

DIDÁ: Empowering Afro-Brazilian Women through the Arts

by NATALIE ARSENAULT

CARNAVAL 2007. THE CITY OF SALVADOR, Bahia, in northeastern Brazil, declared its theme: the samba. For one Carnival group, it was the year of the Samba Lavadeira (Samba of the Washerwoman). More than 3,000 women and children danced in costumes made of bright blue fabric specially printed with black-and-white images of washerwomen. Leading the group, teenage girls carried large metal tubs, clothing, and water; their choreographed dance imitating the movements of washerwomen at work. Several elderly washerwomen, invited as honored guests, came after the young dancers. Following them was a sea of blue parading in front of a large flatbed truck—the *trio eléctrico* central to Salvador’s Carnival—that carried Didá, an all-female band whose music pushed the group along the seven-kilometer parade circuit. For three hours, these women—many of them with young children in tow—danced while we completed the circuit, surrounded on all sides by revelers who sang along with the band.

I was fortunate to be there, along with Sue Anderson, an art teacher at the Bentley School in Oakland, California, atop the *trio eléctrico*, looking down on the festivities. As we began, the dancers performed in front of dozens of TV cameras, with each camera craning in for close-ups of the graceful dancers, powerful musicians, and lively singers. Reporters hopped onto the truck to interview Víviam de Jesús Queirós, Didá’s Cultural Director, who explained, “Carnaval themes are chosen through close observation of the moment in which Didá, and Brazilian society as a whole, is living. The focus is always to appreciate women and their achievements. Today we bring our 2007 theme to the street: Samba of the Washerwoman—Let’s Wash Clothes.”

Since its inception in 1993, Didá Educational and Cultural Association, a nonprofit organization with a mission to educate women and children through the arts, has sought to include women from Salvador’s lowest classes in its activities. Participation in the all-women Carnival

group is free, as opposed to the many groups in Salvador that charge several hundred dollars to participate. To make her costume, each Didá participant receives several yards of material in exchange for 2 kilograms of food, 1 liter of cleaning product, and 10 aluminum cans for recycling. Didá then distributes the food and cleaning products to needy women on International Women’s Day.

Staying true to its roots, Didá’s Carnival theme paid homage to a class of work characterized by women’s participation. Since Brazil’s early colonial days, Afro-Brazilian women—first as slaves and then as free workers—hand-washed the clothes of the rich. Initially, the slaves used rivers and lakes to complete their task; along the banks of these bodies of water, women came together to work, talk, and sing. Eventually, with access to running water, women took the work into their homes. Today, because of technological advancements, the profession has declined, but washerwomen performed an essential role in Brazilian society until late into the twentieth century. For Carnival, Didá celebrated their contribution to society.

LLILAS Outreach and Didá

In 2004, Professor Joseph Straubhaar, then-director of the Brazil Center, and I led LLILAS’s first overseas teacher training program, funded by Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad: Study Seminar and Curriculum Development Project in Brazil. Fifteen K–12 teachers from Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma, and California completed a four-week seminar in Salvador on the history and culture of Brazil. After the seminar, all participants were required to submit lesson plans based on their experiences in Brazil. These lesson plans are now housed on the LLILAS Outreach Web site and promoted through conference and educator in-service presentations throughout Texas and beyond.

During our residency in Brazil, the Fulbright group met with Didá to learn more about how nonprofit organizations in Salvador help their

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— NEGUINHO DO SAMBA



PHOTO BY SUE ANDERSON

Young performers from Didá at festival in Salvador, Bahia

communities through educational and cultural programs. “Poor black women empowering themselves through music. This is an important group, an important movement for us to highlight,” comments Prof. Straubhaar, who organized the visit to Didá.

In 1993, Neguinho do Samba, former maestro of Olodum, one of Salvador’s most famous percussion ensembles, created Didá Educational and Cultural Association. Through Didá, which means “power of creation” in Yoruba, Neguinho promoted transformation through the drum. Traditionally, percussion groups in Salvador included only men. Didá was the first group to include—and specifically focus on—women. At the heart of Didá is the drum, and the traditional music and culture it evokes, but Didá also offers a variety of free educational activities in popular forms of art created and maintained by Africans and their descendants.

Didá offers eleven arts courses, ranging from percussion to African dance to theatre, to 600–800 students every year. Many students take city buses, traveling over an hour each way, to get from their neighborhoods in outlying low-income districts to Didá’s school in the center of the city. The school serves basic meals (three daily) to 40 percent of its students and two snacks every day to all of its students. Didá’s other initiatives include the Carnaval group; the band, which has toured nationally and internationally; a technical course in Afro-Brazilian beauty and hair styling; a merchandise store; the Sòdomo project, through which Didá supports its students in partnership with their schools and families; and a new vocational training program that

will teach students to make drums and other musical instruments.

Central to all of Didá’s projects is the desire to promote a strong sense of self-esteem, identity, and citizenship through a focus on Afro-Brazilian culture. As Neguinho do Samba describes it, “The work that Didá does causes the community to evolve, to know its rights and the rights of others, its importance and the importance of others, so that we can have a society with more equality and freedom, understanding that anything is possible when there is respect. We all have the right to eat well, live well, and have a good education.”

Inspired by Didá’s social program, Sue Anderson, a participant in LLILAS’s Fulbright seminar, returned to Salvador in 2006. Sue actively sought funding to bring digital cameras and a photo printer to Didá, and spent the summer teaching photography at the school. Working with more than thirty students, ranging in age from 8–22, Sue taught four classes, four days a week. Víviam was so impressed that she immediately planned a show to exhibit the students’ work. The exhibit began as Carnaval 2007 ended—Sue and I had gone to Salvador to install the exhibit. Sue comments, “The project was a huge success and will be continued into the next three summers. Over sixty people attended the opening [of the exhibit in Salvador]. Even more important, to see the sense of pride and self-confidence in the smiles of the students was the real reward of the project. As one student said, ‘I feel like a real artist, I never want to stop making photographs.’”

This ongoing project, which is the direct result of UT’s first Fulbright seminar in Latin America, demonstrates the transformative

power of the Fulbright program; both Didá and Sue have benefited from the project. On a larger scale, this project can be used to promote knowledge and understanding of Brazil. In spring 2008, LLILAS Outreach will bring the photo exhibit to Austin. In conjunction with the exhibit, Neguinho do Samba and Víviam de Jesús Queirós will visit Austin for a series of educational events. With support from ArtesAméricas, the joint Performing Arts Center–LLILAS project, Neguinho and Víviam will conduct a series of master classes with university and local musicians. Plans are also underway for a symposium and educator workshop related to Afro-Brazilian culture, women’s issues, and community organizations in Brazil. Following the Austin visit, the exhibit, Neguinho, and Víviam will travel to New Orleans, where the Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University will organize similar events.

LLILAS Outreach’s relationship with Didá has been growing since the Fulbright seminar. Through Neguinho and Víviam’s visit, we hope to draw attention to the important work that Didá is doing and to encourage exchanges with students and faculty at UT. We want both to support Didá’s crucial mission and to highlight the social problems it is trying to address. In summary, as Víviam wrote in celebration of Didá’s thirteenth anniversary, “We understand that we are important to the stability of the community that we serve. The playing of our drums brings hope to hundreds of people, it always has been and will continue to be this way.”

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