



Back In Time

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The Tablado

The first few months of the year in Montevideo were, it seemed to me when I was growing up, all about carnival. We lived in Pocitos in the 1950s and early 1960s, on 26 de Marzo between José Osorio and Pereira de la Luz. Then as now, it was a busy thoroughfare, but the intersections led off to quiet streets with tree-lined pavements and residential homes. Quiet, that is, except during February and March, the tablado season.

Tablados were makeshift stages; raised wooden platforms that stood about 5 or 6 feet high and were as wide as the street. Though temporary, they were sturdily built, usually with a painted backdrop or curtains that provided a small backstage area, with steps on either side, and coloured lights strung on wires and poles to light the stage. The lights were essential, since tablados were only used at night. Every night.

Theoretically, the carnival was supposed to be celebrated over three nights, but it actually lasted for weeks. In fact, people used to boast that the carnival in Uruguay was the longest in the world. Neighbourhoods and any number of clubs and organizations were represented by their comparsas—groups of drummers and dancers that could range from a couple of dozen to a couple of hundred—and competed with each other to be the best of the season. These groups spent many hours rehearsing their numbers and creating their costumes, which were sometimes as lavish as any used in major theatrical productions. The women wore colourful, exotic, and frequently skimpy outfits, evocative of the uninhibited displays that made the carnival in Rio de Janeiro famous. My brother and I used to go into town for the *llamadas*, the gathering of groups whose drummers played intoxicating *candombe* rhythms in a cultural ritual with roots that ran through Uruguay's black population all the way back to Africa. The *corso* parades down Avenida 18 de Julio were almost more exciting than I could bear, with deafening drumming, bright lights, decorated floats, *cabezudos* (big heads), and scantily clad carnival queens of all ages dancing in the street. Highly excited crowds thronged the sidewalks, laughing, shouting, throwing coloured *serpentina* (paper streamers) and *papelito* (confetti), and squirting water from *pomitos* (plastic tubes) at the unwary.

The tablados, by comparison, were on a smaller, *barrio* scale. They weren't quite as overwhelming, and

I loved them. Every year there was one fairly close to where I lived, and I used to go there in the evenings to watch the *murgas*, which fascinated me. Though the music played by the Uruguayan *murga* is undeniably African in origin, the ensemble's style is descended from the Spanish *zarzuela* and is more of a theatrical performance than the wild rhythm-and-dance of the *comparsa*. The *murga* was born here in the very early 1900s as a variation on the traditional *mascaradas* which had been around since the previous century. There were usually between 13 and 17 members in a *murga*, usually all men, some of whom played percussion instruments while others did the singing. They performed satirical sketches set to music, drawing on local politics and current events to spoof and lampoon anything and anyone in the news. The instruments recalled the *murga's* European heritage: a *bombo* (shallow bass drum extending horizontally from the waist), *redoblante* (snare drum), and *platillos* (cymbals). The performers wore elaborate costumes reminiscent of Italian carnival and theatre. They were, I thought, hugely entertaining, and for a while in my teens I nurtured a secret ambition to be a *murguista*.

But the tablado was much more than a stage production. It was also a street party, with constant music blaring from speakers and crowds of people mingling—mainly the immediate neighbours who surely had mixed feelings about the nightly *fiesta* right on their doorstep. The carnival experience was largely about fantasy and blowing off steam, so we could wear costumes if we felt so inclined, or paint our faces in the *lubolo* (blackface) style, or at the very least wear a mask and imagine ourselves to be mysterious and interesting to that special someone. The street food was delicious: vendors set up portable *parrillas* and served *chivitos* and *chorizos* on fresh bread rolls. There was plenty of cold beer and *demijohns* of red wine. Those with a sweet tooth could always find a *postre chajá* or something with *dulce de leche* in it. Many, of course, had their own *mate* and *thermos*, but there was usually a cup of coffee available somewhere for those who wanted something hot to sip on before heading home to rest. It was important to get some rest, since the fun would all start up again tomorrow, and none of us wanted to miss a minute of the carnival.

Note: Pedro Figari (1861-1938), the Uruguayan painter, produced many fine paintings of *candombe* and other carnival-related themes that help to understand the origins of the Uruguayan carnival. See: <http://www.pedrofigari.com/D.html>