



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Festival Internacional de Poesía de Medellín (Colombia)

(2006)



" for showing how creativity, beauty, free expression and community can flourish amongst and overcome even deeply entrenched fear and violence."

Gloria Chvatal, Fernando Rendón, Gabriel Jaime Franco
(Festival organisers)
Photo: Ana Lucia Florez

The International Poetry Festival of Medellín is one of the largest and most prestigious poetry festivals in the world. It started in 1991, when Medellín was one of the most dangerous and violent cities in the world. Through poetry readings in the streets, people have reclaimed their city.

The Idea: Poetry Against Terror

The International Poetry Festival of Medellín started as a protest against the political violence and hatred prevailing in Colombia and especially in Medellín. In the early 1990s, Medellín was ruled by fear, political terror and fighting between criminal groups. Some 100 people could be murdered on a weekend. After 8 p.m., the city was usually dead due to a curfew imposed by the paramilitary, nowadays still active in the country. Initiator Fernando Rendón says: "It seems a difficult task to find flourishing and tranquil decades in our country in the last 150 years, but the decade of the nineties was particularly sombre and mournful. [] The festival arose from a proposal to overthrow the wall of terror and fear imposed by the internal feuds of our country". It was an attempt "to create through poetry an atmosphere that without ignoring the spiral of death and the inertial strength of hate could put a little light in this sombre scene."

The idea was simple: By organising poetry readings in the streets, the Festival initiators helped people to re-establish a cultural life and reclaim their city. More and more listeners overcame their own fear and attended the poetry readings.

During the 10 days of the annual Festival in Medellín, there are public readings of poetry in the streets, in parks, residential areas, at the university and libraries, in theatres, cooperatives, schools and cultural centres, restaurants, malls, subway stations, factories, churches and even in prisons. Each year, some 70 poets from about 55 countries participate actively in the festival. Up to 200,000 people come to listen to the 100 poetry readings.

The Festival has brought much positive international attention to Medellín, and it has invited many foreign poets: Until 2008, 843 poets from 143 countries have read their poems in more than 60 languages and dialects during 1106 public readings in 33 Colombian cities.

History and Organisers

The International Poetry Festival of Medellín was organised for the first time in 1991 by thirteen people connected with the literature magazine Prometeo, which was founded in 1982 and has published 83 issues, 14 books of poetry and a CD ROM with poems and biographies of 216 poets from 113 countries. The main inspiration came from the editors of Prometeo, the poets Fernando Rendón and Angela Garcia.

Rendón was born in 1951 in Medellín. He worked as poet, editor and journalist and was the founder of Prometeo. The organisation responsible for both Prometeo and the Festival is the Corporation of Art and Poetry Prometeo.

Further Activities and Outreach Programmes

In addition to the Festival and magazine Prometeo, the Corporation of Art and Poetry Prometeo has projects which include a TV documentary series entitled Tiempo de Poesía, an International Poetry School and the Gulliver project, poetry workshops for children in the poor neighbourhoods of Medellín. From 2005-08, the Corporation of Art and Poetry Prometeo

- offered through the Poetry School 57 free courses for 400 annual students, 53 conferences, workshops and talks;
- carried out 16 annual workshops of poetry appreciation under its Gulliver project, reaching annually out for 400 children from 6-11 years from the poor districts of Medellín;
- created cooperated actions of Latin American Poetry festivals, with Festivals from Venezuela, Cuba, Puerto Rico and, soon, Costa Rica, San Salvador, Nicaragua and Argentina. The Corporation of Art and Poetry Prometeo has also helped to strengthen many of these, and to create the Itinerant Poetry Festival of Africa;
- edited in Spanish and English the [Colombian poetry web page](#) of Poetry International of Rotterdam, in which 63 Colombian poets have already been included; and an unique worldwide [poetry anthology](#) on the internet, with 343 poems from 345 poets from 133 countries of five continents;
- summoned the International Poetry Prize for books published in Spanish, the Latin American Poetry Prize of the City of Medellín, the National Prize of Stimulus to the Young Colombian Poetry and the Gaceta Award together with the Cuban magazine Gazeta.

Campaigning for Democracy

In 2003, the Festival brought together the first Global Conference on Poetry for Peace in Colombia, which passed a declaration about the political situation in Colombia.

The Corporation of Art and Poetry Prometeo has also campaigned for the democratisation of the country by disseminating a letter signed by 188 poets and writers, 282 artists and hundreds of other Colombian professionals, and 138 poets from 82 countries. It has also participated in the Committee of National Meeting of Artists and Intellectuals "to promote a process of unity of action between Colombian poets, artists and intellectuals in the struggle for freedom of creation, expression and mobilisation, and for the full democratisation of our authoritarian and intolerant country."

The Poetry Festival has been facing death threats, attacks on its office and its homepage and has to deal with a reduction of the Colombian state's economical support, nevertheless it manages to keep its activities ongoing, supported by different donors, for instance the culture secretary of the mayor's office of Medellín, Dutch Hivos and DOEN and the Governments of Switzerland and Germany.

It received the Comendador Order by the Congress of Colombia in 2008. In March 2009, after two years tiresome court case, the Constitutional Court of Colombia declared the International Poetry Festival of Medellín as cultural heritage of the nation.

Quotes:

Fernando Rendón: "The Festival has the conviction that culture must and has to play a fundamental role in any process of development. It has the certainty that arts and poetry will contribute decisively

to the up-surfing of a new humanity, a new human society."

"The International Poetry Festival of Medellín has maintained and will maintain its efforts, as a way of opposition to barbarism and of looking into alternative routes of democratic and peaceful resistance to the extreme violence that strikes our country, seeking the strengthening and defence of the fundamental rights of the Colombian people: the right to live, the right to have liberty of expression, the right of meeting and the right to create."

The motto of the Festival is "Por una paz más activa que todas las guerras." "For a peace which is more active than all wars."

Quotation

"Colombia is the victim of a terrorist plot, and poetry is the universal language that deciphers the riddle. The terrorism is state-sponsored, and poetry is the dream and the answer to the eternal challenge of a magnificent people."

Fernando Rendón

RIGHT LIVELIHOOD
AWARD FOUNDATION