many arms, and the two gundees [main claws, pincers]
like something coming out of a military tank. He’s metal with a great crab’s head
with little lights and things flashing, a compressed-air canister on his back. He
comes onstage moving to the sound of East Indian tassa drums. I had seen
kathakali in London—so I go up to an Indian village with Peter Samuel [Minshall
spreads his legs into the wide, bent-knee stance of kathakali and stamps the
ground with high, violent steps to an imagined drumbeat].

SCHECHNER: They do kathakali here?
MINSHALL: No. And there’s a bicycle chain and gear thing, and you know it has to be exposed, because you don’t hide de innards and de workings. And there are levers and cantilevers, the claws are going up and down. There’s a moment he just settles center stage and breathes. And at that moment, the cloth begins to bleed in front of your eyes. This is the beauty of mas’.

The thing about the mas’ in a push-button television age, it’s about human energy. There are no electric wires, it’s me doing this, it’s me making it work. It really is a chilling thing, in a Carnival, full of all its many parts, its sequins, its feathers, to see this piece of white silk undulating, and suddenly rivers of red starting to run. At that point, with due respect, because it was so good, stolen from kathakali, a performance that left me limp, he exits pulling from his gut—

SCHECHNER: Yes, yes, the revenge Bhima takes on Dusassana at the end of The Mahabharata—

MINSHALL: —he just leaves this 30-yard trail as he exits.

On his first appearance, half the audience, I tell you, as an artist, it was as though there were two prize fighters onstage. Half the audience was booing, half the audience was clapping. It was a moment of terror.

Another designer comes up to me after and says, “How could you do that! That is my daughter being raped!” I thought—once more this is the Hummingbird—yes! Mas’ when it works is as grand and as great as opera. When it jumps! you have no defense.

River. I used the clothes of our island ancestors—African, Indian, some European; turbans with pearls, all in white cotton—2,000 people, men and women. And each section was called by the name of a river of Trinidad. “The River Shark”—dandy men in waistcoats and bow-ties, and little hats and trousers with canes. “Oropouche,” a great turbaned women with frills and yards and yards of white cotton. And der’s nuttin’ dat makes black people look more beautiful than to put them in white. And people from Laventille, people from Diego, on Monday, the entire band, this river of people... And at Carnival we have the tradition of a standard, a pole with something stuck on it—the entire band is joined together by a piece of cloth that is 25 feet wide and three-quarters of a mile long, floating above them on standards held by the band members themselves, diaphanous white, and all of these people in white, Washerwoman leading them, and I begged the people, “Dress up for Monday.”

Of course, before this, controversies rip. How I could bring a band all in white, Carnival is color! This is madness. In fact, the color scheme of the band was this skin tone and that skin tone and the other. And the white just framed it. The people looked beautiful. So on Monday, as the band hits the stage, there is Mancrab, crowned King the Sunday night before, challenging Washerwoman. And with a symbolic square of white cloth, she dismisses him. But the story goes that that Carnival Monday night, Mancrab, using all his technological magic, fashioned an illusory rainbow. All those little gadgets of the 20th century, that are so dear to us, that make our lives so comfortable, offering all these pretty colors to the people, a rainbow of colors.

Tuesday morning. Every single person in the band has been supplied with a white cotton pouch and in it is a white squeezy bottle [plastic squeeze bottle, such as is used for dishwashing liquid] loaded with colored dye. Ha! Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. Now this is where the people take the art over from the mas’ man. I, being the disciplined artist, and knowing that Carnival has to be pretty and entertaining, had been stupid enough to think the first section would splash itself orange and blue on the stage, the next section neatly green and yellow, and the other colors would follow—and so on.
River
A Mas’ in Two Acts

Peter Minshall

The Cast: Mancrab, Washerwoman, The River People

The Story

We first meet Mancrab and Washerwoman at the Carnival preliminaries, which is a sort of prologue or overture.

