

The other side of carnival

Rosanne Zammit

Anna Curmi working full speed ahead to finish on time the costumes being used by the company led by her husband Oscar. Photo: Jason Borg.

The merry, happy-go-lucky atmosphere created by the grotesque characters that feature on carnival floats contrasts sharply with the heartache and pain their builders often endure as they strive to make it in time for the annual colourful manifestation, this year taking place in the first weekend of February.

These people do not mind the long hours, the lack of food and the time away from their families. However, it upsets them that they have to work in substandard conditions, wasting precious time because of lack of adequate facilities and being made promises that are never kept year after year.

And because the facilities at Lower Fort St Elmo, in Valletta, are not big enough, they have no option but to build the floats in parts and then assemble them outside their warehouses, carry out any necessary alterations, leave their creations outdoors and hope for the best.

"Different governments have been promising us facilities for the past 25 years or so. Nothing is ever done. Until sometime ago we used to be flooded with water whenever it rained. I have now put up a drain system which has cost me Lm250 and the other enthusiasts have done the same. We work voluntarily and are constantly forking out money of our own pockets.

"We do get a subsidy from the government but if our company wins a prize, the subsidy is subtracted from the prize money. So, for example, if I get a €1,397.62 subsidy (Lm600) and win €1,747.03 (Lm750), I only get €349.41 (Lm150)," Godwin Scerri, 45, of Valletta said.

Mr Scerri, who has been taking part in carnival for the past 25 years, said that because of lack of support, both financial and in the form of adequate facilities, he might have to stop next year, as many others had done before him.

Oscar Curmi, 53, of Valletta, said he and his wife, a seamstress, were working round the clock to finish making their company's costumes in time.



Anna Curmi working full speed ahead to finish on time the costumes being used by the company led by her husband Oscar. **Photo: Jason Borg**

A company leader for the past 33 years, he has been involved in carnival since he was a child and he saw the festival's costumes evolve from rich but simple costumes to the present-day elaborate, intricate and expensive ones.

"Carnival has become tougher and we are like its slaves. Costumes, paid for by the dancers, are now costing them about Lm120 each."

He has been forced to stop putting together a dancing company because it was not worthwhile. This was the last year he would do it.

But what really annoyed Mr Curmi was the environment in which he has to work. "No participant deserves to work in such conditions. We spend well over 12 hours a day here and we do not even have toilets. Moreover, when we are here we do not see our families and we do not eat well, so much so that I manage to lose weight over the winter period."

Unfortunately, he said, governments managed to find funds for everything except for carnival.

"Because we have no adequate facilities, all of us are fearful that bad weather would prevail in the coming days destroying our work before giving us and the people time to enjoy it."

By adequate facilities, the enthusiasts mean warehouses of the right size where they would be able to work comfortably and be able to set up their floats in order to take them outdoors already assembled and be able to garage them again for the night.

Charlie Curmi, 58, of Valletta is working on a triumphal float together with his brother Paul, and took 29 days leave just to work on it.

"We have to build the float bit by bit and leave all the bits apart hoping for the best because of our inadequate facilities. If we had proper hangars, we would save at least a month because we would not have to do a lot of the work we do due to lack of space," he said.

Jackie and Doris Armeni, of Valletta, said that, together with their son, they had been sleeping at their room in lower Fort St Elmo since Christmas to make sure they get everything done in time for carnival.

Is this folly? Madness?

Whatever it is, it is all done for the love of carnival.
