

PRA

CTI

Inside the preparations
for Carnival at one of
Rio de Janeiro's most
famous samba schools

CE MAKES P

By Sarah Brown
Photography by Lianne Milton

ARA

DES





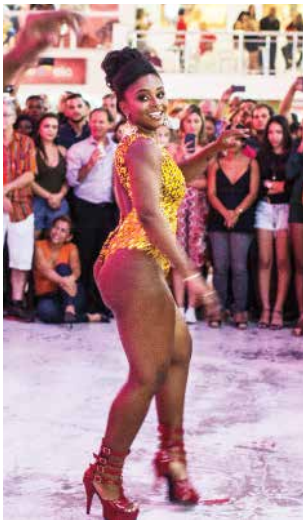
It's a balmy November evening in Andaraí, a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro's North Zone not far from the iconic Maracanã soccer stadium, and the crowd outside the Salgueiro samba school is anxious. Lines of visitors spill out onto a narrow, one-way street, some tapping out samba moves, others buying cold beers from the entrepreneurial vendors who mill about. When the doors open, the mass of people pours into a vast rehearsal room that's decked out in the school's red and white colors. Stalls offering potent caipirinhas edge a large dance floor, with balconies above offering views of the floor and the stage, where a band is warming up with a few samba classics, hooking the locals and intrigued tourists alike with fast-paced *cavaquinho* strumming, *pandeiro* rattling, and passionate vocals. Hawkers weave in and out, selling feathered headpieces and fans.

This is a party, yes, but it's also much more than that. This is preparation for Carnival, the annual spectacle that brings millions of people to Rio for frenzied street parties and, most importantly to the people here, four days of performances and competition on the wide avenue known as the Sambadrome. There are 26 samba schools in Rio, with 13 of them, including Salgueiro, forming the Special Group that hopes to win the parades. This competition is fierce,

dynamic, shrouded in tension. And rehearsals—like what I'm witnessing on this Saturday night—are just as serious. “Carnival starts for us 15 days after the last Carnival finishes,” says Siro de Carvalho, Salgueiro's director of harmony, a suitably Carnival-sounding title that effectively means director of operations. “We finish the parades, then rest for a couple of weeks before we



“ People support a samba school the same way they support a football team. ”



sit back down to figure out the next theme. It's not like a basketball game that has a second half. Get Carnival right, and you get a pat on the back. Get it wrong, and there is no going back. We have one year to make sure we produce the perfect 75-minute parade.”

Carnival in Rio dates back to the 17th century, when the city's lower classes, including slaves and escaped or freed Africans, began to

incorporate fancy dress into the celebrations leading up to Fat Tuesday. The samba schools sprouted from these humble roots, eventually becoming tight-knit community clubs, especially in the North Zone, which is home to many of Rio's impoverished favelas. Today, the schools play a crucial role in supporting these neighborhoods, providing free educational courses and sports throughout the year for those who couldn't afford them otherwise. The heartfelt passion in their followers is one of dependence, pride, and gratitude.

“People support a samba school the same way they support a football team,” de Carvalho says as we skirt the edge of the rehearsal space. “The passion, the involvement, the love—it's the same thing. The difference is, a football team only has 11 people. A samba school has about 4,000 that represent them, and everyone plays together.”

With such a vast network of people, all of whom are yearning for their school to win, anything less than a spine-tingling performance is unacceptable. To get the school to the required gold standard, everything from the floats and the costumes to the dances and the music is meticulously planned throughout the year. “Choosing the theme makes up about half of the operation,” de Carvalho says. “It influences everything.”



This year, Salgueiro's theme is The Women of the World's Womb. De Carvalho explains that it's a symbol of the Afro-Brazilian woman, which connects with the African identity and heritage of so many people here. During the parades, the schools express their themes using elaborate costumes and flamboyant floats in an effort to impress a group of 36 trained judges, who are handpicked by the president of the Independent League of the Samba Schools of Rio de Janeiro, the governing body of the Carnival

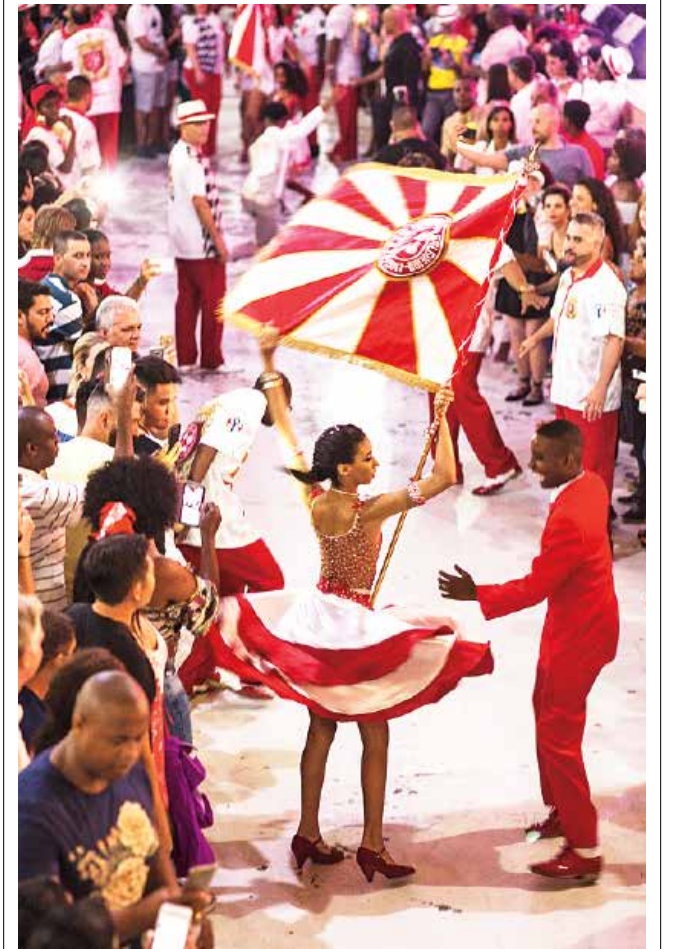
competition. The designs are conceived by a creative person or team called a *carnavalesco* and are assembled at a large workshop in downtown Rio called the City of Samba, a creative space shared by all the samba schools. (Despite their proximity, the schools fiercely conceal their work from each other.) Tailors receive the costume designs around June, transforming sketches into outfits that in some cases can weigh more than 40 pounds.

