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THE CARIBBEAN, ON SCREEN: A CONVERSATION WITH FRANCES-ANNE SOLOMON

HYACINTH M. SIMPSON



Frances-Anne Solomon

For the past decade, Toronto has played host to the annual **CaribbeanTales International Film Festival**, an important milestone marking the global emergence of a rich and vibrant Caribbean film and television industry. Each year the festival brings some of the best Caribbean-focused feature-length dramas, documentaries, and shorts to audiences in Toronto. Running for approximately 10 days in September, the film festival is one of the more visible undertakings of the **CaribbeanTales** brand.

Founded by the UK-born, Trinidad-raised, Canadian filmmaker Frances-Anne Solomon, **CaribbeanTales** is comprised of a group of companies whose mission is to create infrastructure and build networks to facilitate the growth of a film and television industry that bolsters the Caribbean culturally and economically and cements fruitful connections between regional and diasporic populations. **CaribbeanTales'** three-pronged business model—production, marketing, and distribution—is aimed at ensuring the industry's sustainability over the long term as well as its reach into international markets.

CaribbeanTales and Solomon's collaboration with film commissions, broadcasting companies, governments, funding bodies, and content makers across the region and the diaspora promotes complementarity; these synergistic relationships will go a long way in ensuring a strong and vital Caribbean-centred industry that can hold its own alongside the Hollywoods, Bollywoods, and Nollywoods in the years to come.

I sat down with Solomon in 2014 to talk about the **CaribbeanTales International Film Festival**, the vision behind and the work being done under the **CaribbeanTales** banner, and her own work as a filmmaker.

HS: You were telling me just now that you were born in the UK, grew up in Trinidad, and then first came to Canada when you were eighteen.

Yes, I attended university here. I studied Theatre Arts at the University of Toronto. I went to Europe after I finished my studies. I wanted to travel and, as I was a British citizen, I ended up in England where I got a job at the BBC. This was right after the riots in 1986.

HS: Brixton?

Yes, Brixton, Handsworth, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds. Everything was in flames. Black people were burning the place down, and in the aftermath of that the BBC was looking for people of colour. That was maybe the one and only time. They're not doing it now [laughs]. I was accepted into the two-year BBC production trainee program. It gave me up to six months' practical work experience in different departments: television drama, local radio, news, and documentaries. I applied for and worked as a radio drama producer for three years, then moved back to television where I worked as a script editor in the Drama Department, and later as a producer and an executive producer.

HS: So you were at the BBC for a number of years?

Yes, 12 years. It was an extraordinary experience for me because at that time the environment was highly politicized. In the late eighties, a lot of interesting things were going on. There was the Black Workshop Movement. John Akomfrah, with the Black Audio Film Collective, was a contemporary. There was also Sankofa—a group of young, black filmmakers that included Isaac Julien and Nadine Marsh-Edwards. There was another workshop called Ceddo led by Imruh Bakari Caesar and Menelik Shabazz. They were all producing very interesting, experimental, and political work from a Black British perspective. Especially after the riots, there emerged an analysis around class, race, gender, and sexuality in the late eighties that really opened my mind. It was a very different scene from what I had experienced in Canada and Trinidad.

And then the BBC itself was an extraordinary institution because here you had a vertically integrated organization that created, produced, and broadcast original content for a rapt audience. British audiences were then completely involved in local television. Everyone sat down to watch *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*. Everyone watched event dramas like *Prime Suspect* or the deteriorating relationship between Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Everyone knew what was going on in the country. They were involved in the politics, in the place, in the events, and the personalities. It was very much a community, and television tied the community together. The BBC was part of that. Also, at that time everything was produced in-house. There was a very direct relationship between what the Corporation produced and its audiences. People would call producers on the phone and write letters. They were involved. So you felt like you were doing something integral and worthwhile, that you were part of something. In Britain, public television and radio, the BBC, is paid for by the audience, by the viewers. Everyone who owns a television set pays a license fee and that money goes back into program production. It's an extraordinary model, actually. As far as I know, nothing quite like it exists elsewhere. Public television in the States is very different, for example. It's dependent on donations, whereas in Britain public television is based on the principles of "Inform and Educate." It's the people's money. They're engaged with it; they own it.

HS: So you honed your skills in those years at the BBC. Was that where you began working on your own films, the early ones such as *What My Mother Told Me* and *I Is A Long Memored Woman*?

As well as working for the BBC at that time, I also had my own company, Leda Serene Films. Initially, there were three of us: Ingrid Lewis, Inge Blackman, and myself, all Black women who wanted to develop work by Black women. I produced several films, like the ones you mentioned. We also produced a series of short films called *Siren Spirits* that were written, directed, and produced by women of colour. They includ-

ed short films by Ngozi Onwurah, Rahila Gupta, and Pratibha Parma. Parallel to that, at the BBC, I also initiated and produced a series of full-length dramas called *Black Screen*. These were 60-90 minute films written, directed, and produced by people of colour. Among these were *Flight*, written by Bengali writer Tanika Gupta, and *Speak like a Child*, directed by the British-Ghanaian John Akomfrah.

HS: What made you return to Canada?

