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British Council ramps up arts work in T&T

Published: Saturday, March 18, 2017 *Participants in the TTFB script development workshop.*

The British Council Caribbean has been carrying out a number of programmes in T&T over the last few months. The council's Caribbean Arts manager Annalee Davis said the implementation of these programmes was a part of establishing and continuing cultural relations between the UK and the Caribbean.

She said it's about demonstrating that the UK has something to share and something to learn when it comes to the arts, the creative economy and cultural industries.

One project is a script development workshop which was carried out in partnership with the T&T Film Festival from March 8-12, facilitated by international script development consultant, Ludo Smolski. Davis said this workshop was implemented in response to concerns from stakeholders in the T&T film industry that there are issues around writing, script development, script editing and story editing. "Rather than just imposing a programme, we wanted to build relationships with entities on the ground who know what their needs are and partner with them to shape programming that fits the local context."

In addition to the workshop, Davis said there was a mentoring component built into the programme so that it will continue when Smolski returns to the UK.

Another initiative is a creative journalism workshop in partnership with the NGC Bocas Literary Festival. Davis said it has been suggested that there is a lack of writing about the arts for general audiences, and it would be useful "to provide journalists who are writing about the arts or have an interest in the arts some of the specificities around the various arts".

She said Bocas began the series with a workshop on writing about the culinary arts, following which the council partnered with them to do a workshop in Jamaica focused on literature and the visual arts. “This five-day workshop brought 11 journalists from Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, St Kitts, Dominica and the Bahamas, and it was led by the book editor for the UK Guardian and the UK Observer, Claire Armitstead, and curator of programmes for the Institute of Contemporary art in Miami, Gean Moreno.

“A spin-off of this workshop was a film criticism workshop facilitated by Jason Solomons carried out in early March at the Film Programme at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, and we're contemplating another in theatre and dance.”

Davis said some of the topics covered in the film workshop included how to look at and write about film and the various contexts in which this can be done. It also discussed “how we can empower writers in the Caribbean to realise their value and their worth to be able to shift ground and to engage with work that's being made”.

This year, the British Council also launched its inaugural Trans-Atlantic Artists' Residency Exchange which sees two artists from the Caribbean taking up residency in the UK for two months to pursue various projects, while two artists from the UK will be coming to the Caribbean for the same length of time.

One of the artists, Joanna Helfer, arrived in Trinidad last week and will be staying at Alice Yard, where she will focus on a pin-hole photography project. The other UK artist, Rosanna McLaughlin, will be in residence at NLS Kingston in Jamaica. Later this year, Trinidad's Joshua Lue Chee Kong will be hosted in London by Delphina Foundation, Gasworks and Autograph ABP, while Jamaican artist Camille Chedda will be going to Scotland for her residency.

Launch of Articulate Caribbean

The most recent project is the launch of Articulate Caribbean, a bi-annual series of conversations on art. The first instalment of the series, which is the brainchild of a UWI cultural studies lecturer, Dr Marsha Pearce, featured artist Mary Bourne, representing the Deveron Projects organisation in Scotland.

Bourne was brought to Trinidad by the British Council after she and Pearce met at the Momentum Festival in Scotland. Davis said, “Deveron Projects has implemented a 50/50 approach in their community in Scotland and Pearce was interested in the project and looking at the relationship between the object and the audience and artist and community. The launch, titled From the White Cube to Society: Art and Social Consequence—A 50/50 Approach, took a look at what it is possible for artists to do within communities, as exemplified by Deveron Projects' work in Scotland.”

Davis said several other projects are being prepared for the upcoming months, including more writing workshops as she doesn't think there are enough opportunities for writers in the Caribbean to learn how to write about the various arts.

“So as we speak to people on the ground, we understand where some of the gaps are and how we can work with different organisations to partner to deliver what's

needed, that becomes a constructive way to develop programming. I think working with journalists becomes really important because it bridges a gap between the maker and the audience and it's a way to bridge understanding and knowledge and expression, so that there's a wider understanding of the work the artists are doing.”

She said it was important to work with people in the arts to professionalise the cultural industries, especially as Caribbean governments are talking about using the creative economy and cultural industries to diversify their economies. Davis said this means a new language will have to be developed where working in the arts is seen as a viable career, instead of a profession for people who don't have other options or something we don't respect or honour.

“Hopefully these workshops will do that. There's so much talent in the Caribbean but there isn't a healthy cultural ecosystem to buttress the makers, to take care of them so they don't feel they have to migrate to be able to sustain themselves in their chosen areas.”

Davis said focusing on the arts helps create understanding about other people and other cultures.

“I think at the moment that we're in, in the world right now, it's really important to facilitate programmes that bridge gaps, that allow conversations to happen across difference. That's why we do it, because I think living in an increasingly globalised world means that we need to understand each other and the arts is one medium through which we can have dialogue.”

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