

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

The Mystery of Life



STEVE SCHMÄDER, CFEE

The theme for this year's Carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil - often billed as the "greatest show on Earth," and a description most who have ever attended this spectacular celebration would not argue - was "The Mystery of Life." That theme must have run endlessly through the minds of the countless thousands of parade volunteers, organizers and city leaders when, on February 7th (only one month before this grand celebration, ranked as the most important annual event in the country, that takes months of preparation and millions of dollars) a fire broke out and devastated the facilities of Samba City, a six-year old complex of workshops and warehouses near Rio's port, that serves as the preparation grounds for the city's parades. In terms of magnitude, it has been compared to a disaster befalling the Super Bowl in the United States or a Wimbledon tournament in Britain, but even that is not a fair comparison when you consider the amount of individual time, effort and passion put into the event, by many of the city's poorest residents, who should, in theory, have the least to give.

In all, it is estimated that some 8,400 ornately and painstakingly hand-made costumes, in addition to many massive and detailed floats and props, were lost, representing most of the stock and preparations by three of the 12 samba schools who share the facility. Firemen had to hold back members of the schools from trying

to save their work. Some stood by and watched the devastation with tears in their eyes as decorations went up in smoke and the walls and roofs caved in. The director of one school was quoted, "It's just a feeling of pain, of loss, of disappointment. Our work of the past year has just been crushed."

But while the mystery of life seemed to ignite the fires that devastated the samba schools so unexpectedly, it also ignited the power of celebration that holds so many 'communities' together. In the weeks following the fires in Rio, leading up to Carnival, a new spirit rose from the ashes.

"I'll do the parade in bare feet if I have to," vowed one of the dancing queens chosen to lead the Grande Rio School (the worst hit by the fire) parade, through her tears. City officials promised the event would go forward. Rio's mayor said the city would provide assistance to the affected schools, promising that they all would parade in the competition "one way or another," and vowed that the reconstruction of Samba City would begin "immediately."

The community of Rio's poorest residents, who make up the bulk of the parades, organized themselves and converged on Samba City to help, bringing material, sewing costumes, and carrying sewing machines.

Officials from competing schools expressed solidarity, offering to lend space, materials and professionals - whatever it took to see their rival

schools through the competition. And the organizers of the parades agreed that this year, exceptionally, would not include competitive scoring of the schools in the parades, out of a show of sympathy for those who found themselves working round the clock to create costumes and floats that would normally take the better part of a year.

One member of the Rio Grande samba school stated proudly, "The school is going to parade with a lot of energy. Even more than in past years. We won't win the competition, but we will win over those attending." Proving them correct, rehearsals were filled to capacity in the first run-throughs following the fire.

A 19-year old flag-bearer said, "I was born in this school. I lived there when I was small and this is my first year as flag-bearer. I felt lost the day of the fire, but it has made all of us even more united."

Two of the school presidents echoed the sentiments felt by all. "The fire burned everything, but it didn't burn our Carnival spirit. We will show the world that there is no community like ours." For others, that passion and commitment may seem like a mystery of life; for those of us in the festivals and events industry, there is no mystery at all.

The IFEA sends our deepest sympathies, our heartfelt support, and our grandest of congratulations to the samba schools, parade organizers, community members and city officials of Rio de Janeiro.