

CHOOSING THE PALENQUE OVER HOLLYWOOD

By David Person

SAN BASILIO DE PALENQUE, Colombia – As movie stars go, 75-year-old Evaristo Marquez is unassuming. He doesn't have a home in the Hollywood Hills or shop on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. He doesn't meet journalists for interviews at upscale cafes, answering questions between sips of exotic teas or while munching on trendy health food.

Marquez can be found here, miles away from the glitz and glamour. He sits in front of what can only be called a shack, shaded by a tree called "mata raton" or rat killer because of its allegedly poisonous sap.

His claim to fame is "Burn," the 1970 film starring Marlon Brando as William Walker, a 19th century British officer who starts a slave revolt on the Caribbean island of Queimada. Marquez's character is Jose Dolores, a charismatic stevedore who leads the black slaves in a revolution against the Portuguese at Walker's prompting. What Dolores doesn't know is that Walker has an ulterior motive. Walker plans to set up a puppet leader named Sanchez, through whom the British will control the island's profitable sugar cane trade.

Dolores leads a revolution against Sanchez's corrupt regime, eventually becoming a martyr and prompting more rebellion. Critics have lauded "Burn" as a great depiction of revolution and the evils of colonialism.

Marquez, a native of San Basilio, arguably gave the film its credibility and authenticity. The quest for freedom, and the willingness to get it at any cost, is part of his heritage.

Manuel Jaimes, now the head of the department of archives and media at the Caribbean Cultural Center in New York City, has known about Marquez all his life.

"The story of Evaristo is a great story," Jaimes said.

Jaimes, a black Colombian, grew up in Cartagena. Like many other black Colombians, Marquez's casting in "Burn" alongside Brando filled him with pride.

"To have a black person recognized as a major actor in Cartagena was a big deal at that time," Jaimes said.

Colombia's palenques, populated mostly by poor blacks, weren't supposed to be producing international film stars. But according to Jaimes and C. Daniel Dawson, an art and media consultant based in New York who specializes in African and African diasporic cultures, San Basilio may well have given Marquez the edge that led



Poster from the movie "Burn," starring Marlon Brando and Evaristo Marquez



Evaristo Marquez, outside his home in San Basilio de Palenque

HOME AWAY FROM HOME:



Evaristo Marquez as Dolores and Marlon Brando as William Walker from the movie "Burn"

Some 34 years later, Marquez doesn't have the face of a revolutionary. He flashes smiles easily, exuding warmth and comfort. Gray and grizzled, he looks more like the gentle grandfather he is than the robust Dolores that Pontecorvo directed.

Were it not for our guides, we would have easily walked right by him, never knowing that he has a place in film history. No neon signs or slick brochures announce that a star was born in and still lives in San Basilio de Palenque, the oldest independent African community in Colombia.

Marquez would probably have it no other way. When he talks about Palenque, as the republic is commonly called in Colombia, he beams.

"In Palenque, there is only one race," Marquez said. "And we all know each other. That's the most beautiful thing we have."

While Marquez sat under the rat killer tree and talked, a little girl sat on a bucket nearby. She wore nothing but dirty panties as she sang quietly to herself while playing in the dust.

Many of the homes around her – more like huts or shacks – have mud-thatched roofs. Their yards, made of dirt and gravel more than grass, are fenced in with long pieces of weathered kindling and uneven, unfinished planks. Thin, muddy pigs wander the dusty roads, snorting up puffs of dirt in their search for food.

Honestly, I wonder about Marquez. Even though the man he was as a 41-year-old movie star has long since faded, he is still a handsome old man. I imagine that he could have done what Harry Belafonte or Sidney Poitier did: allow his good looks, charisma and passion to carry him away from this impoverished palenque and on to Hollywood stardom.

The same is true for his son, 25-year-old Enrique Marquez. Enrique has his father's good looks and charisma, and it has already taken him far. He is a drummer in a group called Sexteto Tabala ("war drum" in English), a reference to the ancient role of the drum in African communities.

Enrique, like his father, has traveled outside of San Basilio. In fact, he's even been to the United States to perform with Sexteto Tabala.

Neither of the Marquez men gave hints of foiled ambition during our brief conversations. Both seemed to be right where they wanted to be.

Perhaps this is because poverty, as we measure it in the West, is strictly about material wealth. But in San Basilio, wealth seems to be measured by legacy and history. By this standard, this means that everyone in the palenque is rich.

"They (the blacks of the palenques) don't have to be subjugated by anyone else's ideas," Dawson explained. "They understand who they are historically."

director Gillo Pontecorvo to select him over trained actors.

"There is an independence of spirit that comes out of those palenques," Dawson said. "And that's what he (Pontecorvo) saw."

Reportedly, Pontecorvo had been auditioning professional actors for the role of Dolores but was dissatisfied with what he was seeing. And then, in rode Marquez on a horse and Pontecorvo knew he had found his authentic Dolores.

"I worked on a farm and the director was looking for a certain kind of person and found me," Marquez said through a translator.

Finding Marquez was a boon for Pontecorvo, who won the David Di Donatello – the Italian Oscar – in 1970 for best director because of his work in "Burn."



Brando, Marquez and other members of the "Burn" cast