I hit a glass ceiling and really needed to be out of that environment. In the 1990s there was a huge pushback against diversity in Britain. Stephen Lawrence, a young Black man, was murdered around that time. Do you remember that? From the way that the case was handled by authorities and reported in the press, I realized that little had changed despite all our efforts. Racism was alive and unmoveable. Simultaneously, all the diversity programs were cut and the progression forward that we had achieved was reversed. There did not seem to be any future for the work I wanted to do in England.

HS: The British were set in their ways?

It was more like spiralling backwards, a surreal and crazy-making experience. So I decided to come to Canada. I had a romantic image of this country based on my experience of studying theatre here at the University of Toronto. I imagined that Canada was a more inclusive place than Britain and that there would be more support here for the diverse and independent work I aimed to do. My mother also lives here. So I decided to come back and commit myself full-time to my life-long dream of being an independent, rather than working from within the constraints of an inevitably racist institution. I decided to work full-time to build a body of work that reflected my beliefs, my heritage, my own background, and stories. It was rather naïve, I suppose.

Like I said, working for the BBC was a great learning experience for me because you had this organization that created, produced, exhibited, and sold content to a rapt audience who paid for it. It's a vertically integrated model and it is sustainable. I felt that's really what we as Black people, as people of colour, as Caribbean people, needed to develop in terms of our own work. That's what we don't have.

*At that time, the Internet was coming on stream. Marketing was becoming easier because of the global reach of the World Wide Web. Production equipment was becoming affordable as a result of digital technology. All those things that usually made it prohibitive for people without access to the means of production to reclaim their stories were beginning to open up. I started *CaribbeanTales* with that vision in mind.*

HS: This was around when?

**CaribbeanTales* was incorporated in 2001. The vision for *CaribbeanTales* from the very beginning was this: creating a vertically integrated and sustainable production, promotion, and distribution vehicle that uses the Internet, digital technologies, and new media to engage audiences. Right away we created an audiovisual Internet platform called CaribbeanTales.ca and we created projects like *Literature Alive*.*

HS: I remember watching the *Literature Alive* profiles of Caribbean-Canadian writers and artists when they aired on Canadian television back in the mid-2000s. You produced a lot of content for that series.

Yes, we made 20 of those short films as well as an interactive website.

HS: You seem to have an interest in creating content for schools, in providing students and their instructors with material that wouldn't normally be readily available to them.

It's a pet peeve of mine that when I was growing up we didn't have much access to Caribbean literature, to Caribbean history, or to stories about ourselves. I had to discover all that—who we are, where we came from—on my own. Since then, I have seen how especially young people can be transformed through discovering and reconnecting with their heritage. I find that in Caribbean diasporic centres like Toronto a lot of young people feel lost. They find themselves marginalized by the larger society and they end up defining themselves by that exclusion rather than from a positive sense that they come from somewhere and that they are part of an important and rich heritage. Through this understanding, they learn that, as Caribbean people, they are part of an incredible story that belongs to them, and that story goes way back to indigenous cultures, to Africa, India, China, Lebanon—to all major civilizations.

HS: I've used some of the *Literature Alive* films and audio materials in the classroom with great success on occasions that I've taught Caribbean and Canadian literature at Ryerson. Students of different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities relate very well to the intimate portraits of Caribbean-Canadian authors provided in the documentaries. I've also found that my Canadian students of Caribbean heritage seem to find a sense of validation in these materials. They find a sense of belonging.

That's wonderful. Thank you. Belonging, community, identity, confidence, role models, yes. It's hugely important. Colonizers and slave masters knew exactly what they were doing by taking away our stories, and even now our culture, and trying to get us to be like them. Because by doing that, they take away a person's and a community's strength. We find it more difficult to resist when we don't know who we are. But once we start resisting, those in power must negotiate Equality and Difference. This is why I believe so strongly in the power of storytelling. It is not a luxury. It is essential to the survival of human beings, of cultures, of races. We need to talk about the things that have happened to us and tell our stories, individually and as communities, of how we got through and how we survived. We need to pass our stories on from generation to generation in order to continue to evolve.

HS: *Literature Alive* was an important venture into content production for *CaribbeanTales* and is a valuable resource for many of us. Around that time weren't you also producing content through Leda Serene Films?

*Yes, there was *Lord Have Mercy!* and *A Winter Tale*.*

HS: I remember when *A Winter Tale* first came out [in 2007]. It hit hard at the heart of the tense racial atmosphere that's always there bubbling under the surface in Toronto, sometimes exploding into violence—with the attendant stigmatizing and profiling of Black/Caribbean communities. As well, all 13 episodes of *Lord Have Mercy!* were so enjoyable and affirming to watch when they aired on Canadian television back in 2003. The series generated quite a buzz among television audiences at the time and it was great when the show was nominated for two Gemini [Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television] awards. What's the relation between *CaribbeanTales* and Leda Serene Films?

*Well, Leda Serene was a company that I created in England to develop my own work and I have continued to use it for that purpose in Canada. *CaribbeanTales* was a larger vision with a wider ambition and mandate than my personal vision and stories. The goal for *CaribbeanTales* is to create a global Caribbean diasporic film industry using the Internet and digital technologies. In 2013 *CaribbeanTales* became a charity and that cemented its public-service mandate.*

HS: A very visible part of *CaribbeanTales*' mandate is the annual *CaribbeanTales International Film Festival (CTFF)*, held in Toronto. How and when did CTFF begin?