We can see straightaway that Mancrab is very clever, an accomplished master of technology, full of complicated genius. He is clearly most powerful and dangerous. Yet he is never satisfied or content with himself. Enough is never enough for Mancrab. He always wants more. Washerwoman is just the opposite. She is really quite simple, as her costume shows. Her power is her love for life, which is the simplest thing of all. Her heart is pure and clean and happy, like her lines of washing dancing in the breeze. Washerwoman is the beloved leader of the River People.

On Carnival Monday Mancrab embattles Washerwoman. He is eager to take from her the river, which he needs for his own purposes of enrichment, but he must first defeat her and win over her people’s trust. Washerwoman’s very strength is in that trust, and it is with that trust and love, in the form of a simple square of white cloth, that she overcomes Mancrab and banishes him from the Savannah.

Washerwoman leads her people in happy celebration before us. The River People, all in white, dance and sing. The river is saved. Its waters run clear and clean as their hearts.

But that night Mancrab develops a clever strategy. He settles quietly by the riverbank and, using his finest chemicals and oils, assisted by his best technicians, he floods the river with a rainbow of extraordinary colour. He stirs the water with glowing promises of profit and luxury for all. The River People are truly amazed. They run to see and, with buckets and calabashes and cups, anything to hold water, they attempt to catch and keep Mancrab’s illusory colours, each fighting the other for more. In their haste and greed, they leave Washerwoman unprotected.

That very night Mancrab steals into Washerwoman’s mas’ camp which is no longer surrounded by the force of love.

He kills her.

On Carnival Tuesday Mancrab is victorious. The river is his. The waters are polluted. He drags the lifeless body of Washerwoman before us, her lines of washing now stained and borne by others. The rainbow river follows, and the River People. They are wild and frenzied in their dance. They believe themselves the richer for Mancrab’s rainbow. They bathe themselves in its colours. In so doing they destroy themselves.

12. Mancrab, from River, a Carnival mas’ created by Peter Minshall in 1983. (Photo by Noel Norton)
Carnival Tuesday, we have folded up the white cloth, put it away. We have made exactly the same size, exactly the same length a cloth that is a rainbow. Suddenly on Tuesday the people are under Mancrab’s rainbow. The ritual begins. Charlie’s Roots is playing the most painful funereal version of “River of Babylon,” a reggae. Thirty priestesses, women in white, with white head-ties, holding calabashes. Fifteen faced the Grand Stand, 15 faced the North Stands. They go through a ritual. Then all of a sudden they tip the calabashes down the fronts of their white dresses. The poor announcer, “And it looks like—blood!” Red, and they go into a Shango madness.

Mancrab comes on under his canopy, but it’s not attached to his feet; four men are holding it, thank goodness, because the wind is raging. Washerwoman’s washing has been slashed overnight and splattered with red, the red of his silk. Washerwoman, the queen of the band, in the middle of Carnival is brought over the stage lifeless, on the shoulders of three bearers. And then, the best laid plans... The band is waiting at Frederick Street by the jail and down at the tail end, Patrick Raymond, who heads the last section, puts his bag of squeezy bottles which he is about to give to his group onto the ground and a car wheel mashes the bag, a bottle bust, color splashes onto a lady’s nice white costume. Well, is to know, color spread like fire through the band. My friends, do you know about theatre? Do you think I know about theatre? Those people start to paint each other. The beauty of it was to see a brown-skinned beauty and an Indian lady next to her saying, “Let me give you a little more pink.” Talk about action painting! Two thousand people on the day of the Carnival going through this ritual of ablution, see their shining faces—but it happened before its time.

But I had a trump card, one little ace. We had cut out big blocks of tissue paper in the same colors, and the tissue paper is flying! And this rainbow thing starts to stretch and haul itself over the stage and the calypso music breaks out. A little note: All those people who said, “Oh God, it’s white!” on Monday, but then realized it looked so beautiful on Tuesday—the country is in disbelief, we could spoil it so. Because the river now—the story is coming to completion—is polluted.

