

Brazilian evening brings the Carnival to Pretoria

The Brazil–South Africa Cultural Centre of the Brazilian Embassy and the Pretoria Alliance Française hosted a very successful Brazilian party on the evening of 16 March 2010.

The venue was bursting at the seams with people from all walks of life attending the event to get a glimpse of the rich culture of Brazil.

Traditional Brazilian food was served as well like guaraná and the infamous Caipirinha cocktail with a scorpion sting disguised by the tantalizing taste of fresh lime and sugar!

Music and dance groups entertained the crowd with the likes of the Batala South African band, whose rhythmic drum beats made even passerby's in the street stop and watch.

The band is made up from volunteers, especially youngsters from previously disadvantaged areas. Membership is free and anyone can join.

The Batala group will also be performing at this year's Soccer World Cup.

The South African Capoeira Foundation's performance drew the crowd with their interesting combination of dance and music.

Capoeira is an Afro-Brazilian art form that combines elements of martial arts, music and dance. It was created in Brazil by slaves brought from Africa.

The Capoeira foundation was started in South Africa over 14 years ago in order to transmit the fundamentals of Capoeira and Brazilian culture through a unique and dynamic medium.

Later in the evening, while sipping on a glass of wine, guaraná (or another Caipirinha) guests were swaying to the Papagaia group, whose combination of jazz music and song transported all listeners to a Brazilian club where the night never ends.

No cultural evening will be complete without an accomplished writer of literature. Maria Conceição Evaristo published her debut novel: "Ponciá Vicêncio" in 2003 and have not looked back ever since.

She is a writer and professor of Brazilian literature at the Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro and flew to South Africa especially for the event.

Anyone who met her was left with an impression of awe and respect for this formidable lady who showed women everywhere that you should never allow yourself to be a victim of circumstances.

Ms. Evaristo graciously answered a few questions with the help of an interpreter from the Brazilian Embassy.

Was this your first trip to South Africa and what do you like about the country?

“Yes, it is my first trip to Africa, which started in Mozambique. Unfortunately my time spent here was too little. I arrived in South Africa on the afternoon of the 16th and returned to Brazil the next day. I passed through the neighborhood and visited the Union Buildings as well as the Presidential gardens. It is beautiful. I became emotionally thrilled with the view and the surrounding residential structures of the Alliance Française”.

Do you see any similarities about the position of women in society in Brazil and South Africa?

“I reply any question arising related to the position of women from my experience and that of the women in the Brazilian society. The living conditions of African women have captured our attention for quite some time and even from across the miles, we always make our comparisons. I can confirm that there are similarities between the position of black women in the societies of Brazil and South Africa. Black women in South Africa and Brazil experience various forms of exclusion from social participations. Black women are mostly poor in the two societies; historically, they bring the story of a social inferiority. Despite the poverty they face, these women actively contribute to their working methods, ranging from domestic employment to supporting their families, and often assume these responsibilities alone when they are abandoned by their spouses or when they are unemployed. This does not mean that all black women are victims in poverty. We have two societies, black women in greater positions and women who are living in poverty”.

If you could do one thing to empower women, what would it be?

"I'd invest in plans to support, and facilitate the everyday life of poor women, for example, implementing good crèches and schools for their children so that they can go to work without stressing about the safety of their children. I'd invest in a professional Employment policy, long term as well as short term, so that these women are put in the correct job market with guaranteed basic rights. I'd invest in the issue of women's health. And when I speak of education, I speak from a formal education, carried out in schools, universities, as well as informal education that can be done in groups of locals and managed in their own community, in particular initiatives coming from the community's own women. And when I speak of health, I speak not only of physical health, as also mental. I speak of preventative measures to avoid illness and the unnecessary loss of women's lives due to preventable diseases."

What in your opinion makes a great piece of literature?

"I believe that a good text is one that besides the aesthetic beauty built by the play on words, the exercise of the construction of meanings, the architecture of the text itself must bring a further 'good message'. This is a story that holds the attention of a reader, a story worth being told. It is not enough to have a good story to tell, you must know how to tell it. It's needed to seduce the listener, in this case the reader. The reader has to identify with the story being told. I like to write fiction as if it were a reality. Sometimes, I listen to others telling stories of their lives or people who witnessed certain events, at the same time I hear or see certain things; I start writing a story mentally that already appears to me in other senses. But above all, a good literacy text, from my point of view, is one that falls into emotion and touch the emotions of those reading it. And the person reading the text must connect with the feelings of the writer.

Do you have any plans for a next book?

"Yes. I've already started three novels and just need some time to continue writing them. I have now been inspired by my visit to Africa and have a lot to write about.

Even as a retired elementary school teacher, I must constantly do extra work in order to survive. I cannot give up writing, taking care of a house, and my special girl, a daughter, 29 years old who has special needs. I have to accompany her to school, help her with

school work and balance a social life outside my domestic environment. I do this all on my own. I've researched information on bursaries offered to children with special needs to see if I can get one. It would be a way to help me to concentrate more on my literary work; this is the direction I'm hoping to take to get help".

What philosophy do you live by?

"I strongly believe in the saying "*o que é da gente vem na porta, chega um dia*" (the literally translation for this is "what is ours come to the door, it arrives in good time"). It's not necessary to run over anyone to achieve our goals). This trip I made to Africa confirmed just that. I've always had a dream of stepping on African soil. I've already received invitations to Vienna, Puerto Rico, USA and hope to get even more in future. I've waited years to get the opportunity to visit South Africa, I think ever since I was born. Then I got an invitation from France/Mozambique and Alliance Française in Pretoria and that was like a dream come true. I'm grateful for everything I have gained in life".

Something that you have learned from life that you want to share with the readers?

"The certainty that our desires and dreams are the 'pegs of life'; it is necessary to desire, dream, but above all to believe that we were born to be happy. And when speaking of happiness, I'm not speaking about Utopia or a transcendental plane transporting you to the unknown. I'm speaking of happiness of "here and now" – of a happiness that we can and should build on. I'm speaking about something concrete. I know of many people that say "money does not buy happiness". This is true, money alone does not. If this were true, all rich people would be happy, they would not be depressed or suicidal etc. Also the idea that a person may be happy to a certain extent I consider as false. I cannot glamorize or romanticize poverty. Hunger, misery, unemployment, a lack of quality of life, humiliation, the taboo of suffering from gender, racial discrimination, social class, sexual orientation etc. causes unhappiness. To be happy without food, a home, being sick without the option of receiving treatment, without having your basic needs met, is impossible. I do believe that people have the dream to be happy and try to search for what they wish for. People are courageous in their search for personal happiness and search for something to achieve that happiness."

We sincerely hope that this was not the last cultural evening hosted in partnership by the Brazil–South Africa Cultural Centre and Alliance Française. If the attendance was anything to go by, they may have to book a sport stadium for the next event.

Written by Ansie Janse van Rensburg