

# The National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited

## *Launch of 'A Bocas November'* *Remarks by Mark Loquan | President, NGC*

*November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Tradewinds Hotel,  
San Fernando*

### Salutations

- NGC Board members, Executive Management Team & staff
- Ms. Marina Salandy-Brown, Bocas Lit Fest founder & director
- Members of the Bocas Lit Fest board.
- Mr. Michael Anthony, eminent writer and ALL our writers present
- Mr. Sherid Mason - Chairman, San Fernando Arts Council (SFAC)

### NGC Bocas Lit Fest South partners:

- Ms. Shella Murray- Vice-Chairman, San Fernando Arts Council (SFAC) and other members of the SFAC Executive.
- Ras Commander - Chairman, TUCO
- Rotary South members
- Members of the media.

Good evening.

NGC has been title sponsor of the Bocas Lit Fest for the past four years. As the Company's recently installed President, I am truly delighted to address the Bocas fraternity for the first time, at this evening's launch of '*A Bocas November*' here in San Fernando. I bring greetings with a sense of pride, knowing that NGC, through its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, has played a role in developing this extraordinary festival for the literary arts.

At the most basic level, the NGC Bocas Lit Fest has been a champion of literacy, as a literary festival fundamentally encouraging participants to

read and write. This is a noble cause in itself - one that I am certain has been well advanced since the festival's inception - and it is also a cause about which I am personally passionate. There are strong correlations between the work of this festival and that of the Music Literacy Trust, an organisation which I founded twelve years ago to help build local capacity in reading and writing *music*, in order to preserve our indigenous compositions for posterity.

Beyond building literacy, however, this festival serves another imperative of paramount importance. I have often lamented our indifference to and undervaluation of our local cultural creations, especially when they are regarded with such fascination by non-nationals. For that reason, I am thrilled and heartened by the work of the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, by its efforts in *developing, commending* and *promoting* Caribbean authorship, in announcing our talent to the world *with pride*.

I am told that today's launch of a 'A *Bocas November*' is to be a celebration of the festival's success in that regard, as the past year has seen Caribbean writers who have been supported by the NGC Bocas Lit Fest, sweep some of the biggest prizes in literature. I speak, of course, of Ms. Tiphonie Yanique, winner of the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection; Mr. Marlon James, winner of the Man Booker Prize last year; Trini Andre Alexis, winner of the Scotia Gillar award; and Ms. Vahni Capildeo, also of Trinidad, who was awarded the coveted Forward Prize for Best Poetry Collection 2016. Ms. Capildeo is also currently shortlisted for the eminent TS Eliot Prize. More recently, I read that another Bocas-curated poet, Ms. Danielle Boodoo-Fortuné, has been announced as the winner of the 2016 UK-based Wasafiri New Writing Prize for Poetry.

To round out this supremely good year for Caribbean literature, I understand that for the first time, over a dozen writers have been invited to the Miami Book Fair, the biggest of its kind in the USA, to be hosted later this month. So, **not only are inveterate and emerging Caribbean writers being honoured and recognised on account of this festival, but international readers are asking for more.**

***What does that tell us?***

Firstly, it says that there is a clear appetite for Caribbean literature. And why shouldn't there be? The Caribbean collective has such a textured history, such cultural wealth that feeds compelling themes and complex characters. Who wouldn't relish the cadence of our language, the riotous colours of our landscapes set in rich prose, or vivid poetry? In Western art, literature, music and cinema, the Caribbean is an exotic *other*, seductive, and enclaved by the sea. It is therefore no surprise that indigenous literary voices, treating indigenous themes and problematics, are being received with hunger and acclaim. This recognition should be a source of great pride to us and we should push to take more of our works to market.

We need to be careful, though, that we don't start using international demand and accolades as the yardstick for value and worth. We need to recognise and appreciate what we have, *proactively* celebrate our works as artefacts of our culture, *and invest* in their preservation. For instance, why do we not push for more local and regional titles to be read in schools as syllabus inclusions? Besides focusing on commercial circulation of our works, why not share them via other distribution channels, such as

libraries and embassies? Our works define us, and they will only endure if they are shared and read.

A second takeaway from the recent success of our authors is the validation it gives to the NGC Bocas Lit Fest and its cause - it proves that there is talent to be uncovered. A novel or an anthology is not the product of a night's rumination - writers can take many years to complete their manuscripts. What Bocas has done is uncover treasures that may otherwise have idled in anonymity. I am certain that in the years to come, as the festival expands its audience and reach, we will see more phenomena emerging, not simply because the festival is inspiring people to write, but because people who have written are stepping forward, finding an avenue for exposure. As a country we need to build our creative industries - we must recognise the fertility of our artistic talent, find ways to encourage our people in these pursuits and facilitate the requisite exposure for persons desirous of sustaining careers in the Arts.

Finally, but importantly, we cannot speak of the success of our writers without acknowledging its correlation with the work of this festival and its architects. Success and recognition for writers is often hard-won, not for want of talent, but lack of visibility. The NGC Bocas Lit Fest has been aggressively promoting our works, placing Caribbean literature in the grasp of international readers and clearly, in the hands of the right people. This it has achieved, as I understand, despite being staffed by fewer than a dozen persons. There is obviously a fierce passion driving this organisation, and I applaud the staff for their commitment to the cause.

For us as sponsors, we are gratified by the success of this investment, especially given the challenges facing our business sector and the concomitant need for prudent expenditure. It is much easier to justify support for an organisation when it demonstrates consistent growth, when it addresses an underserviced need and when it delivers tangible results. Moreover, we are exceedingly pleased as a **locally grown** company to see this investment in our indigenous craft yield such profits for our people.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I congratulate all our award-winning writers, and express our optimism about Ms. Capildeo's chances of copping the TS Eliot Prize. I look forward to the celebrations of the coming month, and I wish the festival's coordinators the best of luck as they work to grow and deepen the NGC Bocas Lit Fest on the literary landscape of our country and region. I thank you.