

Brazil's carnival queens

Reigning over wild parties is hard work

AFP | Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's carnival celebrations are among the wildest parties in the world, but someone has to reign over them -- and being "queen" can be a year-round job.

We interviewed two "carnival queens" who devote a substantial part of their lives year-round to the personas they bring to life every February: the super-buff, silicone-pumped queen of the Portela samba school, and a business executive turned drag queen who has fused his love of carnival with his job as an airline sales manager.

Hard work being queen

With a glowing smile, rippling muscles and a body glowing with sweat, Bianca Monteiro dances the samba so fast it is hard to keep track of her feet.

Monteiro, 31, is the "queen of the drum section" at the Portela samba school, the winningest group in the history of Rio de Janeiro's annual carnival competition.

On Sunday

night she will don a costume as sumptuous as it is revealing and dance her way through Rio's "Sambodrome" at the head of Portela's 300-strong percussion section, dazzling tens of thousands of spectators and a TV audience of millions.

But being dazzling is no easy job. Monteiro spends hours each day working out and rehearsing, backed by a team -- a dance instructor, a make-up artist, a dentist -- that helps get her ready not only for carnival but for myriad public appearances. "As queen, I have to watch what I eat, although I do indulge occasionally," she says, before devouring a hamburger in the middle of a photo session.

With her sculpted, athletic body, Monteiro looks more like an Olympic athlete than a model.

Her curves have gotten some extra help from her plastic surgeon. "I just put another 300

milliliters of silicone in my breasts last year -- I'm up to 485 milliliters in each breast," she says with a grin.

Samba schools often pick famous actresses or models for the part, but Monteiro is a neighborhood local who worked her way up through the ranks of Portela dancers to become queen in 2017.

"My dad used to bring me to Portela rehearsals when I was a baby," she says.

"I grew up watching actresses become samba school queens, so I never imagined a neighborhood girl could do it, too."

Mild-mannered exec, in drag

By day, Fernando Magrin is a mild-mannered business executive at American Airlines' offices in Sao Paulo, with black-rimmed glasses and white-collar shirt.

By night, he is carnival queen Mama, a flamboyant

character in false eyelashes, pink wig and a frothy tulle dress who leads the frenetic festivities of a roving street party known as "MinhoQueens."

The party -- one of thousands of "blocos," or street parties, around Brazil this time of year -- drew 200,000 revelers last year during Sao Paulo's carnival.

Magrin, 55, invented Mama for MinhoQueens in 2016. The character was so popular she was soon being celebrated as an LGBTQ+ icon.

That led to people learning about her at Magrin's day job. That could have been a problem in some countries. But in Brazil, it led to him becoming a brand ambassador and the head of American Airlines Brazil's newly launched diversity committee.

"I've been invited to speak at all kinds of events in the name of

American Airlines," he says.

Despite the avowed homophobia of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who arrived in power last year, corporations in Brazil are keen to show their tolerance, says Magrin.

"Something is changing" in the corporate world, he says.

"It may be for PR reasons, but there -

sult is still positive. People are starting to accept and respect us."

Fernando Magrin, an American Airlines executive in Sao Paulo, created the drag-queen character of Mama for the city's big annual street party and is now celebrated in

Brazil as an LGBTQ+ icon



Bianca Monteiro spends much of the year preparing for her role as queen of Portela, a traditional Brazilian carnival school

Filipino-Americans 'fired up' as Tagalog added to Nevada ballot

Las Vegas

Manny Pacquiao, roast pig dinners and prayer services: Activists are using every tool possible to get the booming Filipino-American community in Las Vegas to the polls for Saturday's Democratic nomination vote.

Overlooked in the past, Filipinos have rapidly become the western desert state's largest Asian-American community -- almost 200,000 by some estimates, in a state of three million people -- forcing candidates to take notice.

For the first time, the Tagalog language will be used on voting cards along with English and Spanish at the Democratic caucuses.

"We're proud that they are recognizing us," said Margie Gonzales, a Filipina community leader. "It means a lot -- it means recognition."

Gonzales, who chairs the county's Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) commission, has also begun training politicians to speak a few Tagalog words.

"When you start knocking on doors, it helps if you greet a Filipino family opening the door in



Elizabeth Warren campaign volunteer Ninna Diaz, pictured in Las Vegas on February 21, shows the materials she plans to distribute while knocking on doors of registered Democrats and Independents

Tagalog," she said. "That's a way to make that person smile -- you feel welcome."

Feeling welcome is key for a minority community in which immigration and xenophobia are major concerns. Like Latinos, Filipino-Americans tend to vote Democrat.

"When Trump talks about not bringing in relatives and things like that, that same thing applies to Asians," said Tick Se-

gerblom, a commissioner for Clark County, where Las Vegas is located. "So Trump has really been a boon as far as organizing Asians."

But traditionally Filipino-Americans have not voted in large numbers.

To counter that, Gonzales and her fellow activists introduced a tradition commonly found during election campaigns back in the Philippines -- the

mingle at long tables covered in banana leaves, with a whole roast pig on the menu.

'Squeak of a mouse'

The feasts hosted in Las Vegas by Gonzales so far have not endorsed specific candidates. A grand Kamayan is planned once the Democratic Party settles on a nominee -- but that has not stopped those in the race from reaching out.

Democratic candidate Tulsi Gabbard, who is Hawaiian, has made inroads, as have Pete Buttigieg and Elizabeth Warren.

"This is an overlooked and often ignored community and I feel like Elizabeth Warren celebrates our existence and doesn't use us as props," said Filipina campaign volunteer Ninna Diaz, 27.

The community is "definitely taking notice," she added.

More recently, Gonzales has conducted Tagalog-language caucus training for campaigns including that of Bernie Sanders.

"The mere fact that a lot of politicians are calling me and other Filipino-American leaders, it shows you that we are becoming important," she said.

"They are paying attention to us, because they know now that we vote."

She added: "Our voice used to be like the squeak of a mouse... But we are getting fired up now."

In a sign of the group's growing visibility, Segerblom and others are leading a campaign to rename a stretch of eastern Las Vegas, which is home to many community restaurants and stores, Little Filipinotown.

But Gonzales turned to one of the most visible icons of all -- global boxing superstar and Philippines Senator Manny Pacquiao, who was in Las Vegas for a fight in 2014.

"We were able to get to his suite -- he posed with us, holding our banner," said Gonzales, who now uses the image to boost voter registration drives.

"It gets the Filipinos excited -- in fact, even non-Filipinos!"

For the first time, the Tagalog language will be used on voting cards along with English and Spanish at the Democratic caucuses in Nevada

Kamayan, a large communal feast.

These typically see politicians