

Ninth Floor re-opens issues of student strife in Canada

Joanne Briggs

Published: Thursday, July 20, 2017

The incident which took place on the ninth floor of Sir George Williams University, Canada, in February 1969 still carries mixed emotions among Trinidadians. For some, it was an event which should not be mentioned, or at least discussed as quickly in the same breath as it was raised. For others, it was an event that represented a time of resistance. For others, it was just an event that occurred without knowing or understanding the underlying tensions that existed. This was a generation of Caribbean people who seemed to have been swept under the rug.



Trinidadian filmmaker Selwyn Jacob felt the need to tell the real story of the events at Sir George Williams University.

The event is a sensitive one. A riot took place after six Caribbean students, among them Trinidadians, protested against institutional racism. The students believe their failure at a computer exam was as the result of prejudiced lecturer. Their protest snowballed into two weeks of chaos and violence, with riot police storming the occupied ninth floor, and a storm of computer cards came raining down onto the streets below.

Now it has become a film, titled *Ninth Floor*. Film producer Selwyn Jacob, a Trinidadian who resides in Canada, felt the need to tell the story, linking the sequence of events. As a result, he presents different perspectives on what took place. The film was meant to be an opportunity to seek clarification as to what really happened on that fateful day.

The irony is Jacob was in Canada when the incident happened. He was a student but he was not aware or involved in the happenings at that time.

“I was sceptical. I didn’t think students would react that way, to pass a course. They were quite capable of passing although the professor failed the Caribbean students. I didn’t know of it until the next day. I was in Alberta when it took place

and the world is looking at you for an explanation. You take it personally. People were coming to me saying, ‘Selwyn, I know. I hope we are still friends,’” he said.

It has always been Jacob’s goal to return to Trinidad, and this story was one of the stories he wanted to tell. But as young filmmaker, he didn’t think he could have told the story effectively. The project became a latent one but the desire to tell it never disappeared.

“I have made the film in my head many times over. I needed to set the record straight and get perspective. This was the first time the students told their story,” Jacob said.

“This story has been percolating for 40 plus years. There are people who were embarrassed and emotional. That was the reason why they wanted to opt in or those who opted out. Some of them were still undergoing the trauma of the incident. I had no idea of the impact.”

The film, Jacob said, is an international story as the students involved were from Guyana, Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas, Portugal, Spain, the United States as well as Trinidad. But the focus, he said, was on the Trinidad component. The film is based on archived material and perspectives from people who participated in the protests. Jacob said the people interviewed were affected by the comments from outside, the comments were racist, inciting that the people of African/Caribbean descent die in the fire.

“It’s a revealing documentary. One side of society tried to vilify them. But they were right. They were standing up for a just cause,” Jacob said.

The film also succeeded in finding Professor Anderson’s voice, the lecturer at the centre of the controversy. Although he was found innocent in court, there are those who believed he didn’t apologise. His son represented him and the family after his passing. In his discussions following the film’s release in 2013, Professor Anderson’s son said he only knew about what happened when he was in high school.

Ninth Floor is one of two films Jacobs has produced, linked to telling black stories. The first was telling the story of the first mosque in Canada during the 1930s. After he graduated from college, he has been doing films between 1984 to 1995/6. In 1997, he joined the National Film Board, focussing on diversity, to reflect Canada to Canadians and highlighting visible minorities.

MORE INFO

The screening of Ninth Floor in Trinidad is supported by the T&T Film Festival and will be shown on July 20 at the Centre for Language Learning, UWI.

NINTH FLOOR

Director: Mina Shum

Documentary Feature/ Canada/ rated 14+