In 2006 a friend of mine approached me and said: "Wouldn't it be nice to have a film festival during Caribana [the annual Caribbean carnival celebrations in Toronto]? You have so much content between CaribbeanTales and Leda Serene. All we have to do is get a cinema and you could show all the films—all the wonderful stories of authors like Ramabai [Espinet] and Honor [Ford Smith] and many others." So I said OK, and that weekend we were screening films in the cinema at the National Film Board of Canada's facilities on John Street in Toronto. We had managed to get the cinema for free. I felt like, OK, is it really this easy? You see, one of the biggest challenges for us as so-called "niche" content creators is exhibition. It's getting people to see our work. It's engaging audiences. It's getting distributors and film festivals to take you on when they don't recognize that there is even a voice. At the time we did not have a brand, a presence. You know what I mean? For example, there's no such thing at this time as Caribbean Film Studies.

HS: I've heard that so many times.

It's a big problem. But once we created the festival and saw the audience response—saw that we could get our own theatre and show our own films, and that people would come, and we could create a brand, we could build an audience, and grow an appetite for our own stories—then I became hooked on the idea of having an annual festival to market, create a brand, and engage. The second year, in 2007, we partnered with the new Trinidad and Tobago Film Company which was, at that point, emerging as well. The recent developments in the industry in Trinidad have emerged parallel to CaribbeanTales. That second year we showed films from Trinidad and its diaspora—from Horace Ové, Inge Blackman, and other filmmakers in England that I knew well.

HS: All of Trinidadian heritage?

Yes, Trinidadian. Horace was the first Black filmmaker to make a feature film, ever. He's from Trinidad. Inge, now Campbell X, is also from Trinidad. She's an extraordinary and important queer filmmaker of colour. There were also films

from Canada, for example from the Chinese-Trinidadian filmmaker Janine Fung, among others. It was very interesting to draw together all the different voices from around the diaspora and have them under one banner as filmmakers of Trinidadian heritage.

The next year the Jamaican Consulate invited us to do the same thing for Jamaica. That was great because Jamaica has such a recognizable brand. We got bigger audiences that year than before just by promoting, you know, Brand Jamaica.

HS: Was the film festival still connected to Caribana in those years? I recall that the earlier film festivals were all done in late July to early August, the same time period for the Caribana festivities.

Yes, it was. Then in 2009 we partnered with the Caribbean Studies program at the University of Toronto and its then-director Alissa Trotz. The festival was held at the University for a couple of years.

*2010 was a turning point. I went to Barbados that year. I had cancer. I was offered a teaching job at the university there and thought that would be a nice thing to do while I was recovering. I couldn't work too much because I was undergoing chemo. I ended up holding a film festival there that year, and the *Best of CaribbeanTales Film Festival* ran in Barbados for three years.*

HS: You also held the film festival at the Harbourfront Centre a couple of times. That's a prime Toronto location for the best of cultural events.

We held the festival there from 2011 to 2013, thanks to the kind support of Melanie Fernandez.

HS: Did using such a well-known cultural hub give the film festival greater visibility?

Yes, and legitimacy, I believe.

HS: Now [in 2014] the film festival is at The Royal [a second-run indie/art movie theatre cum post-production studio on College Street in Toronto]. What response has the film festival had from the Caribbean community and the film-going public at large in Toronto over the years? For example, did holding *CTFF* at a high-profile venue like the Harbourfront Centre help bring in larger audiences?

Actually, we had bigger audiences this year than when we were at Harbourfront. The Royal is more accessible to our audiences, more central. But Harbourfront is a fantastic venue.

HS: We've talked so far about two of the media companies under the *CaribbeanTales* banner: CaribbeanTales.ca and the *CaribbeanTales International Film Festival*. There is also *CaribbeanTales Worldwide Distribution (CTWD)*. When and how did *CTWD* come into being and what's its purpose?

Being in Barbados was an opportune moment. I was fortunate to come into contact with The Barbados Business Enterprise Trust, a company that was offering small amounts of venture capital to entrepreneurs to develop innovative ideas aimed at diversifying the Barbadian economy. There was talk about developing the cultural industries as an alternative to our traditional agriculture- and tourism-based models. I partnered with Dr. Keith Nurse, then Director of the Shridath Ramphal Centre for International Trade Law, Policy and Services in Barbados; Dr. Terrence Farrell, an economist from Trinidad; Mary Wells, the Jamaican writer and director; and also Lisa Wickham, an established producer from Trinidad. Within the context of the film festival we had in Barbados, we felt that it was important not just to show films but also to begin a discussion in the region about making our content marketable. In order to develop an industry for the Caribbean and not just a brand "in foreign," we felt we needed to conceive of, and construct an infrastructure for, a sustainable industry that allows for creating jobs, building complementary sectors, and developing income streams to monetize and professionalize the potential of the audiovisual industries to enhance the region and contribute to its economic growth.

As we began to talk in those terms, it became important that we engage the emerging filmmakers in questions like: Who is your audience?

