

The Caribbean Equality Project “Unveils”



Aminta Kilawan

On August 8th, 2015, the Caribbean Equality Project, an organization whose mission is to promote social change, awareness, and acceptance by empowering and strengthening the voices of LGBTQ people of Caribbean descent in the New York area, “unveiled” for the first time at the Queens Museum.

Guests were greeted to traditional Caribbean drinks including mauby and sorrel, before heading into the Museum’s Theatre space for what resulted in emotional, moving presentations from start to finish.

“Unveil” began with an opening dance performance entitled “A New Beginning” by the International Dancer Zaman, and welcoming remarks by CEP Program Director Krishna Ramsarran, followed by a screening of “The Abominable Crime,” a film created by Micah Fink and featuring Maurice Tomlinson, a gay rights activist and lawyer. “The Abominable Crime” portrayed the fear instilled in Jamaican LGBTQ individuals – not simply for denial of their rights, but also the ability to simply avoid getting killed. For many across the globe, Jamaica resonates as a popular honeymoon destination, but Fink’s film shed light on the fact that for many LGBTQ individuals, much of Jamaica fosters intolerance.

As the film ended and the lights dimmed back on, a glance around the room captured the tears of many attendees. It was clear that the documentary hit home for some. After the screening, CEP Founder and Executive Director Mohammed Q. Amin introduced “My TRUTH, My STORY,” CEP’s multimedia storytelling campaign. In the campaign, Skyler Manchoon shared his battle with coming out as a gay man and contemplating suicide multiple times. His mother thought he was simply in a phase and sought to take him “back home” to find a wife. Moreover, Manchoon stated, “I thought I would

never know if my father loved me for who I was.” Manchoon is now an empowered powerhouse and



Panel Discussion: (from left to right) Maurice Tomlinson, Skyler Manchoon, Renella Pereira, Tyra Ross, Micah Fink. (Photo Credit: Richard Persaud, Captured Society)

an inspiration for others. Renella Pereira and her girlfriend Trina Williams were also featured in My TRUTH, My STORY. The couple talked about their experiences as women who came from staunch Christian backgrounds, and remain true to their faith in spite of the adversities they faced. Pereira was cursed to 7 hells for being who she was as a lesbian, yet believes that she, like all of humankind, was put on the Earth to “be happy.” Tyra Allure Ross, a transgender woman, stated: “I thought the demon I was fighting was me believing I was a girl. The demon was people seeing that I knew I was a girl and them taking advantage of that. Someone else’s thoughts of you don’t make you. They don’t create you.”

After the launch of the My TRUTH, My STORY campaign, a panel discussion featuring Fink, Tomlinson, Ross,

Manchoon and Pereira was held. The discussion was facilitated by Mohamed Amin of CEP and Emily Baumgaertner of the Pulitzer Center. In responding to a question about the history of his film, Fink indicated that he believes there is hatred towards the LGBTQ community in Jamaica because “there is a culture of homophobia connected to nationalism” as well as a “religious fundamentalism that identifies itself as

Much progress has been made. Recently, Tomlinson and others were able to get the Montego Bay Cultural Center, a government-owned entity, to loan them space to freely screen the film.

Upon a question by attendee Rohan Narine regarding the panelists’ faith, Pereira indicated “Live your happiness now, no matter your religion. Judgment is a sin. Gossip is a sin. So ... I guess we’re all going to join

the bridge but we will not go to someone who will cannot, by a confidentiality clause, ‘spread your business.’ So ... I went to therapy. And I started understanding myself. And I started to realize we have to look at where other people come from at times and not just live in the moment of that aggression and the animosity that they throw on you. And once I realized that, I realized I was the one with the power because I was doing something that many people could not do... Me going to hell is just your thought. It’s not actually what’s going to happen.”

The event’s guest speaker was New York City Council Member Daniel Dromm. Dromm recounted the day in 1973 when he came out to his mom and told her he was gay. When he asked if she was ashamed of him, she said, “No. What I fear is you’re going to face a lot of discrimination in life.” Dromm indicated that many keep their sexual identities hidden out of fear that they will lose a connection to their families. He detailed the

anti-gay,” “a legal environment that criminalizes homosexuality,” and “a public health system that is taking that to mean they can’t do any public education for the gay community dealing with HIV and AIDs.”

In addition, Fink believes there is “a musical culture that honors anti-gay violence.” He described the situation in Jamaica as “the perfect storm.” Maurice Tomlinson, who has done much work to raise awareness about LGBTQ rights in the Caribbean, explained that just last year he tried to air a 30 second clip of the documentary on Jamaican national television, but the government would not permit that.



Sundari, Indian Goddess performs “Queer Kajal Liberation.” (Photo Credit: Richard Persaud, Captured Society)

each other in hell?” The audience emitted echoing laughter. Ross responded to the faith inquiry by saying “A lot of Caribbean people will tell you ‘don’t go to therapy’ – we will go down the street and talk to our neighbor on

volatile landscape of New York City in the 1970s with a number of murders in Howard Beach, Bensonhurst, and Jackson Heights. Nevertheless, the LGBTQ movement gained traction with events like the Queens

Pride Parade. Dromm expressed a commitment to support CEP’s work. He indicated he would like to see “The Abominable Crime” screened at New York City public schools.

The event featured performances by Sundari – The Indian Goddess, who performed for the first time as a drag queen to his mother, as well as Nadia Bourne, an Indie vocalist, songwriter, and musician. During a networking reception, delicious Caribbean hors d’oeuvres sponsored by Spice, Inc. were served. Attendees enjoyed another stirring rendition by Nadia Bourne as well as a colorful dance calling for peace by Akash Singh and the Sanasani Cultural Organization.

In emotional closing remarks to the audience, Andy K. Bishun, CEP’s Community Outreach Coordinator said, “Having been raised by conservative, semi-traditional Guyanese parents, I could not be true to myself without feeling obligated to uphold a certain image and a certain way.” Bishun further stated that “Many in our community still face discrimination, engage in dangerous sexual activities and suffer in silence through violence and rejection. Because of our cultural and religious backgrounds, many have suppressed their sexual identity; have been apprehensive to live their truth.” For Bishun, CEP “seeks to help our multi-generational community find resources to understand their truth and provide supportive outlets to share their struggles and stories.”

To learn how you can support the Caribbean Equality Project, visit <https://www.facebook.com/CaribbeanEquality>. To learn more about “The Abominable Crime” visit <http://www.abominablecrimefilm.com/>.