Travelling With *Harriet’s House*

By

Tara Goldstein

The morning of my first staged reading of *Harriet’s House* in Bogotá, Colombia, I woke up feeling ill. I had spent much of the night throwing up, and my lips were purple. So were my fingernails. The symptoms pointed to altitude sickness. Severe altitude sickness. Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, is 2,625 metres above sea level. Altitude sickness commonly occurs above 2,400 metres (8,000 feet). The key to not getting sick is not to climb higher than the altitude you’re accustomed to too quickly. I had climbed too quickly. The day before I had gone to see the famous Salt Cathedral located in Zipaquirá, 50 kilometres north of Bogotá. The Cathedral is one of only three salt churches in the world. The other two are in Poland. Our guidebook said that about 250,000 tons of salt were cleared away to carve the Cathedral. There were four of us who went to the Salt Cathedral. My partner Margot who had travelled to Colombia with me, the director of the staged readings, Jorge Arcila, and his nephew-in-law Emmanuel, whose wife was playing the role of Ana in the reading. When we arrived we descended 180 metres below ground and toured 14 small chapels representing the Stations of the Cross, Jesus’ last journey. After our visit to the Salt Cathedral, we travelled up one of the mountains north of Bogotá to Rio de Nuesa and then to Tibio, a tourist town where local artists sell their work.
The trip up the mountain road to Rio de Nuesa and back down just one day after arriving in Bogotá, may not have given me the time I needed to acclimatize.

Margot checked the altitude sickness symptom sheet the travel nurse had given us. My symptoms were severe. If I get a fever or experienced confusion, I’d need to go a doctor to get some oxygen. Meanwhile, we decided the best thing to do was for me to try to sleep it off. Jorge and Margot went out to buy me some soda crackers and Gatorade so I wouldn’t get dehydrated. By noon I was well enough to move from the bed in Jorge’s apartment, where Margot and I were staying, to the hammock by the window in his living room. My lips and fingernails had started to turn pink. It was a good sign.

At 3:00, it was time to go, but I didn’t think I could manage the short walk from Jorge’s apartment to the theatre. We took a cab. The first staged reading of La Casa de Harriet, was at El Teatro Jorge Eliécer Gáitan downtown, which houses a large theatre downstairs and a small theatre upstairs. The audience we were expecting that evening were theatre artists and teachers. Because Harriet’s House had been written as a research-informed theatre piece to introduce Canadian teachers to the lives of adoptive same-sex families, Jorge had deliberately invited an audience who were public school teachers as well as theatre artists. When we got to the theatre, I found out that there was no elevator, and I would have to climb six flights of stairs to get to the smaller theatre. Jorge and the actors went ahead to warm up and set up. After climbing half a flight of stairs, I had to sit down. My lips and fingernails were deep purple again and my hands were ice cold. I was having trouble breathing. Emmanuel, who was a veterinarian, went out to buy me some coca tea, which is known for relieving the symptoms of altitude sickness. Meanwhile, the theatre manager came by to see why I was sitting on the stairs.

Before leaving for South America, I had taken four months of Spanish lessons at The Spanish Centre in Toronto. Margot and I had travelled to Peru and Ecuador before arriving in Bogotá, so I had had some time to practice my Spanish. Despite the four months of lessons, and the fact that at home I could produce sentences with about 30 verbs in the past tense as well as the present tense, once we arrived and I needed to use the Spanish I had learned, I could only speak in the present tense and use the same 10 verbs over and over again.

Left to Right: Jorge Arcila, Margot Huycke, Tara Goldstein. Photo credit: Emmanuel Medina.

Nosotros vamos trabajar en el teatro poquito. Upstairs. Yo soy enferma y no puedo caminar rápidamente. I knew that trabajar meant “to work” and not “to perform” and that caminar meant “to walk” and not “to climb”. But it was the best I could do. Work and walk were two of the ten verbs I could actually use in a conversation. They were enough. The manager understood. “Okay, okay. Tranquila, tranquila.” Take it easy, take it easy. I could sit there as long I needed to.

Emmanuel came back with the coca tea and told me to put my hands around the cup to warm them. After a few sips we started climbing the six flights of stairs, half a flight at a time. When we arrived, I sat in the seat closest to the exit and made plans of how I’d get back to Jorge’s apartment if I felt I needed to leave before the performance was over. Miraculously the coca tea worked just as the audience started filing in. Suddenly it was time to start the reading and for me to join Jorge on stage to introduce the play to the audience. I didn’t think I could walk down the step flight of stairs from my seat to the stage without falling. So instead I stood up from my seat next to the exit, introduced Margot and myself and said a few words about the play. I spoke in English and Jorge translated for me. He also told the audience that I was suffering from altitude sickness. The audience nodded. I wasn’t the first North American to fly into Bogotá for quick visit and not take the time to acclimatize.
The performance went smoothly. Because we knew the play so well, Margot and I could follow the story in Spanish. It was the first time I had ever heard any of my work performed in a language other than English. And it was the first time that *Harriet's House* had been performed outside of Toronto. The family that Jorge had created in Bogotá was different than the family that Canadian director Jocelyn Wickett had created in Toronto. Jorge's family members touched each other constantly. Even in their most difficult conflicted moments. Jocelyn's family members often kept their distance from each other during an argument.

Harriet's family is Jewish. At moments during the Bogotá reading (which had quite a bit of blocking and movement in it), the family seemed more Jewish to me than it did during our Toronto performances. This was despite the fact that the audience didn't know much about Jewish people.

