

Bright sunshine gives carnival a boost

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Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

The weather could not have been more pleasant during carnival yesterday, drawing out the crowds and luring them into Valletta, aided by the blaring music and dizzying colours and confusion.

Carnival this year is probably one of the few that did not have to endure the threat of storms and blustering winds but, instead, enjoyed bright sunshine, reflecting off the elaborate costumes and floats.

Traffic into the capital city started from mid-morning and got heavier as the day progressed but it did not seem to put anyone off trying to reach their spot in the sun to watch the show.

A family outing more than anything else, persons from every walk of life, including mesmerised foreigners, streamed in, thronging the streets and even finding themselves stuck in tight bottlenecks in particular areas.

One young Spanish couple thought the carnival was "fun" and were impressed by the children in costume but were not too sure about the level of organisation - they had just managed to emerge from City Gate among a sea of revellers, unscathed, but slightly daunted due to the density of the crowds.

But that was, after all, what carnival was all about, National Folklore Commission chairman George Zahra said. "Without the crowds squashed together, pushing against each other, it is not carnival!"

In fact, his plan for the coming years is to focus more on the streets outside the enclosure in Freedom Square, which is the stage for the dancing competitions, and make them even livelier.

"Carnival is for everyone and those who do not pay to enter the enclosure have as much right to enjoy it as those who do," he insisted.

The fun and merry making are still in full swing but Mr Zahra is already contemplating innovations for the future.

He is determined to have more satire - which was gently introduced this year at a time that was considered both good and bad due to the upcoming election - although it would have to be controlled, without ever stooping low and getting personal.

"Environment Minister George Pullicino drinking a diet drink would be allowed, for example," he said, outlining the limits of the satirical aspect of carnival but insisting that it had to grow with the traditional element of the feast, which would also be kept alive.

The plan was to encourage young artists to go down the road of satire, he said, adding that the commission would be collaborating with the Għaqda Partecipanti Karnival.

Mr Zahra also wanted carnival to be promoted strongly overseas so that tourists would visit Malta specifically and not attend just because they happened to be here.

The idea would be to hold "a week of mind-blowing madness", including activities in Gozo, in various villages, in the streets of Valletta and the Freedom Square enclosure, as well as carnival balls, so they would go back and tell others about the revelry.

In a few years, carnival could become a small industry that helped the economy, he augured.

Activities in Freedom Square started in the early afternoon with dancing competitions, including a spectacular grand défilé of colourful floats along the main streets of Valletta, followed by their entrance into a packed enclosure.

For the first time, the enclosure was fully booked from about four days ago, Maltaticket.com CEO, David Pollina, said. The fact that tickets were being sold online and from about 35 outlets made their purchase easier.

But the smiling, spring weather also helped, as well as the fact that the prices had remained low and affordable, Mr Zahra was quick to add.

As is normally the case, it was mostly the children who wore costumes and rarely could an adult be spotted in fancy dress.

Other than the dancers, who take the whole event seriously but also let their hair down on the day, the oldest participants, who dared to dress up, were early teenagers, most of them sticking to the unoriginal punk-cum-rebellious-schoolgirl look; some probably grabbing the opportunity to wear revealing, sexy clothing they were usually forbidden to.

The typical sickly-sweet aromas of all things unhealthy, but still appetising, wafted through the air, with the smell of burgers, hotdogs, chips and other deep-fried delights mixing with the sugar-coated fare that was being scoffed in the streets. By the afternoon, the remnants of these snacks could be seen strewn about, while the stairs of Castille and the Triton Fountain were carpeted in bodies that sat down to rest, leaving the hardcore partying to the diehards.

Activities today start at 5.30 p.m., with dancing competitions again at Freedom Square, entrance costing €3.50 (Lm1.50), while on the last day tomorrow, the grand défilé in Freedom Square starts at 4 p.m.. The events culminate in the grand finale in St Anne Street, Floriana at 6.30 p.m.