

The fountain of stories

Karen Greiner visits the Plazoleta del Chorro de Quevedo and describes what makes it so unique.

A few weeks ago, while exploring *La Candelaria*, I stumbled upon a plaza with a large crowd of people listening to a young woman telling stories. The audience sat in close quarters on rows of stairs within a small, U-shaped space at the south end of the square. A plaque on the wall read “Plazoleta del Chorro de Quevedo.” I tried to squeeze myself within better hearing range of the storyteller but the crowd was too dense, despite the rainy weather. What are all these people doing, I wondered, listening to stories in the rain on a Saturday night? I vowed to return another time to investigate this phenomenon. Over the years, living in several cities in the United States and abroad, I’ve seen a variety of street performers. Washington Square Park in New York City is known for its chess sharks, players engaged in five-minute “speed chess” matches for money. In Washington D.C.’s Dupont Circle, chess can also be found, along with a variety of card games being played to pass time and money. Along “Las Ramblas” avenue in Barcelona, I’ve seen the “usual suspects” of street performance: jugglers, mimes, and the ever-ubiquitous frozen metallic people on pedestals. Yet among all this outdoor playfulness and performance, never have I seen public storytellers. I asked expatriate friends in Bogotá if this concept were new to them as well. Adam Bowie, a young Scot working for the British Council, said the closest thing he could think of was “Speakers Corner” in London’s Hyde Park. “But those public speakers mostly go on about politics,” he qualified. Cherie Elston, a Londoner who lives near the Chorro de Quevedo, said the festive ambiance of the Chorro reminded her of the Plaza Alameda in Seville, although she recalls no storytellers present at the latter. “I’d really like to know the history of that space,” Cherie added.

Spurred on by Cherie’s question, I paid a visit to the District Institute of Cultural Patrimony, an entity dedicated



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to the promotion of Bogotá’s “material and immaterial” culture in the Candelaria Corporation building, 100 meters from the Chorro de Quevedo (Calle 13 No. 2-58). A helpful young Institute employee named Alfredo gave me an overview of the Chorro history: “The area where the plaza now stands was occupied by Spanish forces in 1538,” he said. “The church where the storytellers gather is a 20th century replica of the 16th century “Ermita del Humilladero,” which used to stand in the Plaza Santander until it was torn down for being too plain-looking.” A life-long resident of the Candelaria, Alfredo estimated that storytellers have gathered in the Chorro de Quevedo for about 10 years. Mariela, a middle aged woman selling gum, cigarettes and phone calls next to the church at the plaza confirmed this time-frame. “I’ve been selling here for 11 years. The story tellers have been here for about that long.”

I returned to the Chorro several days later to try my luck finding storytellers in action. Instead of walking east up the Calle 13, I took a short-cut through the “Callejon del Embudo,” a lively cobble-stoned street lined with bars and craft stores. Hurrying toward the plaza, I passed several bars offering *chicha*, alcohol made from fermented corn. Each bar spilled its own genre of loud music and as I passed each doorway in succession, the aural sensation was of a spinning radio dial. When I finally reached the plaza I was happy to see storytellers and plenty of seating. A young man named Diego was just beginning his rendition of a short story by Julio Cortázar. “Instructions for Climbing a Staircase,” he sternly announced. I recognized the story from the book “Cronopios y Famas,” one of my favor-

ites. What followed was nothing like my silent, solitary experiences with the story. Diego’s body brought Cortazar’s absurdly earnest instructions alive. Several times he asked the audience for input, adding texture to the story. This first story ended triumphantly at the top of the stairs where most the audience was seated. For the next hour the crowd listened, laughed and at times chimed in, no longer needing an invitation to participate. Diego was later joined by José Gregorio, fellow storyteller and graduate of Bogotá’s Academia Superior de Artes, and Andrés Fabian, composer-musician and newlywed with a one year-old daughter.

After the show, I spoke with the three of them about the art of public storytelling. For José Gregorio, the Chorro de Quevedo requires him to “break all of the rules” of his academic training. “In conventional theater, you practice in private and then you present in a room with lighting and sound effects,” he said. “The theater always seeks to hide things - it is planned, manipulated and aesthetically pleasing. Here we seek to create an anti-aesthetic.” Nodding in agreement, Diego added, “Here we have direct contact with the public - they’re not spectators but rather participants in the show - and often we improvise off things offered by the public. We’re trying to be inclusive - for us, this [storytelling] isn’t just about providing distraction, we’re trying to create an alternative source of information and entertainment, and to make people think.” The type of crowd they attract in the Chorro also adds to the ‘street flavor’ of their performance. Who comes to hear stories? “People who live in the street, young couples, elderly people and kids.” Then Andres, still

strumming his guitar, said: “and drunk people!” José Gregorio described the process of telling stories to such a diverse crowd, a challenge he seemed to enjoy. “Imagine having kids in the public, and so you’re telling a children’s story, and then a drunk guy comes along, and you have to find the tools to incorporate what the drunk guys is saying into the show...”

Diego acknowledged that their trio, “Clawndestino” (a play on clan/clown), also tells stories to make money. “Let’s be honest - we need money. I’ve been living off coins for seven years. But I also do this because I don’t want to be forgotten. I want the people who come to listen to us to think “Wow, this form of community still exists.” Among the community called into being at the Chorro was Gilmar Ardila, a handsome 17 year old with an impressive black ‘mohawk’. Gilmar said he liked the Chorro because it is a place where people are respectful of one another. “I’ve seen storytellers in other places, like the Parque 93, but it wasn’t as welcoming. We know that if we come here, people won’t look and point at us.” I glanced at the audience members still sitting on the stairs, a mix of several generations and, judging from apparel and electronics, social classes. “We know that even if we don’t have money we can come here and feel good and have a good time,” said Jazmin. “We come from a really poor part of Bogotá where there is a lot of violence,” John added, “Here it’s different - it inspires us to not stay there [in our neighborhood], “delinquiendo” (getting into trouble).” “And,” Gilmar offered, as final words on public storytelling, “it’s cheaper than going to the movies.”