



December

2019

Vol. 52, No. 12

Features

68

SAN JUAN

Five notable locals, from an award-winning chef to a hip gallerist, show us their side of San Juan, Puerto Rico

85

WINDY CITY COMEDY

Sixty years of laughs at the legendary Second City comedy theater and improv school

116

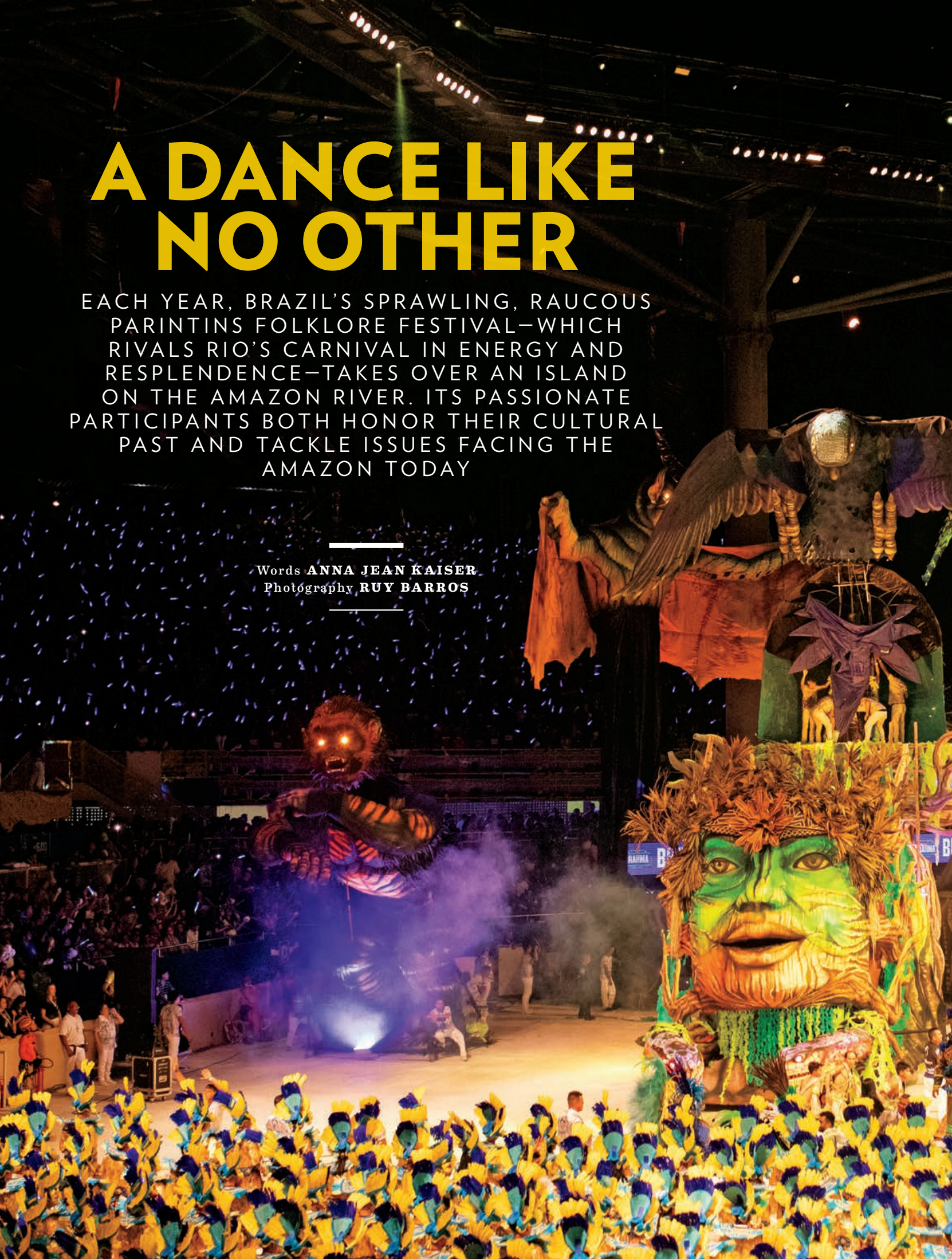
RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Brazil's raucous Parintins Folklore Festival rivals Rio de Janeiro's Carnival