We had parked up by the side of the stage six 500-gallon barrels of these same colors, hooked up to power hoses.

SCHENCRNER: You’re kidding.

MINSHALL: I’m telling you. Yellow went 30 feet up into the air like an arc of pee, and look at the people: “Oh, God, wet me down!” And they came wid de blue, and as it came up the people are shouting, “Wet me dowwwn!” And talk about the frenzy of the 20th century, “Wet me dowwwn!” This baptism, this ritual, this total madness on stage! This was ritual, I’ve never experienced anything like it.

So much for my artistic ideas of neatly coloring each section. This was a chaos of color, a madness, all the colors running together ‘til they got to a deep purplish muddiness. But it was so much better than what I had planned—the people played the art profoundly. They played pollution better than any artist could have painted.

Ah, something else. We had for Mancrab tassa drums, the drums of war, and the band is just coming to an end. You know where everybody’s turnin’ and spinnin’ and people are saying, “Come off de stage, come off de stage.” One of the tassa drummers lifts his drum off his neck, holds it out to me, and says, “Drum.” I never have beat a tassa drum in my life. You know you’re being honored. The best drummers are all watching me [Minshall begins to drum on the table, calling out the beat], and I just watched the next drum-
mer, and tried to do what he did, and next thing you know I was right there with them, beating tassa with a passion. That moment was just transcendental.

Two days later, the results are announced. And in those days it was grandly and publicly done, there was an audience, and the envelope was opened. And as you know, when they make these announcements they start at the bottom and work their way up. “Ladies and Gentlemen, we will now announce the Band of the Year results. Tenth, River.” The audience is of the mas’ fraternity, and my brothers went up in a roar of approval. Yes! Tenth and last! I in my heart knew that I had been—and I say it in world terms—part of an extraordinary experience, part of an extraordinary statement, a statement that could only have been made in the mas’. The simplicity of it, the power of it. And—dare I say it?—my own humility, in learning once more from those people, that this River was truly a river polluted.

Two days afterwards, they count up the votes for the “People’s Choice.” And by a vast majority, and I’m speaking about thousands, River was the People’s Choice. The audience in the Savannah marked the band they thought best on their ticket stubs and put these into ballot boxes on their way out.

SCHECHNER: Do they do that anymore?

MINSHALL: They don’t, and the reason that’s generally believed is that one person was winning the People’s Choice too often. The bandleaders recommended to the officials to stop the People’s Choice. The People’s Choice was introduced for the very reason that the judges’ decisions were often very unpopular. And so the first Prime Minister of independent Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams, instituted the People’s Choice. And the bandleaders de-instituted it.

I’ve taken the time to tell this story not without reason. Often I am asked, “Which was your favorite, or most important?” In fact, in its entirety, the Mancrab, the Washerwoman, the River People, the white cloth ribbon. You know I am aware of Christo, of Running Fence [1977], and I am aware, forget everything else, one piece of cloth joining them all up. Words, paintings, a movie can’t convey this. Even as recently as New Year’s Day [1997] and I was asked to say a few words. “Gentlemen, our Carnival is going to grow when you start awarding prizes to those works that can truly be called ‘works of art.’” And River was one such powerful work. Having done River, we knew
there was a next step which became the band *Callaloo* in 1984, and climaxed with *The Golden Calabash: Princes of Darkness and Lords of Light* in '85. We didn't know that *Hallelujah* [1995] was leading to a trilogy—it just led into *The Song of the Earth* [1996], which carried the theme on, and *Tapestry* [1997] just finished it.

SCHECHNER: One of the most impressive things about Carnival is that it's both very local and enormously. Members of bands know each other, people on the island know each other, but the scale of Carnival is vast. Between the people watching and the people doing, who's left inside?

