

Tracey Sankar begins the intricate folding, stitching and beading of the train of the costume.



A new dress for The Lady



Elements of the costume on Sankar's work table at Granderson Labs.



With the costume on a dummy, Sankar refines the fit of the elements of the costume.



PHOTOGRAPHS AND STORY
BY MARK LYNDERSAY

Tracey Sankar is gathering long strips of detailed white cloth together to run them through her sewing machine when I finally pop the question that's been on my mind for almost eight weeks now.

"You do realise that you're making a wedding dress, don't you?"

Sankar rocks back in the rolling chair she's finally sat down to use, squints at the yards of detailed white cloth in front of her, then squints at me.

"You think so?" she responds, more than a little quizzically.

From the moment I met the petite masquerader in November last year, she's been working on a costume for her striking character, Erzulie Freda, inspired by the Haitian Lao, an Afro-Haitian divinity of sorrows, never able to realise her heart's true desire.

On October 31, Tracey Sankar lost her husband, Cpl Shervaun Charleau, during an attempted robbery at Fort George. She was married for 19 years and the mother of four children.

By mid-November, she had decided to return to her plans for Carnival 2016 after a successful run as an individual in 2015.

"My husband believed in the costume. As he walked with me to the stage, he was talking to me under the hat."

"This will take you further than

anything else, he told me. I think he was a little afraid of it, he might have been afraid I was getting lost in it."

When Tracey Sankar talks about the character, it's less a description of something she portrays than it is of an essence, a personality that inhabits her when she wears the costume.

In casual conversation about the progress of her work, her personal pronouns refer as often to Erzulie as they do to her, which can be a bit confusing.

Sankar also plays a Dame Lorraine and has done so for several years with her mother, June Sankar's Carnival band, as well as a fancy jab, but each character speaks to her in different ways.

"With all the frills and beading, my Dame Lorraine costume doesn't speak to me. It's too quiet as a character; it's too dainty. It reminded me of knowing my place. That character takes me back to when I was a housewife. I was there for one thing and so was she, as a slave concubine. I was raised in a religious home, and you know your place as a wife."

She plays Erzulie, the La Diabliesse as the embodiment of the privileged slave concubine, both desired and trapped.

Sankar had another plan for the 2016 version of Erzulie's costume. "After a while it began to evolve," she recalls.

"The mas began to have a life of its own. I had the skirt, and she

wanted pants. It was supposed to be dark, but it started to become pretty."

In November, the train of the costume was hanging from the roof above her workstation at Granderson Labs, where she has been afforded space since after Carnival 2015 to develop her concepts.

For hours, the costume was the subject of her careful stitching of dozens of beads. At one point, Sankar began vigorously dancing around it as it hung insouciantly from clothespins, the masquerader trying to work out how it would hang from her body and flow in the real world.

"I could draw it, but I need to feel and touch the material to understand how it will move. That's how I work"

A week before the costume was to make its first appearance at the NCC's traditional costume competition at Adam Smith Square, Sankar took apart the character's finished hat, one of the focus points of the costume, along with the hoof, and rebuilt it.

"It was doing nothing for the character," she said dismissively.

It was hardly the first sacrifice demanded for the costume's creation.

"With every piece, I get chook. There's blood inside that hat."

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On a Sunday night, accompanied by a Police Band performing outside a neighbourhood bar, Sankar would often don her fancy jab costume and blow fire at the intersection of Erthig and Belmont Circular Roads, a block from Granderson Labs.



Over the months she worked on the costume, Tracey Sankar alternately gained and lost weight, which affected her ideas for the costume. A bustier was part of the plan here, but was eventually dropped.



At Queen's Hall, Sankar and Junior Bisnath discuss the reconstruction of the hoof that's a key part of the costume's design.



Sankar with her mother June.



Sankar reacts to backspray as she paints masks for children from Basilon Street in Belmont.



After a bout of severe illness after performing at the St James Amphitheatre, Sankar had a cleansing and blessing ceremony for the costume and her children before packing the costume for the Adam Smith Square performance.

Encounter with Erzulie

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Tracey Sankar is incandescent with rage. It's a sight made even more terrifying by the milk white contacts and makeup she's wearing, and as Erzulie's costume drops from her in sections, her fury grows more articulate and colourful.

It's a sharp contrast with the scene just two hours before, when she stood on a grassy verge on Murray Street at the very edge of the eastern side of Adam Smith Square, growing ever more solemn and silent as she painted her body and began assembling Erzulie's new costume.

Tentatively assisted by her eldest son, Joshua, the sections of the costume slowly overtook her until at the end, Sankar is totally silent, whispering to her son occasionally.

As the weight and discomfort of the costume settle into her, she utters the occasional gut-deep grunt, sometimes a sharp, guttural cry as she begins to walk with the hooved leg, which she does with a chilling, swaying hobble as she alternately walks on the balls of a foot perched on top of a chamfered block of wood.

The costume bends her small frame, occasionally forcing her to her knees and she leans forward on the palms of her hand, but that didn't annoy her. Her fury was reserved for the crush of curious photographers and snappers pressing in on her: the delicate handling of the NCC road management and the studied indifference of her costumed colleagues.



The first phase of personal preparation for the performance at Adam Smith Square is the creation of the character's face.



On Murray Street in Woodbrook Joshua Charleau, Sankar's eldest son, works as her handler, helping her into the costume.



Erzulie the La Diabliesse performs for the judges at the parade of traditional characters at Adam Smith Square.



In full costume, Sankar as Erzulie walks up Murray Street to join the parade of traditional characters flanked by three of her sons.