As we cross the dance floor, de Carvalho introduces me to Marcelo Monteiro, Salgueiro's

ex-vice president, who is still heavily involved in the school's day to day business. While de Carvalho steps away to attend to some business, Monteiro takes me to meet the dancers, leading me past Salgueiro members who twist and swirl seamlessly, like a shoal of red and white fish. During the parades, there are two main types of performers: Bahian dancers who wear traditional dresses from Bahia that nip in at the waist before cascading out from the hips, like 19th-century Victorian gowns; and samba dancers, the ones who wear the famous jewel-encrusted bikinis and headpieces. “The girls start very young at a samba dance school,” Monteiro explains. “These are the future samba dancers and the potential Carnival Queens. The dancing never stops, and there are classes each week.”



Only the most talented, the most beautiful, the most charismatic of these samba dancers can become a Carnival Queen. The position comes with prestige, admiration, and lucrative modeling and TV opportunities. Each school handles the appointment of the queen differently. “There are schools that change their queen every year,” Monteiro says. “There



“Salgueiro is my second home, the place where I cry, smile, play, and fight—the place where I feel I can be myself.”

are celebrities that pay to sponsor the school and end up queens. Salgueiro has had the tradition of keeping the same queen for the last 10 years: Viviane Araújo is considered the Queen of the Queens in the local newspapers.”

Araújo isn't here tonight—she's in São Paulo, where she works as an actress and reality TV star—so Monteiro ushers me into a small back room to meet the princesses of Carnival instead. There are about 20 striking women, ranging from around 18 to 30 years old, some chatting, others sliding into their tiny costumes or adding finishing touches to their buoyant hairdos. Their collective fidgeting and foot-tapping betrays their eagerness to hit the stage. “My passion for samba started when I was 3,” Rafaela Dias tells me. “I joined the parades for the first time when I was 5. Salgueiro is my second home, the place where I cry, smile, play, and fight—the place where I feel I can be myself.”

The women take their cue when their dance teacher, Carlos Borges—Carlinhos to

the Salgueiro faithful—enters the room. Leotards sparkling, skin glowing, they prance on 5-inch heels to the side of the stage in the center of the main rehearsal room. A flick of Borges's hand sends them shimmying onto the dance floor, and the crowd recedes like an ebbing tide to clear the way. Soon, the women are joined by six bare-chested young male samba dancers, and the whole troupe enters into a flurry of lightning samba steps to the sound of the five-man band on the stage.

As the crowd, numbering in the hundreds now, whoops

who provided safe spaces for samba musicians during the late 19th century, when the music was banned in Brazil.

I make my way back to the space near the stage, recently vacated by the samba dancers, where the crowd has now parted to let a waltzing couple glide through. A man in a crisp suit and bowler hat leads a female dancing partner in a long, billowing dress as she proudly waves the Salgueiro flag, which will be presented to the judges at the Sambadrome. Spectators rush to touch the flag, some even kissing it.

directors, and other key members, who choose a winner. All of the *sambistas* will play during the parades, but the winners get the prestige of having their song represent their school—an enormous professional milestone for samba musicians. “If you choose great music,” de Carvalho says, “you will probably perform well.”

As the orchestra winds up, there's no doubt that the school has chosen great music. One man pounds a steel drum, rattling tambourines pick up the pace, and the song reaches a climax as small drums



at the samba dancers, I follow Monteiro to meet the Bahian women, who have just begun dancing at the other, quieter end of the rehearsal room. Compared to the breathtaking samba dancers, who pour sensuality into their movements, the Bahian dancers seem calm, effortlessly swaying across the floor in their multi-layered, puffy-sleeved dresses. These dancers have been a part of the parades since the 1930s, in honor of Bahian women

On the balcony above, some 60 members of the Carnival orchestra—just a fraction of the 288 who will perform at the Sambadrome—prepare to play the Salgueiro Carnival song. In July, de Carvalhos tells me, the school's dozens of *sambistas* (samba musicians) split up into small groups, with each group developing a song to match the year's theme. After two-plus months of rehearsals, they present the songs to the school's president,

sound a melody. An electrified ripple runs through the crowd, with dancers twirling and flexing to the fast-paced rhythm, singing along to the song from printed lyric sheets. Come February 9, when the parades begin, they'll know these words by heart.

“There is nothing better than getting into the parades and singing and having fun without thinking about anything else,” de Carvalho says as we watch. “Carnival is joy.”

AD