

AN UNTAPPED TREASURE: THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FILM INDUSTRY

SEEING OURSELVES THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE



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The imaginative world of the silver screen remains a relatively untapped resource for creative and entrepreneurial minds in the 21st century. The virtual possibilities of this luminous world entered Trinidad and Tobago first in 1911 with the opening of The London Electric Cinema in Port of Spain. By 1959 there were 40 cinemas, many springing up as a result of the presence of the US armed forces situated in the country during the Second World War and ushering in a new era of North American influence on top of the colonial European one. By the 1970s there were 74 cinemas located throughout the twin islands. The films were foreign-made and premised these islands as receivers rather than producers of film. The passage into self-government and nationhood, and, by the last decades of the 20th century, changing technologies of film making, made it possible to claim a greater sense of ownership of the images of ethnic and national identity, transforming the potential for film and filmmakers during the first 50 years of independence.

The early diet of films consumed in Trinidad and Tobago presented a western as well as eastern cultural variation. Although Hollywood and Pinewood were the major early distributors, the 1935 screening of the Bollywood film *Bala Jobhan*, followed by many others, was valuable entertainment for the second largest ethnic group in the islands connecting them with a fantasy image of India. Films were reality spiced with adventure, excitement and romance and transported the imagination of islanders, identifying global icons on whom they would draw. By the 1960s we see names of literary characters such as Bogart in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, and steelbands such as *Desperadoes* and *Casablanca*, all influenced by larger than life characters or places in film. Similarly, the exotic lure of the tropics pulled foreign filmmakers and screenwriters to set their films on these shores. By the 1950s Trinidad and Tobago attained recognition as a film location

for successful Hollywood box office hits. Island flora and topography – palm trees, sand, beaches – or the architectural vernacular, together with generous helpings of sunlight, attracted both filmmakers and foreign audiences, by now accustomed to vicarious travel through motion pictures. Between 1952 and 1960 four popular films were set or filmed either in Trinidad or Tobago. Among these were *The Affair in Trinidad* (1952) starring Glenn Ford and Rita Hayworth, *Heaven knows Mr Allison* (1957) directed by John Huston with Deborah Kerr and Robert Mitchum, *Fire Down Below* (1957) with Rita Hayworth, Robert Mitchum and Jack Lemmon and the first classic representation of the children's adventure novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1960) starring John Mills and James McArthur.

These films were, however, those of a world outside of the everyday life of the islands. Very rarely were local actors seen or local voices heard. If the Caribbean and Trinidad and Tobago in particular was being sold to itself and to others, it was a highly mythologised version. Thus it was natural that Trinidad and Tobago would make its own debut as producers in the film industry. The first local film to emerge was *The Right and the Wrong* (1970) directed by Harbance Kumar, an Indian national resident in Trinidad, who followed this up with *Bim* (1979), a story based on the life of a local criminal with screenplay by Raoul Pantin and featuring local actor Ralph Maraj in the lead role. There continued to be a sporadic local film industry with a third film by Harbance Kumar entitled *Girl from India* (1982) and *Obeah* (1987) by Hugh A. Robertson. For the first time, film, like the West Indian literature which had also evolved during this period, began to feature local themes – such as the troubled romances between couples from different ethnic groups and exploring the body of local mystical knowledge and wisdom, set in familiar context of towns and villages.

As foreign filmmakers continued to depict

Opposite: poster for the film
Coolie Pink and Green, 2009

an imagined region in films like *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), the accelerated desire of claiming authenticity on the screen, along with the expanding possibilities for entertainment, for occupations in film and television production in the post-independence era led to an increase in skilled personnel, training possibilities and incentives. Thus, by the second decade of the 21st century Trinidad and Tobago are poised not just as a location that is welcoming to foreign filmmakers but as a rich source of inspiration for those locally born and bred who want to tell their own stories through film. In this desire local filmmakers of the present and future are aided by two institutions. First, evolving out of earlier government initiatives, a national agency The Trinidad & Tobago Film Company Limited (TTFC) was formed in 2006 to facilitate the development of the film industry. This company provides logistical support and core services such as location scouting, research and acts as a liaison with industry partners, the community, production houses and government agencies. They have also introduced a competitive Production Expenditure Rebate Programme of cash up to 35 per cent to continue attracting International producers to Trinidad and Tobago. Alongside there is the annual Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival and other film festivals who each year reward both quality and content.

In the space of just over two decades we have seen major short and feature-length narrative and documentary films directed by local filmmakers, many made by local crew and cast, ranging from narratives of migration and disruption as in *What My Mother Told Me* (1995) and *Joebell and America* (2004), the experimental and visionary film *Sista God* (2006), stories and documentaries that capture the heart and soul of Trinidad and Tobago's musical traditions like *The Panman* (1997) *Calypso Dreams* (2002) and *The Audacity of the Creole Imagination* (2010), films that continue to maintain the necessary foreign

connections like *The Mystic Masseur* (2002), a Merchant Ivory production, the Hollywood *Contract Killers* (2007) and the Bollywood *Dulha Mil Gaya* (2010), short films that exhume island ghosts like *Minutes to Midnite* (2009) and *Dark Tales From Paradise* (2011), films that confront religious and ethnic difference and gender relations such as *Coolie Pink and Green* (2009), films that enshrine the local cuisine and idiom, such as *Doubles with Slight* (2011), others that celebrate the music and art of the nation such as *The Solitary Alchemist* (2010) and *Seventeen Colours and a Sitar* (2010) and in joint production between France and Trinidad, *Calypso Rose the Lioness of the Jungle* (2011). Still others relate the lives of those who made these islands what they are in dance as in *Julia and Joyce* (2011) and *Inward Hunger* (2011), the last a biography of Eric Williams, the man who brought the nation to independence in 1962.

The infrastructure for film has come of age, it has become professionalised, with some 30 different production companies now in operation and a large number of local films that are winning awards not only in the local festivals but are also being screened internationally. In reaching inward and stretching outwards film is achieving what the nation has set out to do, to claim its history and tell it to the widest audience, and to preserve our creative legacies and histories on film for generations to come. But, there are many stories still left to be told in the coming 50 years. ■

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