



Peter Minshall

Mr. Chancellor,

I present Peter Minshall, celebrated son of the soil whose star shines brightly in the firmament of local art, supreme artist of the theatre of the streets—the art we call "Mas," the Carnival of Trinidad and Tobago.

Born in Guyana in 1941, Peter Minshall grew up in Trinidad. His father, a painter with fine voice, his mother a woman of deep social conscience committed to helping children of the underprivileged, he has taken possession of the fortune of his inheritance and brought it to full flower.

As a child, like most children of his time, he vividly recalls the powerful effects on his psyche of traditional mas'—dragons, jab-jabs and midnight robbers, then still a part of the Carnival scene. At the age of thirteen, while a student at Queen's Royal College, he made his first carnival costume—that of an African Witch Doctor—from a cardboard box, long grass and dog bones. It was a choice not without its significance. By then he had begun to paint, first for himself and increasingly at the request of neighbours and friends. From childhood through adolescence his attraction to artistic expression became more insistent, more compelling, so that on leaving school his ambitions were already sharply focused.

Following in his father's footsteps he secured a job as a radio announcer, principally as a means of saving for his training abroad. But his painting continued and he began designing sets and costumes for local amateur theatrical productions, of the Operatic Society and the Drama Club. Then, in 1962, on the occasion of independence he received his first award—Most Promising Young Painter. Finally, it was time to leave for London to join the Central School of Art where he studied assiduously for three years and graduated in 1966 with a Diploma in Theatre Design. This mere record of his success in qualifying as a professional artist in no way reveals the intensity of his experiences. Of this period he recalls:

I gained a sense of what worked and what did not, what made good theatre, or good art and what did not . . . I learned to analyse and to discriminate. When one does this, one does not have to accept someone else's view of what is good and what is not.

What I began to discover was that our mas, when done well, has many of the qualities that made good theatre or good art.

This was a revelation as powerful as it was profound. Images of the Carnivals of his youth, long stored in his subconscious, began to surface and be seen in a completely new and different light. Mas was much more than the sheer joy of revelry, more than the competitions, more than the terror of the moment instilled by the black figure of a Jab Molassie dancing in the j'ouvert dawn. Carnival bands took on a new meaning. They were visual symphonies, moving sculptures, expressions of man's hopes, fears, beauty, ugliness, good and evil. In short, mas had the potential of being great art and in common with all great art was a valid expression of inner turmoils of the soul.

Following a British tradition, the young Minshall was obliged to serve an apprenticeship in the provinces to prove his mettle before qualifying for commissions in London. This took him to the New Theatre in Bromley and such was his success that three years later he was appointed to design sets and costumes for the full-length ballet "Beauty and the Beast" at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London. He had arrived. His work not only won standing ovations but excited superlatives from the most austere critics. This is what the London Times had to say:

Peter Minshall had designed a world of shimmering silver against black, which turns to richer but still sombre colours for the scenes at the home of Beauty's father, until at the very end it brightens into golden dawn to celebrate true love in the unexpectedly grande finale.

What followed then were a series of engagements which set a pattern of constant movement that endured throughout the seventies and eighties—at the Commonwealth Institute, the Nottinghill Carnival, at theatres in various parts of England and at the Trinidad Carnival.

After designing sets and costumes for a production of Cannes Brulees in London, directed by Beryl Mc Burnie, Peter Minshall at last broke into the Trinidad Carnival as a designer, in 1972, when he designed a costume for his adopted sister, Sherry-Ann Guy, which won the Junior Carnival Queen contest. This success was repeated two years later with costumes designed for Miss Guy and an adopted brother, Jose Samaroo. They were masterpieces, winning not only first and second places but also Individual of the Year. Guy's costume was that of a Humming Bird, made of cloth and cane, which, with the whirling movement of the masquerader, was transformed from a drab figure to a shimmering explosion of colour. It was at once a triumph of art and of technology. Its effect was electrifying, setting the stage for a succession of designs for large bands whose artistic power has since passed into the realms of legend. The first, Paradise Lost, was carried out at the invitation of Lee Heung, a major producer of bands. It swept the field, winning every possible award. What was particularly significant was that Minshall had taken the principle exemplified in the traditional Bat costume and greatly extended it, so that with greater movement built into the costume, the masquerader was free to create a unique choreography for the costume as an extension of his own movements. Costume, character and masquerader became one. This development opened up a whole new range of possibilities, for with the availability of new materials—aluminium, fibre-glass and styrotex—it was now possible to increase the size of the costumes to the awe-inspiring scale of the figures which we know today.

