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## Colombiage... For the love of art, Colombia and our people

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*The director of this festival, Landa Acevedo-Scott, opens the doors to her personal and professional life for The Prisma and its readers, as she tells us about her experience as an immigrant and gives us the latest on the next festival events.*



**Ivan Gunchev**

Here I am with Landa in Brixton Market, a lively and multicultural place and an ideal setting for this interview. We sit down to a cup of coffee in a picturesque location, a meeting point for a mixture of various cultures. Reggae music is playing.

But who is Landa Acevedo-Scott?

She is a Colombian. Although she has spent more time in the United Kingdom than her native country she feels very Colombian.

She is passionate about culture and its impact and capacity to create and change attitudes and perceptions, to educate and enrich people.

She is passionate about people. She loves bringing people together and this is what drove her to organise [Colombiage](#).

But above all, she is a mother and a wife.

She has a daughter and is awaiting her first son. She is currently in the final stage of her pregnancy. I look in her eyes, very deep, dark eyes, and I can tell that she is happy, tired, but happy.

Her personal story begins in Colombia, where she lived the first twelve years of her life. She looks on those years as very important and formative to her and they influence her to this day. Afterwards she arrived in London with her family.

Here she studied at secondary and university level, including two one-year stays in France and Spain. Afterwards she began to travel, another one of her great passions.

Despite the fact that her family had only originally intended to stay a couple of years, it turned out that life had other plans for them. And that's how it all started.

### Looking back, how do you value your experience as an immigrant?

Very positively, London at that time was very open to the immigrant community, no matter where they came from. From the start I had many opportunities, the same opportunities as kids here had. Considering how young I was, I was very much thrown in the deep end. Luckily, I felt no hostility towards me or my origins. England treated me very nicely.

### Did the fact that you were very young help you then?

Of course, it's much easier for a child to adapt than for an adult. Factors such as language, for example, can affect an older person more than a teenager. For instance, within six months my English was already competent; it wasn't perfect and I went everywhere with my dictionary, but it wasn't a



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difficult obstacle to overcome. For my parents it was more difficult. This process of adaptation turned out to be a very enriching experience for me and very important in helping me grow and develop as a person.



#### **What do you think about multiculturalism in England, and especially in London?**

London is a very unique case. England is one thing and London another. The multicultural atmosphere fascinates me. When so many cultures meet, mix and intertwine, we should try to take as much out of this as possible, as well as to learn and enrich ourselves with new values and perceptions. I learnt more during the two years that I went travelling and got to know new people and traditions than at university.

#### **What do you think about the way in which the Latin American immigrant community has integrated into London life?**

From my point of view and in light of my experiences all these years, it's good but could be better. I think that the Mexicans and Brazilians have integrated best, the Colombians are getting there. And we'd like to believe that *Colombiage* has actively participated and is helping this process of adaptation and integration.

When I say that it could be better it's because I don't think that people who work in their restaurants, butcheries and other businesses have integrated very much culturally, for example. This is what *Colombiage* is working on and will continue to do so to improve and liven up the process.

#### **Your experience as an immigrant has been positive, but there have been some not-so-pleasant experiences, with stories of misery, suffering and social isolation...**

I think that the issue of immigration is wide and complex. The majority of foreigners come to seek a better life, new opportunities, others are in exile. There are also those who work extremely hard to be able to send money to their families. I know one person who works in Brixton Market who hasn't seen his loved ones in three or four years.

#### **So it's not always worth the trouble?**

What you gain in one area you lose in another. I think that sometimes personal sacrifice is simply not worth the trouble. Sadly there are many cases where striving for a better life leaves its scars and has irreversible consequences.



#### **What do you think about the reception and treatment of immigrants by some of British society?**

I believe there should be commitment from both sides. The Latin Americans that live here must do everything possible to integrate into British society, not just to be accepted, but also so that they feel valued for what they do.

It is often the case that immigrants prefer to isolate themselves within their community, forming isolated groups within society. This creates problems when it comes to integration and communication. There are people who have lived here for years and don't even speak English. There has to be an effort to improve relations at all levels- personal, professional, intercultural.

If this were to happen, I think that British people would open up more to foreigners and would value their customs and traditions much more.

