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About New York

Real Thing In Parades? Coney Island

WHO needs Hercules when you can have Xenobia the Bearded Lady With an Attitude and — absolutely gratis — Ron Kuby, the Radical Attorney With a Ponytail? Walk this way, down the Coney Island Boardwalk, where in one week — a mere seven days — the Mermaid Parade will welcome the summer solstice with its procession of characters, cars and commotion.

The lady and the lawyer are the Grand Marshals — Queen Mermaid and King Neptune — of a celebration that is more New York than anything imported by legions of Mouse marketeers. Let them close streets and dim lights tonight in the name of Hercules and the Main Street whatsis down Fifth Avenue. But the strong man, whether in Greek skirts or pinstripes, better not ride the D train to Coney.

“Disney is sexless and sanitized,” said Dick Zigun, the unofficial mayor of Coney Island. “Worst of all, it’s standardized.”

Sure, this comes from a man who runs a freak show, complete with Electra, who lights a torch with sparks that fly off her tongue, and Koko the Killer Clown (the sign on his cage says he likes peanuts and subway tokens).

“New York has always prided itself on being different,” said Mr. Zigun, who is the artistic director of Coney Island U.S.A., a theater group. “If you want an experience that doesn’t challenge you in terms of meeting new cultures, go to Disneyland. Go to Epcot and get an artificial introduction to other cultures. Go to Coney Island, walk down the boardwalk to Brighton Beach, and you got a real Russian community.”

PARADES and stores like those sponsored by Disney strike some New Yorkers as an imposition that has little to do with local spirit. In a city filled with ethnic, religious and neighborhood celebrations, the last thing they want to see is art mocking life with a Main Street parade of cartoon characters.

“Looking at Times Square with the Disney store, it’s the unbearable cuteness of being,” said Steve Zeitlin, a folklorist who is the head of CityLore. “It’s animated figures instead of people. A mouse does not capture the City of New York.”

Not a cute one, anyway.

For the half-million dollars that Disney is forking over to the city for police and sanitation overtime, Medy Langman could put on five parades. She’s one of the organizers of the Philippine Independence Day Parade on Madison Avenue tomorrow.

“We have officially nine floats,” she said. “The Ambassador of Song, Miss Carmen Patena, too. She is the No. 1 singer in the Philippines and here. She will be in one of the floats singing a nationalistic song.”

A more solemn tone surrounded the St. Anthony procession last night in SoHo, where a crowd trailed a statue of the saint before returning to the church for a blessing with a relic.

“People need to be in touch with God,” said the Rev. Daniel Morey, the pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church. “Anthony’s concern was always the poor.”

CALL it empathy. He let out a slow “wow,” when asked what he could do with the money being spent on tonight’s cartoon caravan. “I don’t even make a half million off the feast,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe what we could do with that money. It could run a summer day camp and not have to charge the kids. I could run a free summer school. I could improve our senior citizens’ center.”

Iris Garcia won’t be taking her family to tonight’s parade. She’s too busy preparing for the opening of a community center in her Bronx neighborhood. Besides, she already pulled off her own May 17 parade in honor of the 100th anniversary of the founding of St. Martin of Tours parish in Crotona. She spent \$25 on promotional posters and \$35 for permits, just a tad over the \$55 top ticket price for the Hercules movie and live action show being celebrated by tonight’s “once-in-a-lifetime” parade.

“What poor kid can go see that?” Ms. Garcia said. “But after they see the parade they’ll want to go to the show, but they can’t.”

A centennial celebration of a neighborhood’s strength comes only once in a lifetime, too. Frances Brown, the grand marshal of the St. Martin’s parade, is still excited about the day she spent perched in the back seat of a Volkswagen convertible waving to the crowd. Crotona Avenue as Main Street, U.S.A.

“It was wonderful because we were all joining each other. Puerto Rican, black and white,” she said. “It was like we were brothers and sisters. Everybody was together, like one.”