It is ritual, definitely. How else can people go hour after hour repeating the same movements to the same music? It's a kind of religious service. A celebration, certainly, but a playing out of belief also. They also immensely enjoy seeing themselves enact themselves. To put it in Clifford Geertz's words, the Carnival is a story Trinidadians tell themselves about themselves.

MINSHALL: I have this observation. Here's a little island that needs catharsis like anybody anywhere else. But we don't have either the resources or the audiences for a Broadway season or a West End. But we have the same needs. So what do we do? Carnival. That it goes back to the most ancient times, that it really is a celebration of life—is almost neither here nor there. What matters is that we are here now, and we have this festival of the arts. We sing songs, we compose tunes, we dance. And it involves the whole society. It is not just the few days. The band is launched the year before, there is a build, a build, a build. There are calypso tents, steelband yards, mas’ camps.

SCHECHNER: And there are people designing, people sewing, people preparing all over the island—and in New York, Toronto, London, too.

MINSHALL: There is much creative activity, it’s our Broadway.

SCHECHNER: It’s both more and different than Broadway. Broadway is a very expensive veneer entertaining relatively few people. Carnival is more like the Elizabethan or Greek theatre—such a large proportion of the whole population participates. At Broadway there is an absolute separation segregating the audience from the stage. In Carnival, at many decisive points and times, all separation dissolves into a scene of total participation. Even if you’re not in the band now in front of you, you have been in some band, you have danced across the Savannah stage, in the streets, at any number of venues. Or you’ve sung calypso, beaten pan. The people who watch are experts through their own experiences, that’s why the People’s Choice was so important: it was the collective opinion of experts. Brecht would have loved the Carnival audience—active, involved, knowledgeable, and critical. The Broadway audience is an extension of the TV audience—passive and receptive.

MINSHALL: Boss, you make me want to cry. Because I know the absolute truth of what you saying. But I do not think that there are many people on this island who would understand your language. Perhaps the reason I choose to explain as I do, if I say “Broadway” they understand.

I squirm when the announcer or commentator says, “This ‘costume’…” Please learn to say “mas’,” or “this dancing mobile,” or “this walking sculpture.” This is not a costume. I like the word “mas’,” it is our word: m-a-s apostrophe.

I have the knowledge through the mas’, having watched it ever since I was a little boy, that if you give a person a cloth, a robe, that extends from wrist to wrist, and you play the music, look at me [Minshall extends his arms as if to show off his “robes”], this is going to happen. If you give a person another piece of cloth with two sticks on it, it is going to happen. [Minshall waves his
A Family Tradition

Women make up about 70 percent of any of the massive masquerade bands in Trinidad Carnival. In every other Carnival activity, men are in the majority. In the calypso tents, women are outnumbered seven or eight to one. In the pan yard, women are admitted and respected for their skill and dedication and for daring to enter this largely male enclave. But in the mas bands women participants seem to be attracted to “role play” in costuming that is more and more risqué; to broad gestures of exhibitionism (dancing, wining, bikini-clad—“bottom in the road” as the calypsonian aptly put it in 1998—on the main thoroughfares of Port of Spain); to the kind of liberation and release afforded by being one of hundreds of women similarly clad and cavorting—and thereafter vying to stand out from the crowd with the wildest, most sensual movements.

In the case of the Harts—a band which is associated with sections hugely populated by women—mas is a family tradition started by parents Edmond and Lil in the early 1960s. The years at the end of the ’50s found the Hart family living on Victoria Square, that area of Port of Spain east of Woodbrook known as Corbeautown, from which also came one of the earliest “middle-class” steelbands, Silver Stars.

In 1966, when Playing Cards, researched and designed by Lil Hart, the only female designer at the time, won Band of the Year, a new era of fantasy was launched. Traditionalists criticised the new genre as “anything goes,” bemoaning the passing of meticulous reproductions for historical portrayals. It was Edmond as bandleader, with his colourful personality, who defended what others saw as merely a “middle-class white social tribe.”