#### **As the director of a cultural organisation, do you think that art, music and literature should show more commitment and get more involved in anti-deportation campaigns?**

I think that it is difficult for a cultural and independent organisation to get involved in political issues. What we do in *Colombiage* is lend a voice to people with talent and things to say. That's where debate and individual conscience searching can begin, with regards to what is happening in the

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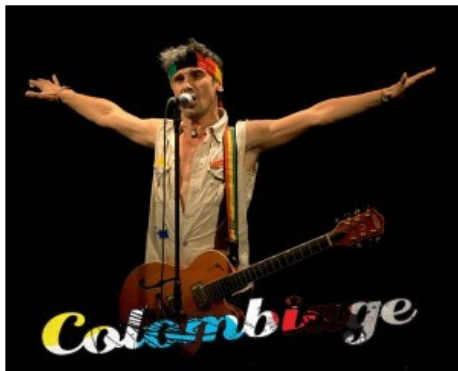
wider world. Our role rather is to open the door to this talent. Taking political sides is dangerous because it marks you and clouds your judgement.

### **What do you think about the Visa points system for artists that don't belong to the EU, brought into effect by the British government?**

The Visa issue has always been complicated for *Colombiage*. Luckily, we've had the support of the Colombian Embassy, who has helped us on various occasions on this issue. Legislation changes constantly and makes procedures very difficult.

Personally I'm always nervous about possible Visa refusal and what this could mean for our organisation and its artists. Although I don't know the concrete motives behind these measures, I suppose it's due to certain abuses that have occurred. In the end the just always pay for the sinners.

It really makes life really difficult for us and could mean the loss of money for some flight tickets that we had bought for an artist. That happened to us in 2008, with Bomba Estéreo, where we had to purchase new journeys due to problems and delays with the delivery of visas.



### **How did the idea for Colombiage come about?**

The idea came about when I was working at the Barbican Centre. Back then, my role was more commercial, but I tried to apply my business knowledge to the world of culture.

It was then that I got involved with a Brazilian project called *Tropicália*, based on the tropical musical movement in 60s Brazil, pioneered by Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso. It was one of the greatest and most spectacular festivals that have been staged in England. There was music, theatre, dance and discussions for three months.

### **In other words, Tropicália had a direct impact on Colombiage?**

Exactly, after participating in *Tropicália*, I decided to do something similar with Colombia. I wanted to reconnect with my roots, which I never positively abandoned, but through life circumstances I had become distanced from for a time.

I was also inspired by the fact that *Tropicália* meant a lot to Brazilians in terms of integrating here in England.



### **And why Colombiage?**

The name came out of joining the words Colombia and collage. I'm very much a fan of collages. I love to make them in my free time and I'm fascinated by the idea of mixing elements, forms and textures. That's what *Colombiage* does; it brings together music, literature and cinema, in a more or less ordered way, and it gives each person the opportunity to take from it what he or she likes and feels convenient. It's a collage of artistic disciplines, cultures and also of audiences.

### **How far is Colombiage going?**

Very far! The festival is changing and innovating all the time. On the one hand, we must get used to an economic environment that isn't very friendly to the world of art. On the other, we want to innovate and suggest new topics and alternatives to the people who follow us.

We've gone from being a day festival in 2007 to spreading our events over a couple of months in 2010. We are constantly testing to see which format can work and to satisfy the needs of our audience.

We've progressed along the road of having a more active presence throughout the year and not only once a year. The results are looking good- we have an audience for those events and it's good to give them alternatives and to avoid having everything at the same time and under the same roof.

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### Is it difficult to find sponsors and people who want to invest in culture?

Very difficult, unfortunately many excellent initiatives have failed to get off the ground due to lack of funds. The Arts Council is cutting budgets all the time and in the world of private business the first things that are reduced are budgets for marketing and sponsorships.

So we have to find increasingly creative ways of getting funding so that the quality doesn't suffer or so that we don't go out of business. Last year

Manu Chao helped us to set up a fund-raising concert and we collected enough to be able to stage the festival this year. I would like to take the opportunity here to thank him for believing in us and lending his whole support to our cause.

### And where does the revenue from the festival go?

This is a non-profit festival with no commercial aims. Our only objective is to open doors to artists and to Colombian talent. We are all volunteers. As is often said, we work for "the love of art" and for love of our country and our people.



### What is the next event organized by Colombiage?

This year's first event is a performance by Bomba Estéreo at the Barbican Blaze Festival next 29th of July. For this we have joined forces with "Como No" to make this performance possible.

We have planned one or two more events that are in the construction phase and they are definitely literature and visual arts related.

### Do you have a message of thanks for anyone in particular?

In general, I'd like to thank my team- those eager, inspired and determined volunteers- who make [Colombiage's](#) existence possible. I would also like to thank Laura and Daniel in particular for their help, as they are leaving us soon. In recent years they have contributed a lot to the festival and I hope that they enjoy the journey they have planned and wish them the best of luck with their future plans. Finally I also want to thank the artists that have worked with us as well as our faithful audience, without whom none of this would be possible.

*(Translate by Jose Stovell – Email: [jose\\_stovell@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:jose_stovell@hotmail.co.uk))*

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