

The State of Caribbean Film: Trinidad and Tobago

By Travolta Cooper, The Cinemas
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L-R: Priscilla Delannay, FEMI film festival; Patricia Monpierre, APCAG; Luke, Bahamian filmmaker and 'The Cinema' series host Travolta Cooper.

Cannes, France - It is safe to say that Trinidad and Tobago is leading the charge for the development of a lucrative film industry in the Caribbean Region. Trinidad and Tobago, a twin island Republic, lead for mainly two reasons: One? The best and most imaginative films have come from under T&T over the last five years. Two? As a nation, they have done more to unite the Region under one Caribbean Film banner.

We have talked about this idea of a “Cariwood” on our television show The Cinemas.

#Cariwood then became a bit catchphrase that Tempo Networks (a regional television network televising our show) also adopted. Cariwood is this idea of a Caribbean Film Industry. And though it mostly exists in theory at this point (as the Region still has a ways to go), if the race to Cariwood is on, it is looking like Trinidad and Tobago will cross the finish line to her first.

As for my first point on T&T films, there are presently two of them here at the Marche Du Cinema (the non competition marketing arm of Cannes). The first I had the pleasure of screening was a film called “The Cutlass,” directed by Trinidadian filmmaker Darisha Beresford (in an impressive feature film debut) and written by Teneille Newallo, also from Trinidad. The Cutlass is a beautiful yet harrowing tale of paradise lost (as ‘paradise lost’ is an all connecting theme and aesthetic uniting Caribbean Cinema I am finding more and more). Inspired by true events, the story centers a young woman named Joanna (played by German born and Tobago raised Lisa-bel Hirschman) who is kidnapped and whisked off into the tropical rain forest of Trinidad by a sociopath named Al (played hauntingly good by Arnold Goindhan). Al charts the rain forest leading Joanna, his prey, with a gun in one hand and a “cutlass” (or machete) in the next. His initial intentions are clear; he’s holding Joanna for ransom. He’s poor and just wants the money her family can afford cough up.

As the story goes on, we all find ourselves held captive to this

the most dangerous of men: a man with nothing to lose, and everything to gain. *The Cutlass* played to sold out audiences at the Trinidad + Tobago Film Festival last September taking home its People's Choice Award, and Best Feature Film. And it is one of three scripts chosen by Film TT to receive both a grant and investment from the Trinidad + Tobago government. In other news here from Cannes, *The Cutlass* was signed to Leomark Studios (a Los Angeles-based production and distribution company). The Producers of "*The Cutlass*" wish to stress, however, that they are holding onto the rights to all Caribbean distribution and to theatrical distribution in North America (which includes the US and Canada) and will self-distribute throughout these territories this year.

The second T&T film screened here at Cannes was a most unusual experience for me. It was a groundbreaking science fiction film by the name of "*Tomb*", which is here being shopped around to potential buyers. I use the word "groundbreaking" because it represents the first of its kind to take on the genre of science fiction. It was also universally refreshing, I might add, to see darker skinned characters take lead in sci-fi flick. The film is written and directed by Nicholas Attin, the filmmaker of Trinidad's *Escape From Babylon* fame. As for story, *Tomb* follows Commander Nelson Obatala (played by Kearn Samuel) who mans one of the first two T&T space shuttles in the near-future Caribbean space programme. When Commander Charles Mercer's (played by Gregory Pollonais) ship goes off course, MILO, an AI operating system, causes Obatala to respond to Mercer's distress signal. This takes them through a wormhole that turns out to be a road to the afterlife. Where *Tomb* may lack

in traditional narrative story elements, it makes up for in vision and imagination. In fact this was probably the point on behalf of Mr. Attin as comparisons' to Stanley Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey* are unavoidable here. Like *2001*, *Tomb* isn't so much a visceral experience as it is a cerebral one. As a Caribbean student of film, it was also a most stimulating one. This is the closest I have personally come to "island" and sci-fi since the TV show *Lost*.

As for my second point on development and uniting the Region, the government of T&T has played an active lead role in developing a local industry. I mentioned the role its Film TT (formerly known as the Trinidad + Tobago Film Company) played in films like *The Cutlass*, but what cannot go unmentioned is the role its Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival (named one of the 25 Coolest Film Festivals in the world by *MovieMaker* magazine) also played. There are many reasons why it one of the "coolest" film festivals but the two that are most worth mentioning are its 'Caribbean Film Mart' held at the festival each year, and its 'Caribbean Film Database', which they also launched at the festival.

The Caribbean Film Mart which receives scores of applications, gives fifteen (15) selected filmmakers (from throughout the Region) the opportunity to present their projects in development and pre-production to sales agents, distributors, and representative of film funds from the US, Canada, Europe and Latin America. In a region separated by a sea and several different languages, there is the Caribbean Film Database, a web resource cataloguing over 500 feature films made in the region in the last 15 years from the English-speaking, Dutch, French and Spanish-Speaking Caribbean.

The site, which is available in English, French and Spanish, also places a spotlight on Caribbean Women in Film, Classic Films showcasing older, pioneering work, and has a Short Film Corner as well. In its resources section, it lists regional film festivals, film commissions and associations and film schools and a bibliography of academic writing on Caribbean film and filmmakers.

Even more endearing at Cannes is the presence of Trinidad's Film Commissioner and General Manager of Film TT, Nneka Luke (this article has a companion piece on an interview done with Ms. Luke at the festival). Naturally, Ms. Luke is here to promote Trinidadian filmmakers and attract Foreigners to Trinidad to film. But she also has a dual and understated mantle. She is active on the Cannes ground, like a soldier, working specifically with the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Jamaica and elsewhere on united us as a Region.

It was through Ms. Luke that I first learned of the Caribbean Association of Film Festivals and the Caribbean Association of Film Commissioners. Ms. Luke mentioned both to me to highlight the need for Film Festivals in the Region to come together. Filmmakers in Trinidad like Sean Hodgkinson have great and encouraging things to say about her leadership as T&T Film Commissioner and Manager of Film TT.

Mr. Hodgkinson, the filmmaker of *Trafficked* (which I reviewed earlier this year) had this to say about the state of Trinidad and Caribbean Film, "We have reached the point where locally made films, are now being screened around the world at major film festivals. This was *Pan, God Loves The*

Fighter, Trafficked, Play The Devil, and now The Cutlass, so that old argument that Caribbean Cinema is not of international quality or standards can be thrown out the window. It's to now reach that next level. Our budgets are minuscule compared to other regions, and we really need to invest in co-productions with other territories and have that conversation, and look at the possibilities for global distribution. Our stories are universal and we have the talent to make this happen, we just need the opportunity.” Trinidad and Tobago continues to lead in attracting opportunity to the Region.



L-R: Steve Zebina of Rencontres Cinéma in Martinique; and Bahamian filmmaker, Travolta Cooper

The Cinemas is the brainchild of its host, Bahamian writer, director, and producer Travolta Cooper, who began the show as a result of an endorsement deal with The Bahamas' movie theater chain. At heart, The Cinemas is designed to promote and encourage the new wave of Caribbean Cinema happening in the Region and around the world. The show consists of movie reviews and interviews with a Caribbean twist.