Where is your market? How do you go from "Oh, I want to tell this story" as a hobby to "I want to have a career and hire people and contribute to the economy and be part of the whole picture?"

We began to talk about building a Caribbean film industry. That was very important because the islands are insular in their tastes and concerns. When you're in Barbados they're talking about Barbados. In Trinidad they're talking about Trinidad. But you cannot build an industry from separate audiences of tiny fragmented islands.

HS: Because it's all the Caribbean.

From an international perspective, it's all the Caribbean. In terms of building an industry this becomes even more important. Trinidad cannot have an industry all by itself because it's only one and a half million people. Barbados is a quarter of a million people.

HS: And Jamaica is only, like what, a little over two and a half million?

Yes. These are not large enough audiences to sustain and recoup the costs of production and turn a profit. There needs to be a wider regional, diasporic, and global audience base to sustain the industry.

It's necessary to draw on all the populations that might have an interest in these kinds of stories—our stories—and look at the potential for audiences across linguistic lines and across bodies of water, and then draw in the immigrant populations in the diaspora who have a hunger and nostalgic need to be connected to the Caribbean. There are huge populations of Caribbean people in North America and in Europe.

And it's not just where people in the Caribbean have migrated to, but also where they've come from. So you're talking, then, about the whole of the African diaspora as well as South and Central America who share with us, very fundamentally, many aspects of our history and culture. There is also India and China, the Caribbean has populations of Lebanese and Jewish immigrants, as well as communities with many different European ancestries (French, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Portuguese). All these heritage cultures are potential audiences for our stories.

We started *CaribbeanTales Worldwide Distribution* with this mandate right after the festival in Barbados in 2010 and we decided to have an international launch for the company in Canada. Well, it didn't make sense to launch a film-distribution business during Caribana, so we decided to do it during TIFF [the Toronto International Film Festival] in order to make the world know that we're here. And since we were launching our company during TIFF, what better way to do it than pair it with our film festival? So we moved CTFF to September to run alongside TIFF.

HS: How do you go about ensuring that you have a steady stream of the quality content you talked about to show, market, and distribute? Does the *CaribbeanTales Incubator Program* play a role in this?

The idea for the *Incubator* came about because of our decision to develop Caribbean filmmaking as a business through CTWD. We decided to link CTWD's mandate to a training program that gives Caribbean diaspora filmmakers the opportunity to experience an international market environment. Because in order to sell content we need to have content that is both marketable and saleable. We need to train filmmakers about the requirements for selling content internationally. So that's how the *Incubator* started. That first year we brought together 26 filmmakers and 15 stakeholders from all over the Caribbean, and it was interesting because the impact was that they bonded and they got an education. A lot of them had never been to an international film festival or market before. They were able to meet lots of industry people.

HS: Other Caribbean filmmakers?

Other Caribbean filmmakers, yes. But they also got a chance to see close-up the monster that is the international film and television industry. Their attitudes beforehand were along the lines of: "I'm a filmmaker because I'm making a five-minute, no-budget film about my bellybutton, or my mother." Or something. Of course, I exaggerate. However, in reality, what they are

up against is a 60-million dollar film by James Cameron, which has a 10-million dollar marketing budget. As a filmmaker you need to really deal with that. Not just with James Cameron and his power and his budget, but also with the machinery and marketing power of Hollywood. And you're who? A what filmmaker? From where? You have to deal with the reality of just how rough the business is in terms of market domination. How difficult it is to create not just a brand for yourself but for a whole region. It is for us as a region to say OK, this is not just one person making a film. We come from somewhere. We have a voice and an identity. We are a movement. We are a brand. And because there were over 30 people here that year, we were able to make a small splash. One of our filmmakers put it well. She said, "There is more power in more people." Before we produced the first *Incubator* many people told me, "Don't do it. Don't even bother to bring your little team of whoever to TIFF. It's not a good idea because first of all, the industry, and TIFF, aren't into Black people." And that's the elephant in the room, right?

HS: Ha! And can Black people produce anything of quality anyway?

That's right. We don't create quality. I was told: "We know this, and so it would be a waste of your time. It will be embarrassing for you. Don't do it." But over 30 people were noticed. There was a sense that there's a contingent here from the Caribbean. It made a difference. So, I thought, OK. Fine. Now we build on that.

HS: Let me see if I have this right. The *CaribbeanTales International Film Festival* was moved to September in 2010, the same year that *CaribbeanTales Worldwide Distribution* was launched during the Toronto International Film Festival? And the inaugural *CaribbeanTales Incubator* was also held, in collaboration with the Toronto International Film Festival, that same year? And since then both CTFF and the *Incubator* are held at the same time as TIFF?

Right.

HS: So, are the incubatees able to attend sessions alongside other TIFF participants and see how Warner Brothers and other bigwigs manage sales and distribution? They get to see how deals are made, how to present their work to potential buyers, and that sort of thing?

Exactly. They get an opportunity to see how the big guys "run tings." We have a deal with TIFF where our incubatees get a special price on industry passes so they can participate in TIFF while they are doing the Incubator. We also produce our own pitching session at the end of each Incubator. The pitching session is becoming more and more popular.

HS: How does the pitching session work? Who attends?