Since Lil died in 1991, and after many Band of the Year titles, Edmond has been content to pass the baton to the Hart children—Thais, Gerald, Luis, and Aixa. Thais recalls, “In Mummy’s bands, people played mas to enjoy themselves. The costumes had to be light. Our people didn’t want backpieces or large costumes. Colour was always important: both in the mixtures and sequences in the band.” At 41, Thais is herself a youthful mother who left her job as a teacher of History and Spanish to be a full-time mas-maker. “I love it,” she muses simply, “although I was reluctant to get involved. Mummy totally enjoyed it, and she pushed us. You either love it, or leave it, because it is not easy; time consuming, stressful, absorbs everything you do.”

With the export market for Carnival changing and growing, in 1996 Thais did the designs for a Trinidadian starting the first Trinidad-style Carnival in Melbourne. However, her primary focus is the Trinidad Carnival. By July-August in each year, she must have drawings completed to launch the band.

—Pat Ganase
arms as though they are wings.] We have our own body language here, our own rhythm. One of the fears in Barcelona [1992 Olympics], expressed fairly early on was, “We are not Caribbean people here, maybe our people will not move in your things the way your people would.” Why is it there is a league of people knocking at the door in Trinidad every year saying, “Next year I want to play a character. I want to be bigger.” I don’t think this is a sentiment that is peculiarly Trinidadian. And I hastened to assure my hosts, “No, there is something else my work tries to be at its best—to inspire the ordinary man to say, ‘Look at me, look how much bigger I am than I was before I went into this thing!’” And though the Olympic stadium is a vast arena, a huge space—I remember when I first got to Barcelona they thought it was going to take 7,000 people to make the Mediterranean Sea, but with the things I knew from mas’, it took 1,000.

For each mas’ you need a hook to hang it on. Tapestry’s hook was, “It is of the cloth, flowing cloth. I am going to stay with flowing cloth.” We can’t make tapestries, but we can give it a richness of texture. I told the sewing team, “Always, always put the seams on the outside. Let the frays fray,” not knowing I was throwing myself into an ant’s nest because some people when they got their costumes said, “Look at all these frayed edges, these things are badly made.” “No, no, no—that was intended!” It is growing the public, growing with the public. With Tapestry I was going back to scene painting techniques of 25 years ago—but introducing them to the crew here. We were crumpling cloth, printing it, sponging it.

The connections: The mas’ is outdoors, the Olympic stadium is outdoors. The mas’ wants to reverberate in the place, something that lifts. Long before I went to Barcelona, here in ’89, in our own stadium, we did a work called Santimanitay [a patois expression derived from the French sans humanité], “without humanity.” We marched into the stadium on Carnival Monday night and performed before 7,000 to 9,000 people.

SCHECHNER: What was the development from Barcelona to Atlanta?

MINSHALL: I had no expectation that there would be an Atlanta after Barcelona. I am the servant of my master. I went to Barcelona to serve Barcelona. Likewise Atlanta. What is “The South”? I was able to draw on many experiences from Trinidad to decipher the riddle of the [American] “South,” and I am happy to say that every Southerner I have met so far has been very pleased with our representation of the South.

Even as the Hallelujah controversy was raging, I knew that three weeks after Carnival I was due to present first sketches, notes, and ideas for The South. So all through the working of Hallelujah I am supposed to be doing The South, all these other wheels are turning. But up ’til that time, The South had not resolved itself, no one knew what it was. I didn’t know where I was going, left, right, or what. I remember one afternoon seeking the counsel of a man of the cloth, having a long talk, saying, “Look, you don’t know how painful this is. I’ve known for much of my life that my work is my prayer, and my prayer is my work.” We talked for about three hours. And as we were walking up the driveway to the gate he said, “Well, Minshall, you need to pray.” And I said, “You’re a priest, tell me, how do I pray?” And he said, “You’re an artist. Go into the studio and work. Your work is your prayer.”

