

An examination of 'Trinidadianness'

Published: Sunday, September 24, 2017

Green Days by the River, T&T filmmaker Michael Mooleedhar's film adaptation of the Michael Anthony novel, premiered at the T&T Film Festival on September 19. In this essay, Caribbean visual arts scholar Patricia Mohammed examines the film's style and substance.

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

In his film adaptation of the Michael Anthony novel *Green Days by the River*, Michael Mooleedhar is not just interested in the remembrance of things past but in documenting the identity of a society in the making, locating the many parts that accumulate to the collective identity of this nation.



*From left Christian James, Michael Mooleedhar and Michael Anthony at the premiere of the film adaptation of *Green Days by the River*. PICTURE DAVID WEARS*

Set before Independence in 1962, *Green Days by the River* presented a message that fitted in with Mooleedhar's philosophy: "I think I am one of those people who fall into the category that we could have a great nation and I am doing my part to build this and if everyone else would do this, we would have a more harmonious country."

"Race is such a touchy subject, I just felt that once you represented it, people will come up with the rest, the mix was there already and the rest will happen. An island has to create its own multicultural success. The place is so small, everyone has to get along, everyone is a villager and we are all struggling; our options are the land or the sea, that has nothing to do with race or wealth, this is what was offered to us."

It is the prerogative, nay, obligation of the filmmaker to add visual dimensions to the text. For example, he has embellished the brief funeral scene where Ma Lammy, Shellie, Mr Gidharee and Rosalie pay their respects; the two women are dressed in shades of purple, the colours of mourning then conventionally worn by women.

And here Mooleedhar adds a minor touch that is superb, inspired by our award-winning 2015 documentary *City on the Hill*, where in the cemetery on the grounds of the Lady of Fatima Church in Laventille, Port-of-Spain, there was one grave on which a man's hat was left, a poignant reminder of the living. In *Green Days*, Shellie takes off his hat as he leaves his father's grave and hangs it on the little wooden cross that marks the plot. He is no longer wearing the short pants we see him in at the beginning of the film and, having come to terms with his adult choices, he walks away purposefully from the grave like a man, not the boy he once was.

A 'Trinidadian signature'

The director said he was trying to "make a film with a recognisable Trinidad signature."

"The land was a significant character in the film so I wanted to get the location of Trinidad right, the authenticity of lush overgrown, bushy tropics located near equatorial heat and vegetation."

His actors are also all local, so accents do not have to be groomed for authenticity in intonations, glances, idiomatic utterances, pauses, the movement of head and hands when one is greeting, walking, dancing, talking, or laughing—all of which are communication genes built into the cultural DNA in every society and learnt from childhood. This is one of the most successful contributions of this film in my mind: there is an unselfconsciousness in the presentation of Trinidadianess that can come only from a generation and director who is comfortable in and unapologetic of what this feels like.

Like most directors with a limited budget (and as every filmmaker will tell you, the budget is never sufficient) he worked alongside his cinematographer to invent creative ways of making the best use of camera time.

"We changed over to the dolly because we did not have a Steadicam operator. We getting smart and making every shot count and finding ways to make a feature film without a big budget. Instead of shooting a wide, medium and close-up, sometimes I play with shots that are not close up or hold the performance on one shot. I learnt to put a lot of movement in front of the camera—I had to make immediate choices.

An indigenous voice

Here experience helps, however, and Mooleedhar admits that his previous productions allowed him to anticipate the editing even while making camera decisions in the shoot. "From the influence of *Coolie Pink and Green*, I learnt economy in camera shots and the best use of cross dissolves, how to visually grip the viewer and how to work with a tighter range of shots.

"We were creating a production style suited to small budget films and a film language and it was important that both the director and producer who were part of

the production be involved in the editing. We were building our own cinematic language, not a Hollywood language.”

The value of visualising characters, taking them out of the imagination or text, into drawings or paintings or making them three dimensional on screen may have its shortcomings for the reader who feels that films usurp the private imagination. This debate will continue as long as we have books and films made from books. Nonetheless, there are many worlds that one can inhabit in the imagination and film has opened up new vistas for memory, for identity creation, and for inventiveness in other artistic form that are connected to filmmaking like music, set design and fashion.

Mooleedhar strives for another market for this film, hoping that it will be used for educational purposes, to bring students back to reading through the movie. Books and films nourish each other and extend the lifetime of novels and created added interest in authors. Michael Anthony, the author of Green Days, is, according to the director, excited to have this film made from his book, and sees it as having extended the novel's shelf life and enhanced his legacy as a writer. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and whether or not the film will become a classic, like the book 30 years after its release date, remains to be seen. My own view is that it has a good chance of doing so.

Patricia Mohammed is professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at UWI, St Augustine. She is an author and a filmmaker. Green Days by the River screens tomorrow at 6 pm at MovieTowne, San Fernando as part of the T&T Film Festival.

The film will be released September 27. nationwide