The pitching session—called The Big Pitch—takes the form of a Caribbean Breakfast and Pitch and takes place at the Lightbox [the TIFF Bell Lightbox Building, headquarters of the Toronto International Film Festival]. We are inside the TIFF building. It's very easy for industry delegates, who are attending TIFF from all around the world, to come to us. This year, there were six thousand people in Toronto for TIFF and we had around 80 in attendance at our Big Pitch. We feel that it was a success.

HS: Are you targeting the behind-the-scenes people in the industry? The movers and the shakers?

That is the idea, yes. We carefully hand-select and invite from that international group those delegates who might be interested in our content.

HS: Hollywood people too?

Hollywood is not our audience, though. I think it's been important for me to say this. We are building our audiences. We're not competing for these so-called mainstream white audiences because they don't do business with us, right? We are building our own industry. We're not interested in being part of an industry that is not interested in us. It's like trying to have an affair with somebody who doesn't want you, has no interest in you. At all. Why would you do that to yourself? It's stupid. We're doing something completely new and different. We are building our own audiences. Our target audiences are global.

Frances-Anne Solomon, BBC; 1990



For example, at our *Incubator* last year a producer stood up afterwards and said, "I thought all the pitches were fantastic. The stories were amazing. I think it's wonderful! The only thing I wondered about was why you guys didn't talk about how any of this is relevant to Canadian television. This is Canada and you really need to think about how you're going to target your content for Canadian audiences." And our Facilitator replied, "*CaribbeanTales Worldwide Distribution* is just that. We create content from a Caribbean perspective for worldwide distribution. We do not cater to narrow niche audiences whether in Canada or elsewhere." I was just so pleased with the way she said that we are the world. Our audiences are everywhere, and we are not a minority. If anybody is narrow and in a minority it's perhaps Canadian broadcasters who have no clue about the global context beyond the couple hundred-thousand people who watch their local programming. Really, I'm not interested in them any longer. I've moved beyond that. We need to embrace the paradigm shift from trying to cater to what white, colonial (whether American or European) buyers and audiences want to focusing instead on what we as people of colour working in a global context want to create; on what our audiences expect in terms of authentic, fresh, and original film and television storytelling that reflects our diverse lives and experiences now.

HS: And perhaps also rethink whether to continue to struggle with working within limiting institutional structures . . .

. . . when there is no space there for us. But now, because of the democratization of media, there's an opportunity to reach audiences everywhere through the Internet. There's no need to go through the gatekeepers or have them fund you in order to reach your audiences. You can make your own content and reach your own audiences and bypass that rubbish. Notice that we've got the Caribbean, which is a huge and diverse region, and we've got the Caribbean diaspora. We've got Africa, India, China—all of these culturally rich and different places that have fed our identities. We've got all the places that Caribbean people have come from historically and where they've migrated to in recent times. And we have so many different stories, like [Richard Fung's] *Dal Puri Diaspora*. Or *Hero*, the feature project that I'm doing now. More and more, people are seeing it's not a question

of being a victim or fighting against racism in a tiny little bubble, but about telling huge, epic, global stories about all the different ways we are connected and got to be where we are today. In *Dal Puri Diaspora*, a Chinese-heritage Caribbean person based in Toronto tells the story of the Indian and African origins of a Trinidadian dish called Roti. He travels the globe to tell that story. In *Hero*, we follow a character who was raised in the Caribbean, who fought in the Second World War, and who played an integral role in the African liberation struggles. These are the stories of the modern Caribbean. They demonstrate just how colossal our reach is.

HS: As evidenced in the sizable turnout of film industry delegates from the international community at this year's Big Pitch.

And this year also the *Incubator* has evolved. This is the fifth year we're doing it. Each year, Caribbean-diaspora content-creators bring their projects. We pick the best ones, which then get developed through the *Incubator*. This year, we decided to concentrate on long-running series because it's important for us to build sustainability. You do one film and then it's done. But with series you're able to build audiences, get advertisers, and create audience loyalty over time. You're building capacity, storylines, characters, stars, interest, and spin-offs, all the while raising money and employing people. So we committed to making long-running series from this year, and the quality of the projects was very promising.

HS: Series for television?

Television and web. The Big Pitch winner was *Defining Moments*, a Caribbean-wide documentary web series by Melissa Gomez [Antigua/New York]. The first runner-up was an animation series called *Magnificent Maggie* by Camille Selvon Abrahams [Trinidad and Tobago]. The second runner-up was a science-fiction series by Jelani Nias [Jamaica/Canada] about a young man trying to get out of a gang and he reinvents himself in a sci-fi world. Such diversity of storytelling, and all of it relevant.

HS: What's being pitched?

The creators are pitching a pilot, but they're pitching the idea of a sustainable, long-running show.

HS: That will hopefully get picked up and then reach wide audiences. Speaking of which, I think it was at the 2011 *CTFF* that I first saw the Jamaican feature film *Ghett'a Life* [directed by Chris Browne]. I love that film. Then afterwards it was brought back to Canada for several showings in various cities across Ontario. I believe it outperformed Hollywood blockbusters when it first showed in theatres in Jamaica and became the highest grossing film in the island that year. Wasn't *Ghett'a Life* in one of the *Incubators*?