By these developments Peter Minshall sought to capture the soul and spirit of the Carnival characters of old but on a new and breath-taking scale. One masterpiece piled upon another—each with a different theme—Zodiac, Carnival of the Sea, Danse Macabre, Jungle Fever, Papillon, bands of Callaloo and de Crab, his folk-tale trilogy: River, The Princess of Darkness and Lords of Light, Ratrice, Carnival is Colour. The sheer artistic output was prodigious.

Minshall's mas was also a rejection of the mediocrity that had crept into the modern Carnival—colourful Hollywood style, full of glitter, plumes, frills and pantaloons, yet lacking in everything else that was important that made traditional Carnival such a powerful experience—revelry without soul.

*Yet from these flames
No light but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe*

He is not without his detractors and at times has provoked storms of controversy to the extent that some say his bands are theatre, not mas, that he has been accused of being a cult leader, of promoting himself and exploiting his followers. He answers his critics by reminding them of the history of the Mas, of the pantomime of the Pierrots, of the rehearsed speeches of the Midnight Robbers, of the exquisite dances of the Bats. These are the roots of his Mas but he also acknowledges the influence of Carlisle Chang who introduced the articulated standard and precise handling of colour and purity of form.

Nicolan Sevcenko, a Brazilian Professor at the University of Sao Paulo and renowned art critic sums it up this way:

For a century Mas invigorated life in Trinidad, but as we Brazilians know so well, it ended up becoming a national institution, controlled by political machinery, vulgarized by nude exhibitionism, made ridiculous by the grotesque indulgence of the middle class which infiltrated it, diluted by the conservative kitsch of the costumes, themes, choreography and arrangements and standardized by the fixed criteria of the judges. A long, disciplined, predictable parade designed to excite the foreign tourist. The popular art of the Carnival was in agony . . . Until the appearance of Peter Minshall.

To explain Minshall's refusal to compromise, to feel his disappointments, to empathise with his rejection of the notion that mas is only about having a good time, one needs to understand his passionate commitment to Mas as great art.

International recognition, slow at first, with teaching appointments at Dartmouth College, USA, is now widespread as when he marched with Madame Hiroshima and sixty others in Washington in eloquent testimony to the horrors of war, as when he exhibited his masterpieces in Sao Paulo, Brazil, as when he thrilled a million and more in Paris with Saga Boy and Tan Tan to the accompaniment of steel band rhythms. Now he has been paid the signal honour of being selected to design sets and costumes for the ceremonies of the 1992 Olympic Games in Spain.

He is nothing if not an idealist, an artist passionately committed to the restoration of human values. He refuses to be denied his blackness or his whiteness, or what is Indian or Chinese or Syrian in him. He, like all West Indians, is all of these—a Callaloo man—a Mas man.

We suspect that the overtones of Mas in this ancient University convocation ceremony have not escaped him. Our band has moved on to the stage, his headpiece is in place and the flowing robes of his costume well adjusted as he prepares to face the judges.

Mr. Chancellor I request you by the authority of the Senate and Council, to admit Peter Minshall to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.



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facsimile transmittal

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Campus Communications(PR) Centre

Date: 1999 December 09

Re: Peter Minshall – Citation 1991

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Photographs

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The attached information sent as requested. Will send scanned photographs with the Vice Chancellor over this weekend.

Robert Henry

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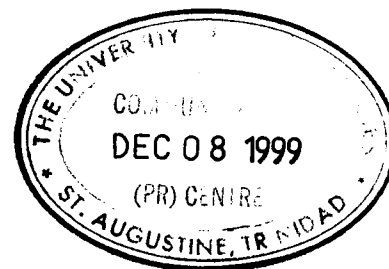




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MEMORANDUM



TO : Bob Henry
Campus Relations Coordinator

FROM : Elizabeth Buchanan
Director, Campaign Unit

DATE : December 8, 1999

RE : **PETER MINSHALL**

Do you have a copy of the citation read for Peter Minshall at the convocation at which he received his honorary degree in Trinidad? If so, please fax a copy to me. 1351

If you have any photographs of the occasion please send by e-mail to: mthomas@hgmad.com