After that, at the eleventh hour, I got the silk. I knew I was going to do a costume because I had promised somebody, a girl from London, who had

14. The Adoration of Hiroshima, at the 1985 Peace March in Washington, DC—one of the many non-Carnival projects created by Peter Minshall around the world. (Photo by R. Reinhard)
come to dye silk, that “It’s all right, I will design a costume for you to dye.” That’s all I knew. And out of this came a work called Joy to the World that appeared at the preliminaries all in white because we didn’t have time to dye it. Here is this girl, with all her colored dyes waiting to paint it, and everybody saying, “Leave it in white, it is too beautiful, don’t touch it.” And Joy to the World comes second in the preliminaries. There are five days to the semifinals. And Minshall is agonizing. Even the girl with the dyes is feeling “Leave it alone, it should be white.” The day before the semifinals, with a million other things to do, there is only one way to find out—pray—do the work. So I get some colored pencils out, I sketch the first sketch, the second. I leave it, and I cover it. That night, Alyson [Brown] and Meiling [a fashion designer who goes by that single name, no last name] comes to do a little adjusting, and I say after the fittings, “Come into the studio a moment.” I cannot be the judge of this anymore. Meiling is the maker, and Alyson will be the player. I just move aside the piece of paper that was masking the sketch. Alyson gasped, “Ah, Mr. Minsh!” and Meiling was...[gesture of astonishment]. So I send for the girl with the dyes that very night. But of course it can’t be done for the semifinals, so she competes in white, and once more she comes in second. And after the semifinals, all day Saturday into Sunday morning, under a light specially set up in the abandoned warehouse next door, the girl with the dyes puts these water colors onto the white silk wings. And Joy to the World floats onto the stage like some Southern angel. She is the Queen of the Carnival, the most graceful, most feminine Queen ever to earn that title.

15. Alyson Brown as Joy to the World, queen of the band Hallelujah and the 1995 Queen of Carnival, in procession at Independence Square, downtown Port of Spain. Minshall can be seen to her right. (Photo by Milla Riggio)
The Carnival was over, I come back to town. “Todd [Gulick], I want you to get me Gershwin’s ‘Summertime.’ We laid the “Summertime” music over the soundtrack of a videotape of Joy in performance. Once you see it and hear it together, you don’t mess with it. This has the possibility of sounding so sentimentally trite, but I did not know that in naming her Joy to the World that she was going to become just that—a symbol of joy performing before practically the entire world. And so, from a real life experience of preliminaries to the Dimanche Gras, I was given the tale of The South. She’s actually created as part of the drama, the Sun and the Moon come with their attendants and in a sort of ritual they put her wings in place, and the Southern Spirit is born. She is dressed all in white, and she brings alive the Garden of the South as she leads the River of History through it. And a great storm, a Thunderbird, comes to attack her. The storm sweeps everything in its path, but out of the storm there is rebirth. She hangs by that one thread of hope. There is a note in the music—such a beautiful blues sound!—and her Southern Spirits come to give her good cheer—and they, all 40 of them, have the colors of the Dimanche Gras.

The folks in Atlanta wanted a feeling of church, so it seemed totally correct to end the piece with a great Southern-gospel Hallelujah Chorus. And it had many makers: composers, choreographers, and people making puppets—each one bringing their own love and skill and inventiveness. Sometimes I wonder, “Did I have anything to do with any of this, or did it just happen to me?” Do you know what I mean?

Schechner: Of course. When you do your best work, you are animated, energy passes through and literally takes you with it. You sign your name to it, but when you are doing your best work, it’s objective, like a piece of rock on the ground, not really yours. You can never own it, you can only receive it and give it.

Minshall: Absolutely. And share it.

Riggio: Of your two trilogies, the most recent comes when you feel danger, threat, and rage among your people. Yet you celebrate beauty and union and wholeness, a swirling kind of coming together—out of the Tapestry of the world and out of the Song of the Earth and Joy to the World. The earlier trilogy—remind me of what they were—? Mancrab was allied to—?