It was in the second one.

HS: There was another film, *Doubles with Slight Pepper* by Ian Harnarine, a first-time Canadian filmmaker of Trinidadian descent. *Doubles* was part of the first *Incubator*. It got made the following year, ended up being screened during TIFF, and also won an award in that film festival.

It won Best Canadian Short Film at TIFF [in 2011] and the Genie [at the 32nd annual Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television Awards show in 2011] for Best Live Action Short film.

HS: So there are possible crossovers?

*Oh yes. We've had many successes. One of our first incubatees, Rommel Hall [from Barbados], came with a series concept called **Keeping Up with the Joneses**. He then went back to Barbados and made the series there. He and his partners have now produced three seasons of the show and have also made a **Keeping Up with the Joneses** Christmas special and feature film. Hall is now making his second series: a classroom-based web series called **Abiola**.*

HS: That's the idea, isn't it? Because too many of us Caribbean people are still watching American TV and other non-Caribbean productions at the expense of our own. I met up with a couple of friends of mine from high school and university on Friday night to watch the screening of the Jamaican film *Kingston Paradise*, and afterwards we reminisced about growing up with Jamaican television series such as *Lime Tree Lane* and *Royal Palm Estates*. We had a good moment just remembering. So it's great to hear of similar successes for locally produced television, and now web series, in other parts of the Caribbean; and of people watching and supporting their own content that reflects their lives. That's the market.

Absolutely.

HS: We've been talking a lot about what you are doing to help others create and promote their work. But we haven't talked much about your own filmmaking. Do you have any current projects?

*Right now I'm making two films. I'm making **Hero**, which is the story of Ulric Cross. We shot in Trinidad, in London, and in Ghana. It's being cut now. The film follows Cross' journey. Cross was born into colonial times, was the most decorated Caribbean ex-serviceman in the Second World War, and then was part of the independence movements in Africa. He moved to Ghana in 1957 and worked with Kwame Nkrumah. Then he was the attorney general in the Cameroon; and he was with Nyerere in Tanzania for many years. The film takes on that whole story of the role that Caribbean intellectuals played in creating the concept of pan-Africanism, and the role that Caribbean people played in rebuilding Africa.*

I find it such a moving story—that we were taken from Africa and enslaved, and that 200 years later children of that event would return and turn the tools of British education to help with the rebuilding and liberation of Africa. There were lots of Caribbean people, professionals as well as revolutionaries and radicals, who went to Africa in the 1950s and 1960s to assist in this process and become part of the independence movements on the continent. For example, the Trinidadian George Padmore was Nkrumah's mentor. He trained Nkrumah's mind based on his own training under Trotsky in Russia as part of the Communist International. It's really important to understand that Caribbean people are not just the ridiculous stereotypes that we commonly hear about: thugs, and pimps, and beach bums. We've changed the course of history. And we helped to redeem the crime that was committed against Africa in the name of European capitalism. We did that.

The other film that I'm working on is based on a story written by Oonya Kempadoo about a young girl who runs away from a girls' home and makes her way on the streets.

HS: When will these films be available?

Next year. They've both been shot and they're both coming out then.

HS: Going back to *CaribbeanTales*—it has grown over the years into such a huge venture. Or should I say ventures?

*I'll tell you how it breaks down. As I said in the beginning, the business model is production, marketing, distribution. Sustainability is a cycle. Our production arm now in terms of the conglomerate is *CaribbeanTalesFlix*, and we've just produced *Kingston Paradise* [2013] by Mary Wells, the first Jamaican feature film to be produced and directed by a woman. We have the film festival, the film festival group, which represents marketing. At one point in time we also had a festival in Barbados, a festival in New York, and a festival in Toronto.*

HS: Are those *CaribbeanTales* film festivals outside of Toronto ongoing?

*I haven't done the festival in Barbados for a couple of years or the New York one either. We are concentrating on Toronto. It would be nice, but it was too much. So we've decided to consolidate our efforts. I continue to have a base in Barbados [where *CTWD* is based]. We would love to develop a base or roots in Africa. But the main marketing event of our year is the film festival in Toronto. That's why we decided to re-brand it as the *CaribbeanTales International Film Festival*.*

HS: And that's what people here in Toronto, in the Caribbean, and internationally will now recognize as the marketing and festival arm of *CaribbeanTales*?

*Yes. Having this platform in Toronto during TIFF is unique. And the *Incubator* has now really defined itself and stands out as a high quality training ground. This year we got many commitments because of the quality of the stories and the filmmakers. The *Incubator* has established itself as an important platform for filmmakers across the region and the diaspora.*

HS: I asked about the *CaribbeanTales* film festivals held outside Toronto because I'm thinking of, for example, the vibrant film industry in Jamaica. Jamaican filmmakers have been producing features steadily over the decades, and the films—such as Perry Henzell's classic *The Harder They Come*, Storm Saulter's *Better Mus' Come*, Chris Browne's *Ghett'a Life*, and Mary Wells' *Kingston Paradise*—have played to enthusiastic audiences locally. How does *CaribbeanTales* liaise with these and other filmmakers and the various production outlets and film commissions in the Caribbean to choose what gets exhibited during *CTFF*?