In one scene in the play, Harriet and Anita, who is a close friend of the family, are having a serious argument. Anita runs the Global Family adoption agency that helped Harriet and her former husband Jonathon adopt their daughters Luisa and Ana from a Bogotá orphanage when the girls were 7 and 10. In this scene, Harriet has just come out as a lesbian to Anita and wants to know if she can bring her new partner Marty to Anita's annual Global Family Passover Seder. Anita refuses. It's a painful homophobic moment for Harriet and Anita's refusal results in Harriet and her daughters becoming estranged from Anita and the Global Family community. During the post-reading discussion, one of the questions that was asked of me was why I had made the family Jewish. Weren't there already enough issues already circulating in the play? Not knowing why making Harriet's family Jewish was an issue, I explained that I was Jewish and I had included Anita's refusal to invite Harriet's partner Marty to Passover to demonstrate a moment of difficulty that same-sex families can face when they come out to their families and communities. Not being invited to Passover Seder was like not being invited to Christmas dinner. While several audience members nodded their heads and seemed to understand, I left the reading feeling that Harriet's family Jewishness did not travel well. Reflecting on that moment now, I wonder if there was a different, unspoken, question that was behind the articulated question of why I had made the family Jewish: Is it fair to raise adopted children who have been born in a Catholic country like Colombia as Jews in Canada? Interestingly, the question of whether it is okay for adopted children to be raised in a same-sex family, a question that I had been expecting, didn't come up that night. Perhaps it didn't seem askable.
The next night the reading was staged at Barraca Teatro, Bogotá’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) theatre. Last June, the theatre ran its second Festival Rosa (Pink Festival). Jorge told me that the Artistic Director had received hate mail during the festival. It was going to be a different kind of evening than our evening at El Teatro Jorge Eliécer Gáitan.

I was feeling much better and was able to introduce Margot and myself from the stage. “Buenos noches. My name is Tara Goldstein. I’m the playwright of La Casa de Harriet and I’ve come to Bogotá with my partner Margot. We’ve been together for 18 years, married for 4 and today is our wedding anniversary.” The audience exclaimed with pleasure and applauded for a long time. A very long time. In Colombia, the LGBT community is fighting hard to legalize same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption. We were a married same-sex couple from a country where that fight had been won. The applause was for the rights we had won in Canada as well as recognition of our wedding anniversary.

The political issues of same-sex marriage and adoption permeated the room as the reading unfolded and unlike the night before were taken up in the post-reading discussion. “If same-sex adoption were legal, would it be fair to the children? Children don’t get to choose the families they are adopted into.” “No, children don’t get to choose. But nobody gets to choose. None of us chose the families, straight or gay, we were born into or adopted into. Who gets to choose? No one. What’s important is being able to work through conflicts that arise in our families. Harriet is very good at working through the conflicts that her family experiences. That’s what’s important.” “Are you trying to persuade Colombians saying LGBT couples should be allowed to adopt? Do you support gays adopting?” “Yes, Yes, I do. Harriet and Marty are raising Harriet’s daughters in a loving, affirming, functional family. Harriet’s daughters are well taken care of. In Toronto, Margot and I know many same-sex couples raising children in successful families.”

Like the audience the night before, the audience at Barraca Teatro wanted to talk about why I had made Harriet’s family Jewish. This time I was better prepared. “One reason Harriet’s family is Jewish is because I’m Jewish. I wanted to use the rituals in my Jewish culture to layer the homophobia Harriet encounters when Anita doesn’t want to invite Marty to her Passover Seder. The Jewish Passover Seder is an annual celebration of the moment in Jewish history when the Jews were freed as slaves from Egypt. Not being invited to Seder gives Harriet the chance to say to Anita that it’s ironic that on a holiday that is intended to celebrate freedom from oppression, Anita is actually oppressing her family with her refusal to invite Marty to the celebration.” This time, the issue of children who were raised in a Catholic orphanage in Bogotá being adopted into a Canadian Jewish family was discussed explicitly as an additional conflict that the play presented. Is it fair that Harriet’s daughters, who were raised Catholic until the ages of 7 and 10, be asked to participate in Jewish religious life?

It is very interesting to me that the question of whether or not it was “fair” to allow children who had been raised Catholic be adopted by Jewish families was debated at Barraca Teatro as much as the question of whether or not it was “fair” to allow children to be raised by LGBT families. As I mentioned earlier, this was not something I had expected. In Toronto, my white, middle-class Jewishness rarely makes me feel Other. In Bogotá, where every Catholic church we visited was filled with people regardless of what day of the week it was or what the time of day it was, Harriet’s Jewishness as well as her life as a lesbian raised questions about her suitability to raise Luisa and Ana.

At the end of the evening of our reading at Barraca Teatro, the Artistic Director asked me if I would like to produce another staged reading of La Casa de Harriet for the third Festival Rosa. I said I’d love to and I am now in the process of raising funds for the performance. I’m hoping we’ll also have the opportunity to present the sequel to Harriet’s House, which is called Ana’s Shadow/La Sombra de Ana at the Festival, as well.
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In the sequel, Harriet and Marty are married and Marty’s relationship to Harriet’s daughters deepens. How will the Bogotá audience respond to the maturing of Harriet’s family? To the different ways Harriet’s growing daughters are choosing and not choosing to connect to their birth country Colombia? Will a reading of the sequel provoke a discussion about the same set of political issues? Or will it bring out different issues? I’m anxious to find out.

BIOGRAPHY:

Tara Goldstein is a professor and playwright in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She is also the Founding Director of Gailey Road Productions, a theatre company that produces research-informed theatre on social and political issues that affect us all (www.gaileyroad.com). Tara has been writing and producing research-informed theatre for thirteen years and has written about her work in Staging Harriet’s House: Writing and Producing Research-Informed Theatre (Peter Lang 2012). Tara’s has just published an anthology of three of her plays called Zero Tolerance and Other Plays: Disrupting Xenophobia, Racism and Homophobia at School (Sense Publishers 2013).