

# Ethnic knack

Author: By Perrie Croshaw

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Once based on food, Carnivale now is all about art.

Carnivale, Sydney's multicultural arts festival, is 25 years old. Much has changed in Australia during that quarter of a century, although many artists from non-English speaking backgrounds believe there is more change needed.

The concept of a multicultural festival was a response to the needs of a community - the leaders of ethnic groups claimed they were only acknowledged when they were visible. If there was no place to exhibit themselves, then they remained invisible.

The festival evolved as an exercise in exhibitionism. The different cultural communities performed in traditional dress and presented their country's food with the belief that the way to a person's heart was through his or her stomach.

"While food is very important," says the festival's artistic director, Mishline Jammal, "over the years we have specifically moved away from making food the priority, to make the art and the artists and the culture and the creators the focus of the festival."

"Not every Latin performer wants to dress in a Mexican hat.

"Getting rid of that stereotype is what we are about. We want to profile the artists and their work at their best."

The festival organisers this year have aimed much of the festival at a younger audience. It's a question of building confidence and raising awareness.

"Young people, particularly in areas like Parramatta, are already engaging in expressing themselves by using their own cultural imagery, but they are still unsure of themselves,"

Jammal says.

"But Carnivale gives them the space to say something like, 'Hey, I'm celebrating my Turkish identity and culture'.

"Young people can see people of other cultures celebrating with them and it prompts them to say, 'Wow, I'm important'. Celebrating their culture in this way validates them."

Education is a pervading theme of the festival.

"Education is important in raising awareness and understanding, which leads to harmony," says Jammal. "The harmony comes from the depth of understanding and the depth of engagement and the depth of the welcome.

"If I'm at an event's front of house and I make you feel welcome as you come through the door, and I welcome you to the art and tell you where my head space is - my dreaming - then you know me back to front. I'm no longer the other. It's a really powerful and exciting place to go."

Jammal says Carnivale is a festival of otherness - the most powerful notion you can call to mind.

"In a way the work of the margins is incredible artwork. We have seen how some of the best artists and best work come out of this struggle," she says.

Apart from organising the festival each year, Carnivale Ltd supports artists through its booking service, assistance with grant applications, workshops and through liaison with major institutions.

The company has a permanent music venue at Cafe Carnivale in Paddington, which every week serves up Latin, Afro, Arabic, Asian and other global music.

Justo Diaz, the festival's music director, would like to see more such venues around Sydney and the State. He believes the purpose of Carnivale is to present, promote and educate audiences. "If we present enough good material, the audiences will become more discriminating," he says.

He is appalled by the low level of cultural sophistication among government officials, even those working in the arts.

"I'm not sure that Australian politicians are aware of the importance of culture. I would say there is a lot of ignorance about culture. Culture builds the national identity. The lack of consciousness about that element is keeping Australia behind in the world context.

"In this period of globalisation that's extremely dangerous," he says, "because if you don't have a national identity, you will become part of something else."

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#### **Khaled Sabsabi**

"Being labeled

'multi-cultural' excludes you from the rest of the population as an artist by the colour of your skin," says musician **Khaled Sabsabi**. "But the idea of Carnivale is good. It gives people who don't have easy access to the mainstream, an opportunity to display their works. But there is a lot of red tape.

"I believe that if you are a good artist, you should be called a good artist not a 'multicultural artist'."

Alejandra Canales

"Carnivale offers me a very good opportunity to express my ideas," says producer Alejandra Canales.

"But I would like Carnivale to have a bigger influence ... It's in a difficult position because in one way they have to support all the traditional cultural roots for every community and at the same time they have to support the multicultural artist who wants to do new contemporary works. Fulfilling both these roles is too much."

Michael Roseth

"If I hadn't received a grant from Carnivale, I might not be travelling down this road," says artist Michael Roseth. "I went back to Israel after I knew I had the grant to do some more research ... I met someone working with Palestinian artists ... We talked about getting together for a future collaboration ... This idea was kicked off by my relationship with Carnivale. If that sort of thing can happen through [it] then it's a really positive festival."

Nasrin Mahoutchi

"Most of the women in our Iranian women's writing group have been in this country less than five years," says writer Nasrin Mahoutchi. "They feel comfortable writing in Farsi, our native language ... It can be difficult to find a voice in English, so it is very important for them initially to write in their own language, to keep in touch with literature in their own language, until they become bilingual. Then they can express themselves in English."

Davood Tabrizi

"For me, Carnivale means the opportunity for artists to meet each other, to be united without having political or religious differences," says musician Davood Tabrizi.

"But I don't like the use of the term 'multicultural'. These artists and performers speak one language under the one roof. When you say multi-cultural, it separates you. I play world music, not multicultural music. I don't think multiculturalism exists anymore."

Maria del Carmen Montesdeoca

"Life is difficult for all artists, but more so for artists from non-English speaking backgrounds. Carnivale is one of the few spaces where artists from NESB can fully participate in the cultural scene of this country," says performer Maria del Carmen Montesdeoca.

"But I wish we were considered mainstream as well, and that we didn't just perform in a special festival in October which segregates English and non-English."