*This year we got funding from the European Union [from the *ACPCultures + Program*] to build capacity and develop income streams for our work. So we are working with the film commissions across the Caribbean to help develop marketing and distribution networks for Caribbean film. What we're doing is also being reflected across the region. There is a lot of regional activity and investment in terms of film development. It's an exciting time; I mean, there still needs to be much more funding and infrastructure, but generally it's been very interesting in terms of what they're able to do. As you've said, a film comes out of Jamaica from time to time. Trinidad is vibrant. There's Guadeloupe that is able to benefit from funding from France. Cuba is always interesting. The Dominican Republic has produced several films. There's activity coming out of Barbados, even though they have no infrastructure at all for film. There's Rommel Hall as well as Shakirah Bourne and Selwyne Browne who are making their third feature film in 18 months. There is some movement on the part of governments and film commissions, but there's equally lots of movement on the part of young people picking up cameras and just doing it. And that's really exciting.*

HS: On shoestring budgets?

On nothing budgets. And telling their stories. Films are getting made on smart phones. A quality camera now is \$1500. So young people are able to afford equipment they couldn't before. And they're just doing it.

HS: How do you find the films that get shown here at CTFF? Do you go to the Caribbean to seek them out? How do you vet them and decide what to showcase?

I'm a filmmaker. So at this point, after a number of years of working in this industry, I do know a lot of the people who are in the industry. In terms of the selection, we have a team of programmers across the Caribbean who communicate via Skype and view and select the films. This year, the programmers included Christopher Pinheiro, Mandisa Pantin, Mary Wells, Bridget "Bee" Quammie, and a number of others. Mary is based in Jamaica. Mandisa is in Trinidad. Christopher's here in Toronto. Bee is also here. The juries are also from all over. Because of the Internet we can get a global response to the content, both in terms of programming and judging it. So that's exciting. But the most satisfying part of all of this, for me, is building healthy communities and sharing our stories in a sustainable way. I'm sure we've all felt at one point or another that we had no context for understanding who we were; we all felt odd and isolated, and like we didn't belong. The joy of the work that we do, that I do, is in seeing people recognize themselves on the screen and realize that their story is valid and wonderful. That people care and want to see and hear their story. That others are experiencing something similar, and that they feel just as unique, and individual, and bizarre.

What defines us, in a way, as Caribbean people is difference, because of all the different places we come from, and all of the different experiences we've had, and the silence around that. All the different ways we went about constructing and remaking our existences and the sharing of that is exciting and diverse and electric and dynamic and connecting. It's wonderful when you have Chinese people, and Indian people, old people, and young people, and middling people, Rastas, and feminists, lesbians, and queer people—everybody. We're all Caribbean. We can all feel that connection because somehow we came from the same place or process of movement and migration—from colonialism.

HS: Speaking of difference, it was wonderful to see a film like *Anti-Man* [by Gavin Ramoutar of Guyana] at this year's film festival. It's sensitive, and realistic, and heartwarming, and heartbreaking at the same time. The young lead's acting was a bit stilted, but that didn't ruin the story, which is a beautiful exploration of friendship and betrayal and sexual awakening and identity and how masculinity is defined in that specific cultural context. It seems to me that for the past three or four years a programming theme around Caribbean queerness has been emerging in the festival—something like an attempt to open up space on certain areas of Caribbean experience, and queerness is one such area of focus.

*Well, I have to say that it's been very difficult to introduce that strand. For me it was important because one of the central things about my views of storytelling is difference. Because homosexuality has been such a taboo in our society, it was important just to face it head-on and say that we stand for difference. We stand for equality of human beings in every way. For human rights. I cannot tell you how difficult it was. First of all, it was difficult to stand in front of, for example, the Jamaican government representatives and say we stand for queer Caribbean. And Black audiences, you know. The first year there was a deep silence when I announced our **Queer Caribbean** strand at the press conference. People just didn't know what to make of that. And then, on the other side of it, there was initial resistance on the part of LGBT communities to participate because they assumed . . .*

HS: . . .that there's going to be a hostile reception?

I mean, just refusal on the part of a lot of people to participate. This is the first year that we've managed to make it a smooth transition. It was really bumpy prior. I'm really glad that we seem to have crossed something and are partnering with a number of queer organizations. There is real excitement now about this programming.

HS: I haven't seen any films directly addressing queerness as part of our story as Caribbean people come out of Jamaica yet. Or have I missed something?

A number of films have been made about homophobia. But you're right. Not that you want to deny the vicious homophobia in our societies, because they kill people, right? It's disgusting. It's horrendous. It's a human rights tragedy—but what would be exciting, as you say, is to get the diverse stories from the various points-of-view, Queer as well as Transgender. And not only the coming-out story or the get-beaten-up story, but all the different kinds of articulations of those identities. I'm excited by the possibilities.

HS: What you've just said reminded me of Shashi Balooja [Trinidad/Antigua/Canada/US]. He participated in the *Incubator* in 2013 with *Ariana*, a short film about a doctor and the man he was in a relationship with and the problems they had to deal with when the doctor's grandmother became ill. The film didn't hold up the men's relationship for scrutiny or comment. It was a story about family, just another of the many family stories that we can tell. And that approach was a large part of the film's power and impact.