A DANCE LIKE NO OTHER

EACH YEAR, BRAZIL'S SPRAWLING, RAUCOUS PARINTINS FOLKLORE FESTIVAL—WHICH RIVALS RIO'S CARNIVAL IN ENERGY AND RESPLENDENCE—TAKES OVER AN ISLAND ON THE AMAZON RIVER. ITS PASSIONATE PARTICIPANTS BOTH HONOR THEIR CULTURAL PAST AND TACKLE ISSUES FACING THE AMAZON TODAY

Words **ANNA JEAN KAISER**
Photography **RUY BARROS**





Boi Bumba

A PHALANX OF PERCUSSIONISTS dressed in feathered collars and headdresses lines up at the stadium gate awaiting entry into the arena. The red garb marks them as part of the Garantido team. Inside, on one end of the bleachers, a roaring crowd, all dressed in red, claps in unison. Everyone's ready for the start of one of South America's biggest parties. "That first boom of the drums—it's such a thrill, you can't imagine," says Euclides Porrotó Filho, a middle-aged percussionist holding an 80-year-old aluminum shaker passed down from his grandfather.

"I was born into this," he says. "It means so much to me. Now it's time to go to war and show our grit." Some of his teammates are crying in anticipation as they ready to compete against the blue Caprichoso team. The metal doors swing open and the percussionists march in.

A few minutes later, the drummers are inside the stadium, pounding catchy beats under a 50-foot-tall float of a giant swamp creature. Suddenly the musicians stop and thousands of people in the stands waving twinkling lights sing in unison: "I was born to be red! Garantido is my love, hey! Hey!"

The reason for this resplendent mayhem is the Parintins Folklore Festival. Each June, around 100,000 people from all over northern Brazil's more than two-million-square-mile Amazon region flock by boat or plane to Parintins, an island on the Amazon River, where two teams compete in a three-night performance, replete with marching bands, dancers, singers, hundreds of musicians and extravagant floats that rival those at Rio de Janeiro's famous Carnival.

The marathon performances, also referred to as Boi Bumba (beat the bull), are based on regional folklore and culture, and are scored by judges. Though it's a joyous party, there are social messages woven into the towering floats, cast of characters and elaborate costumes.

The inspiration for the festival comes from a colonial-era story of an enslaved couple on a farm: The wife was pregnant and craving tongue from the farm owner's prized ox. Her husband could not resist her request and slaughtered the animal, only to enrage his master, who threatened to whip him. Then—depending on the region's religious beliefs—some form of divine intervention resurrected the ox and saved the day.

The tale comes from the more arid cattle region in northeast Brazil, where wealthy landowners ran vast ranches worked by enslaved people. When Brazil abolished

Right: Garantido's Adriano Paquetá performs the Kawahiva ritual

slavery in 1888, many former slaves migrated to the Amazon to try their hands at tapping rubber and brought the ox legend with them.

These northeastern migrants made the fictional ox come to life by crafting figurines and costumes out of paper and cloth. They would reenact the legend through informal performances, song and dance. Over the years, two teams evolved: the red and white Garantido and the blue and black Caprichoso. "Garatido and Caprichoso started building large communities around them, and soon they divided the city, literally," explains Allan Rodrigues, a communications professor at the Federal University of Amazonas who is also on the Arts Commission of Garantido. Anywhere west of the city's main cathedral is considered Garantido territory, with schools and street signs painted the ox's traditional red and white. To the east of the cathedral is Caprichoso's side, where everything is blue and black. Outside of the island, loyalties to an ox are generally chosen based on family preference, or sometimes simply on which ox's performance "moves you," according to Rodrigues. Since the rivalry isn't based on ideological differences, just the overwhelming belief that one team's performance is better than the others, the fervor is similar to that of die-hard sports fans and always in good fun.

Amazonians call Parintins, a city of 114,000 reachable only by boat or plane, the "enchanted island," and it's not hard to see why. Besides the contagious excitement, colonial buildings and plazas face the banks of the vast Amazon River. The sun is punishing during the day, but once it sets, evenings are balmy and breezy. Street vendors sell everything from homemade jewelry and herbal remedies to exotic fruits and freshly caught fried river fish—but the most popular items are the loud red or blue T-shirts.

