

Danielle Diefenthaler Does It Again

"This work is like trying to plant a field of corn in a desert" That is how Danielle describes the daunting task of producing yet another series for television. So why do it? Well it's what she lives and breathes for. So once again, she wrote and re-wrote scripts, casted actors, scouted locations and campaigned the corporate sector to bring her new series *The Reef* into your home, on your television screen. She admitted that the idea to do it was always there but reading Herman Wouk's 'Don't Stop The Carnival' is what lit a fire under her.

"This new project is not soapy like *West Wood Park*. It is a thirteen part drama series set in a boutique hotel with complete storylines in each episode. Really it is a premise every Caribbean thing person can relate to because we all know and wonder about these people we meet at hotels, behind the desk, smiling at us, taking our orders. Sometimes we want to ask, 'Well what is *really* going on in your life? What is going on behind closed doors? Who is having marriage problems?' So many things happen in a hotel behind the scenes, there is no end of interesting stories to tell."

Her greatest vindication however is the way *West Wood Park* has truly taken on a life of its own, not just in Trinidad and Tobago but region-wide. Even though the soap opera did not address serious issues as the main focus it did touch on everything from AIDS to domestic violence, to cancer to homophobia and reached a far wider cross section of Caribbean people, so there is something to be said about appealing to the popular audience.

"Up the islands, they just claimed it as their own. I mean even in Barbados they don't care it is from Trinidad, they *love* it!" she beamed. Perhaps best of all though were the invaluable lessons learned during production of *West Wood Park* that have now made scripting, casting, filming and producing *The Reef* a far less harrowing experience. However some challenges remain,

"Let's face it, this is not New York where you have thousands of actors competing just for one role. We have such a dearth of talent here that the few who can do the job and are well known never really have to fight for a role so with the last project, many came in with a kind of diva "I know better" attitude about everything, not appreciating the hard work they had to do. This time round though people understand the hard work" she explained. Just to be sure, Danielle has taken steps to ensure this. She has taken the initiative to train theatre actors for the subtleties of film using drama techniques provided to her by Naima Thompson, a respected Arts Instructor and a DVD by the famous Michael Caine. Still *The Reef* presented new challenges.

"The private sectors in England, France, Belgium, and Australia were forced to have quotas given to the Arts and that is how those countries got their film industries off the ground. Over here in Trinidad our private sector is booming. You will find a corporate

client willing to fork out hundreds of thousands on sponsoring one fete. As opposed to funding film and television projects that last for *months even years*. West Wood Park is soon airing on Tempo, being released on DVD thanks again to the TTFC. The people who got product placement on it are still getting mileage"

If successful locally produced material clearly shows the viewing audience want to see themselves on television why aren't private sector sponsors lining up to sign checks to support local television and film production?

The reasons Danielle is so passionate about developing the film industry in Trinidad and Tobago are profound and have a lot to do with a forging a sense of national identity and self esteem, particularly among the youth. "We talk about the plight of the youth but we don't realise the effect it has on the youth when they grow up not seeing themselves on television. The only people they see who look like them are rolling in big cars with bling and guns and objectifying women. Do you know how many young people come to me thinking show business is this easy road out of poverty but they cannot even *read* the script at the audition?"

So why does she persist? "It is my expression. The only other thing I wanted to do desperately was to be a marine biologist and work with Jacques Cousteau but sadly he is dead" she says with a smile. "I guess you just have to believe you will get there and I am talking believing you will get there long before you even start. "

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