Yes, there are all kinds of possibilities that I am excited to explore. Next year, we want to look at mental-health issues in the Caribbean. That, too, is a completely taboo, electrifying, and explosive subject.

HS: We don't talk about it. We hide them away, especially if they are in our family.

We put them into mental hospitals. They walk down the street naked. It's a stereotype, but we don't engage with the humanity of mental illness, which is too obviously so prevalent in a society traumatized by the kinds of historical experiences that we have been through. I think as a people we have all been wounded and damaged by the historical circumstances of enslavement, by the trafficking of populations, and the global migrations that created our region. In order to address this in a wider context we have to take the top off the pressure cooker and start dealing with the damage. There is so much trauma. It's not like there's one person that's mad and walking down the street. We're talking

about a region created by trauma. It's an important issue for us to start talking about. I know many people who have killed themselves. That is the silent norm. We need to open it up.

HS: I'll definitely look out for those films next year. What are the plans to develop an infrastructure to make Caribbean series and films, including some of those shown at CTFF, available to wider audiences? I see that another company, *CaribbeanTales-TV*, a VOD channel described as "a Netflix-style online film shop for Caribbean film buffs," was launched in 2013.

Well, I think one of the disadvantages of always starting something where there was nothing before is that we have to prove ourselves.

HS: Everyone's waiting to see whether you sink or swim.

*Yes, whether we'll survive, whether we'll make it, whether we are of value. We want to make sure that our content is available wherever our audiences are, right? That means on every television screen. In Africa. In the Caribbean. On the Internet. Everywhere. Our job is to create infrastructure so that people can have their *CaribbeanTales* film app on their cell phone and online. That's the aim. The funding that we got from the European Union this year will allow us to build infrastructure as well as travel to international markets, which is key. Last year, we went to a market in Africa called Discop where African broadcasters and programmers go. We got a number of sales out of that. This year we're going to different European and US markets as well. These are film and television markets where you meet with and sell content to buyers. This is something we haven't been able to afford to do up until now. This will represent a big turning point for us. It will help build global reach.*

Frances-Anne Solomon
with Gina Belafonte; Barbados



HS: Hopefully, the more you can show financial viability—because it always comes back to the bottom line—the more the funding will come in to sustain the work.

There were two things that happened this year. One was that we got charitable status as a Canadian company and therefore for the film festival, which will be transformative because we will be able to access social-giving funding. So now we can get, I hope, a sponsor that'll float the festival, make it viable. We've also got a great location now where we can sell tickets.

HS: You will keep CTFE at The Royal, then?

Yes. The festival is at the point of going to another level because of these things and now with the distribution company we are poised, with the help of this year's European Union funding, to develop our reach by travelling and taking our content to the world, which we weren't able to afford before. I'm very excited.

HS: You said earlier that this year's film festival at The Royal has been the biggest in terms of public response and ticket sales. Can you give a sense of how much growth you've seen over the years?

It's been building steadily. It's very, very difficult programming a festival against TIFF. For a lot of years there have been people saying that we'd probably get more publicity and better audiences if it weren't during TIFF. But our reason, our justification, has been that our core audience does not go to TIFF. And then, we do get spillover from TIFF for the Incubator. People care about us and come. If we can reach our audiences it really doesn't matter what else is going on. And there are benefits too. The benefits that come from running parallel with TIFF outweigh the disadvantages. Even holding it during Caribana brought up issues because people wanted to be outside jumping up in the street; they don't want to be inside watching films. The best time to have done it might have been Black History Month. We did have a festival at one point during Black History Month. We had the Youth Film Festival where we took the films to schools. But I believe in our positioning right now, and this is the first time I've felt some traction.

We had a great festival and incubator team in place this year. Special thanks to filmmaker and producer Nicole Brooks, our Incubator Manager; and to Timmia Hearn who, as well as being the Incubator Coordinator, also handled community outreach for the festival. We have first-class mentors who contribute their time and talents to help shape and guide projects that come through the Incubator. We have, for example, Christopher Laird who has over 30 years' experience as a filmmaker and documentarian. He founded and is CEO of Gayelle: The Channel in Trinidad [the first 24-hour Caribbean-content channel in the Caribbean] and was Chair of the Trinidad and Tobago Film Company for five years. Rita Shelton-Deverell, a veteran Canadian broadcaster and producer, has had a tremendous role in growing and shaping the Incubator over the past four years. We now have a very strong steering committee and Board of Directors that support our operational team in making decisions strategically. Among them are Denham Jolly, founder and former CEO of Flow [the first Black-owned radio station in Canada], and Jean Augustine [a former Member of Parliament for the Canadian Liberal Party]. The festival has momentum now.

HS: Which also gives momentum to your overall goal of producing and marketing content in a way that is sustainable for Caribbean filmmakers and series creators.

Yes, we have a larger mission, which is about building the Caribbean industry globally. And it will work for us. You know, I am feeling the vision. It's beginning to have teeth and find its legs.

HS: That is great news. Thank you for talking with me, Frances-Anne. I know there are many others who, like me, are looking forward to CTFE in 2015, and to hearing more about the successes of *CaribbeanTales* in the coming years.