Each year when the spotlight lands on the island, a world away from the metropolises of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, it's a point of immense regional pride. During the festival, the city's central district turns into a 24-hour party, with performers playing the crowd-pleasing "ox music," ultra-catchy Brazilian folk songs with influences from country music and African percussion. The stadium festivities consist of four main categories each night: the Amazonian legend, folklore celebration, typical regional character and indigenous ritual. Though only lasting three nights, locals rehearse and prepare year-round. >



“THOUGH IT’S A JOYOUS PARTY, THERE ARE SOCIAL MESSAGES WOVEN INTO THE TOWERING FLOATS, CAST OF CHARACTERS AND ELABORATE COSTUMES.”



THEIR PRESENTATION BUILDS TO VARIOUS CRESCENDOS OF





CHANTS, SONG AND DANCE; THE ENERGY SEEMS WITHOUT END.





IT'S CAPRICHOSO'S TURN TO TAKE THE stage on the second night. Their performance pays homage to matriarchs of the region's three dominant religions, with a towering Virgin Mary float alongside Iemanjá, the Afro-Brazilian goddess of the sea, and Nhandecy, an indigenous goddess of Mother Earth. As with Garantido, their presentation builds to various crescendos of chants, song and dance. The energy seems without end.

As the music swells, a vast swath of the stands, all dressed in blue, dance in step, following the lead of "animators" at the bottom of the bleachers who display simple choreography. The local government claims it's one of the largest mass dances in the world.

This section of the stands is called the *galera*, or "crew"—nearly half of the seats are set aside as free, with lines forming for entry 24 hours before the start of the event. The resulting *galera* is judged as a part of the performance, based on their "joy, contagious energy, synchronization, grit, evolution and excitement." They must wear team colors and stand for the entire

**“THE OX MEANS
EVERYTHING
TO ME. WE DO IT
FOR THE LOVE
OF THE OX.”**

Above: Caprichoso perform at the arena. Previous page: Announcer Israel Paulain presents from the *galera*

show, participating in group chants and dances. But when their rival is performing, they must act completely uninterested.

Brenda Carvalho, one of the dancers, wipes tears from her eyes after her performance. "The ox means everything to me," she says. She's participated in a local chapter of Caprichoso all her life and took a boat for three days from her home in Macapá in the eastern Amazon to be here. Sleeping in a hammock on a river ferry was a small price to pay, she says. "We do it for the love of our ox. It's really gratifying."

One of three animators facing the Caprichoso *galera*, Nelson Souza, jumps down from the platform, sweat dripping down his face. "We're the maestros and the *galera* is our orchestra," he says. "It's not easy, but it's an amazing feeling to see our energy transfer to them, and the other way around. They stay in line all day and are complete fanatics at night. They are warriors."

Marta Viranda was among the first in line for the first two nights, and plans to do the same for the third. In order to maintain her coveted spot at the front, she leaves the show immediately after it finishes and gets back >



in line, spending the night there. “For me it’s worth every moment. This is my great love. I wait all year for this event—what’s 20 hours in line?” she says. “There is no such thing as getting tired during the folklore festival!”

Though clearly a raucous party, there is an inherent social message to all this joy. “There is no other manifestation this important that celebrates the indigenous so much,” says Rodrigues, pointing out that most of Brazil’s indigenous population lives in the Amazon and surrounding regions. “You have on broadcast television five hours of programming where the indigenous are protagonists from beginning to end, in a positive way. It’s a huge reinforcement for identity in the region.”

The messages within the parade also touch on social issues. One of this year’s songs, “Red Roses,” calls for the end of homophobia and *machismo*, while honoring both a trans woman and a black woman activist who were murdered in recent years. “The performances have become platforms to discuss a lot of serious issues in society,” explains Rodrigues.

With the election of Jair Bolsonaro—the current president whose policies have rolled back environmental protection—the call for conservation at the festival is loud. During his campaign, Bolsonaro promised that if elected, he wouldn’t give “one centimeter more” of land to indigenous people, and soon after his election he likened indigenous people living on reserves to animals in a zoo. Since taking office in January, his government has attempted to strip the indigenous affairs agency of its authority to allocate lands and has threatened to abolish an indigenous health care program. Deforestation, often from illegal mining, logging and ranching, increased 92 percent in the first eight months of 2019 compared to the same period of 2018.

