

Bogota theater festival: a bright mask for a once grim city

Bogotá's biannual theater festival is credited with helping turn this once-grim city into a cultural Mecca. This year's event is expected to draw more than 5 million spectators over a two-week period



Bogota's Iberian-American Theater Festival is expected to attract some 5 million spectators - making it one of the largest events of its kind. More than 200 theater companies are attending the biannual event. Among the US groups is California's Carpetsbag Brigade, which will be performing "Dios de Adrenalina" with Colombia's Nemcatacoa. Courtesy Carpetsbag Brigade / Carpetsbag Brigade

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BOGOTA -- Colombia's international theater festival was launched in 1988 with a dubious bang. At the time, this Andean nation was better known for narco-thugs and guerrilla groups than stage villains and theater troupes. Doubts about the viability of the festival were encapsulated in its official motto that year: "An act of faith."

During one of the inaugural shows, an Argentine production of Geppetto, a right-wing group planted a bomb in the men's room. The explosion gutted the dressing rooms and jolted the stage, but nobody was hurt.

Twenty-six years later, The Iberian-American Theater Festival of Bogotá has become one of the largest such events in the hemisphere and has been credited with helping turn this often cold and bleak capital city into a cultural Mecca.

Held every two years, the event will draw more than 200 theater companies from 32 nations. In all, there will be more than 900 presentations that will occupy bullrings, shopping centers, public parks and theaters during a two-week stretch that began last weekend with the inaugural parade.

Organizers estimate that 5 million people will watch the shows either live or on public screens erected around the country. Other theater festivals are more renowned, but Bogotá's is thought to have a clinch on spectators.

On a recent weeknight, Festival Director Anamarta de Pizarro was bouncing between interviews, fielding phone calls and trying to figure out how to get a European set piece out of a frozen port.

With short-cropped, bright-blue hair and a voice that hovers just above a whisper, Pizarro still seems a bit surprised by the festival's success.

"We're in a country that has no theater tradition," she explained. And yet, every two years, many of this city's 9-million people turn into art hounds. Shows are routinely sold out, and avenues and parks are often clogged with those gathering to watch free street theater. Unlike Colombia's sexier cities, like Cartagena or Barranquilla, Bogotá doesn't have a traditional festival that brings the city together. "The city's signature carnival is a carnival of the performing arts," she said. "This is the city's party."

The festival was created by Fanny Mikey, an Argentine émigré who is viewed almost as the patron saint of Bogotá theater. At the time, the city was among the most crime-ridden in the hemisphere and seen as a cold cultural wasteland.

"Nothing interesting was happening here in the arts," Pizarro said. "No big concerts would ever come here. The festival was something of an awakening."

Since then, Bogotá has blossomed with film and music festivals and a thriving performing arts scene. Colombia's cultural fame has been carried abroad by artists like Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, painter Fernando Botero, and musician Shakira.

But it was Mikey, who died in 2008, who deserves much of the credit for reviving Bogotá's art scene, said Beatriz Rizk, a theater professor at Miami-Dade College, and a director of the International Hispanic Theater Festival of Miami.

"She had the intuition that this would work in Bogotá, where commercial theater didn't really exist," said Rizk, who is also the author of the Fanny Mikey entry in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Theater and Performance. "This was at a time when the country was truly troubled. ... But she created an atmosphere where people in Bogotá would attend the theater en masse."

Despite the "Iberian-American" in the festival's name, it has always been a global gathering. This year, it's bringing in companies from Germany, Slovenia, Benin and Japan, among others. Hollywood Oscar winner Tim Robbins will be here directing his theater company's production of *1984*.

Jay Ruby is the director of the Carpetbag Brigade, a company of acrobatic stilt-walkers based in California. This is the company's third time in Colombia but first time at the festival.

"Most people in the States haven't heard about it and don't understand the magnitude or impact of it," he said of the event. "Even people in my own company don't understand what we're getting into."

For *Bogotáños* the festival has become something of a reprieve for a city that is often obsessed with traffic jams, crimes and local political corruption.

"It's the one time of the year where newspapers, taxi drivers, street vendors, people in restaurants aren't talking about all the city's problems," said Lucho Guzman, the director of a clown troupe that will be participating in the festival. "Everybody will be talking about theater."