

Garzón, My Dad, and Us

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In this country everybody is shocked because I say motherfucker on TV, but nobody gets outraged when they see kids washing car windows and asking for money on the streets, that's called folklore.

Good night and may God forgive us.

—Jaime Hernando Garzón Forero (1960-1999)

Garzón,

AT THE TIME, laughter was all we had and they killed it. In the wee hours of the 13th of August, 1999, Jaime Hernando Garzón Forero, a beloved Colombian comedian and social activist, was shot six times on his way to work. Garzón, a key member of two of the most celebrated comedy TV shows in Colombian recent history, *¡Quac!* *El Noticero* (1995–1997) and *Zoociedad* (1990–1993), was the modern heir of the country's (tragic) political comedic tradition. Known for his acute satiric style, he developed a variety of characters that depicted the worst (and best) traits of Colombian society: the semi-professional anchorman who would break out of character during the transmissions; the wacky doorman of a building that metaphorically represented the country; the personal cook of the president who would share the latest gossip about her boss; the archaic right wing political commentator; the radical Lieutenant

General; the national version of a socialite; the leftist revolutionary student; the sports correspondent; the massively beloved shoe shiner turned interviewer who didn't hold anything back. Garzón, one of the most adored public figures in the country, was not only the people's favourite comedian; he was also considered a beacon of common sense. His imitations were celebrated by many and feared by those who were the aim of his subversive performances. People have said of Garzón that *he wasn't a simple imitator*; that *he stole his guest's souls*; that *sometimes the imitation was better than the original*. In a country where all the dimensions of social life had been tinted with the drug money and "narco" aesthetics, Garzón's characters were mediums, live canvas for expressing his views about the corrupt nature of Colombian political culture, the proclivity towards easy money and the in-your-face violence that defined those days.

The most important facet of Garzón's talent was his courageous ability to laugh at the absurdity embodied in the Colombian armed conflict without choosing sides. For him, any actors or institutions that had an impact on Colombian life—the military, the guerrillas, the politicians, the paramilitary groups;—were open for dissection. Garzón had a sensibility few possess. He would say the most shocking (and truthful) things in a way that everybody could relate to them. He was the outspoken people's commentator, sharing opinions that were thought by many but spoken by a few. The importance of Garzón's comedy was felt beyond the spheres of popular culture, it had a significant impact on society. His performances almost single-handedly made the average citizen remember that humour and courage were necessary tools for active criticism, that laughing was a much needed response to the ubiquitous threats of violence and fear, that political humour could be much more than simply bashing ideological opponents, and that laughter and its intrinsic community value could be the basis of a civic anti-violence movement.

... My Dad,

I USED TO think my dad was the funniest person in the world. His comedic range was so broad: spot-on imitations, politically incorrect skits, site-specific comedy, raunchy jokes, there wasn't much he couldn't nail. Growing up, he often had lengthy talks with my brother and me about his comedic heroes. I remember him chattering passionately about Mel Brooks, The Three Stooges, Klim (Lucas Caballero Calderón), several French cartoonists, from nineteenth-century legend Honoré Daumier, to contemporary figures such as Plantu, who were definitive and direct influences on his "style." But since the mid-90s, Jaime Garzón rose to the top of my dad's comedic pantheon and never left. To this day he is still at the top.

I used to watch Garzón's shows with my father and mother on Sunday nights. I remember my father's non-stop guffawing during the show, repeatedly using the routine he had just seen Garzón do as a starting point for a rampant monologue that covered a wide range of topics, from the rotten foundations of our civic culture to classic fart jokes. Who was this guy that my father admired so much and made him laugh like nobody else? Besides his ironic and satirical sketches about specific political actors and circumstances, my dad particularly admired Garzón's use of humour as a cathartic experience in a time of despair and brutality. I used to watch *Zoociedad* and, a couple of years later, *¡Quac!* as a way to bond with my father. Although I couldn't understand half the jokes, I would rapidly start following my dad's laughter with a more hysterical giggling of my own. I developed a sharp laughing reflex, motivated by a son's attempt to get closer to his dad. I wanted him to know that I too could recognise good comedy; that, just like him, I knew we were lucky to see one the brightest minds this country had produced in years. I just wanted him to see that I knew what funny was, and that, by osmosis, I could be funny too. But that desire didn't last long. As soon as I started to get Garzón's jokes, he quickly displaced my dad at the top of my comedic pantheon.

... and Us

IT WAS A regular Friday morning. That meant we didn't have to stand in the central square of the school for our daily prayer and the pseudo-philosophical thoughts of the school's director while we froze our butts off at 7:00 a.m. Fridays were TV mornings, a time for a broadcasted religion connection. We would stand in front of the TV and (supposedly) pray. The ritual was led by some poorly prerecorded footage of our priest, and followed by the latest edition of the school's news program. It was a regular Friday morning, a stinky classroom filled with a bunch of spoiled brats that couldn't wait to finish the day and go back to their homes for a quick masturbatory session, followed by an unrestrained intake of cheap national and Caribbean spirits. Yet, almost immediately after the teacher turned on the TV, the "Breaking News" sign popped up on the screen: "Attention. The comedian and social activist Jaime Garzón has been shot dead." At age 14, his assassination was the second tragedy that I watched unfold on the television screens in our classroom. As the news about his assassination began to spread, the local TV networks started to collect the citizens's reactions to the tragedy. I especially remember the testimony of a woman with dark hair, in her midthirties whose voice was so broken I could barely understand her. As the interviewer mumbled some impromptu, consoling words, the woman looked straight into the camera and repeatedly started to yell: "Who's going to teach us how to laugh?" Even though most of us didn't immediately understand the magnitude of what had just happened—some of my classmates were carrying on their usual routines, bullying some poor kid, or eating Doritos for breakfast—I remember sensing a dark veil fall over the whole place, and a feeling of certainty that things would never be the same again. What started as a regular Friday morning had turned into an unmistakably defining moment of our generation. Laughter was all we had, and we still don't know who killed it.

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