As a response, Caprichoso invited one of Brazil’s most outspoken indigenous activists, Davi Kopenawa, to participate in their first night’s performance. Under a ghostly float with glowing eyes and a feather headdress, Kopenawa speaks in the Yanomaman language, which an emcee translates into Portuguese.

“The indigenous and the whites must come together in defense of the rain forest,” he says. “We must take care of the Amazon and all our indigenous relatives in Brazil. No to mining, no to deforestation, no to pollution in our rivers!” The crowd cheers.



Above: Caprichoso’s sacred dance ceremony performed by indigenous people
Left: Caprichoso perform the Ox’s Feast

**“I WAIT
ALL YEAR
FOR THIS
EVENT—
WHAT’S 20
HOURS
IN LINE?”**

MARCIELE ALBUQUERQUE PACES backstage, wearing a costume of green and tan beaded strings that wrap around her neck, chest and waist, and a massive fanning backpiece of feathers that sways as she walks. She’s playing the female protagonist of Caprichoso’s show, the *cunhã-poranga* (beautiful woman), a dancer who represents indigenous women’s beauty, tenacity and role as warriors and guardians.

Albuquerque is from a small town just down the river and is a descendent of the Munduruku tribe. Most of the performers are from the island or rehearse with local ox chapters in towns throughout the region. “We just did a group prayer,” she says, motioning to her counterparts preparing themselves in sequin bras and feathered headdresses. Albuquerque has been a part of Caprichoso since she was a little girl. It’s her third year as the *cunhã-poranga*.

“It is one of my greatest prides to represent not just beauty, but also our culture and our struggle,” she says. “We’re here with a message. It’s about more than just being items for the scoreboard. There’s a big setback in indigenous rights and many politicians are talking >



A large crowd of people at night, many holding up large, stylized flower cutouts. The flowers are primarily blue and yellow, with black outlines. The crowd is dense, and the scene is illuminated by artificial lights, creating a vibrant atmosphere. A white text box is overlaid on the image, containing a quote in red text.

“WE’RE THE MAESTROS AND THE GALERA
IS OUR ORCHESTRA ... THEY ARE WARRIORS.”

Boi Bumba

about taking away hard-earned, well-deserved benefits. There's a lot at stake for indigenous people in Brazil at this moment, and we can't leave this out of our performance."

She stops in front of a fuzzy live broadcast of her rival's presentation. The ox's art director, Ericky Nakanome, seems nervous. "I'm confident in our beauty but things need to flow!" he says sternly to the performers in the room. When the show finally gets underway, Albuquerque has a big reveal—she appears out of a globe, atop a 20-foot platform with a halo of two-foot-long feathers around her and fireworks going off in the background.

Moving her hips to the beat, she's lowered to the floor. When she lands, Albuquerque runs to the front of the stage, striking warrior poses and shooting an imaginary bow and arrow. She dances barefoot and mouths the words as the hundreds of feathers on her costume shake in unison. She then abandons the feathered backpiece and runs to the *galera*, dropping to her knees, briefly clasping her hands in prayer and then lifting them to the sky while the crowd roars, shaking silver and blue streamers in the air towards her.

The next day it was announced that the Garantido had won. But by then, the Caprichoso were already plotting for next year.

"You are born blue and it's for life," says Sarah Reis, a Caprichoso drummer. "It's an emotion that you will never feel anywhere else." **AW**

If You Go

Manaus is the closest jumping-off point to reach Parintins. You can fly American Airlines and either take a local carrier to Parintins, or if you are more adventurous, take an 18-hour ferry downriver with live music and DJs. Most revelers stumble into hammocks slung inside the ferry around sunrise.

Accommodations can be found on Booking.com and Airbnb. Be sure to book in advance, as this small island town fills to the brim and hotel rooms are taken months beforehand.

Local tour companies such as Amazon Destination Tours, Olímpio Carneiro Turismo and ATS Turismo offer customized package deals. Tickets for the show can be purchased online.

festivaldeparintins.com.br/ingressos/



Top: Marciele Albuquerque performs as the *cunhã-poranga*
Right: Caprichoso perform the Amazon legend
Previous page: The Caprichoso *galera* raises cardboard flower petals