Minshall: River followed by Callaloo. Throughout my work is this duality. The very structure of Mancrab, the four poles, the structure of evil became the structure of goodness for the king of the following year, called “Callaloo Dancing Tic-Tac-Toe Down the River.” Callaloo is the son of Washerwoman from River and Papa Bois—who is the father of the forest, who had seen Washermamn bathing in the river one day, took the form of the water, and when she poured the calabash all over her she felt such great beauty...and her son was Callaloo. Because he was son of the water, the water taught him how to dance tic-tac-toe, like a stone skipping down the river. So the same structure that was developed for Mancrab—the articulated collar and the four poles from the feet—became two enormous diaphanous splashes one from each ankle. The king of the first band, the same structure, is the king of second band. And it says in the story that “Callaloo, besides being good was also very wise. He had brains as tall as any skyscraper.” So his headpiece made of balsa wood, 16 foot, a shaft, very African—a vertical line like the stamen of a flower rising up between these two huge dancing splashes. So every time he stamps his foot, the water splashes. And in Papillon [1982], which was as much about social structure as about butterflies—here today, gone tomorrow—the king of that was called The Sacred and The Profane.
RIGGIO: And the third year?

MINSHALL: There’s an old calypso, “And when de two bands clash, partner/ If you see cutlass/Never me again/Jump up in a steel band in Port of Spain.” There used to be steel band clashes. Taking this theme, I wanted to bring a mas’ that was actually two bands—a band of angels clashes with a band of devils. So, the third in the River trilogy was called The Golden Calabash. Whoever owns the Golden Calabash is given great power. Two bands fought for this Golden Calabash—one called “Princes of Darkness,” the other, “Lords of Light.” I would simply leave it up to the judges to decide who should win. But, ironically, neither of them won. To everyone’s amazement—because it really came across as an epic and magnificent mas’—the judges placed “Princes of Darkness” second, and “Lords of Light” sort of got lost in the shuffle. We were all so disgusted with the judging by this time that in a fit of passion I threatened to quit Carnival altogether, which prompted editorials in both daily papers, singing the praises of The Golden Calabash and saying, “Peter, Don’t Go!” What a bacchanal. It was a wonderful year because Ken Morris was still with us [Morris died in 1991]. He is legendary in Carnival for his copper and metal fashioning. He did some of the most extraordinary costumes. We’d sit down together and say, “What about this, let’s try that out.”

SCHECHNER: Any final words?

MINSHALL: I’m visiting San Francisco doing the tourist thing, and I pass a corner shop just bright with kites. I’ve always loved kites, so I go in to look...
and, touch and I discover—I forget the year, I always forget the year [1981]—the fiberglass rod. In Carnival we have used wire, cane. Immediately I think, mas’! mas’! The first time I use it to simply make long, long feathers for the band Jungle Fever, like grasses, forests of feathers quivering across the stage. Then one day, this is how it happens, we’ve done the Mancrab thing, I’m working on the band Callaloo, and I am thinking, how does this band work? Instinct takes over. I’m wearing an ordinary T-shirt, the fiberglass rod is there. The mind doesn’t think it, the hand does it. The hand picks up a scissors, cuts into the hem of the T-shirt and pushes the fiberglass through. And suddenly [Minshall describes a circular shape around his waist] happens all around me. “Todd, please, run into town, get me a bolt of cotton jersey, and buy a sewing machine.” I start to make shapes and cones. Talk about making a person bigger—it’s gone right through and been absorbed into the Carnival. It went straight into the Atlanta Olympics. The opening number, the tribal “Call to the Nations,” all of those jumping and dancing hoops, it started off one day with a fellow in a studio with a T-shirt and a piece of fiberglass. Two years later, it’s fashion. Well I’m not Cecil Beaton, and this isn’t My Fair Lady. Nobody knows it, but Trinidad put a little thumbprint there, our little mark on the universe.

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