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Dwarf bullfighters big in Mexico

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It was a little after midnight, long past the bedtime of the children in the stands, but the crowd in Acapulco, Mexico, sat transfixed as the Original Bullfighting Dwarfs of Mexico faced their first animal of the night.

Matador Ignacio Zaragoza raised his wooden sword at a fighting calf that was nearly as tall as he was. It pawed the ground, Zaragoza flicked his cape, and the beast rocketed toward him.

"Ole!" shouted the crowd, as Zaragoza spun away, knelt on his short legs, and snapped the cape again. "Ole! Ole!"

It's a spectacle repeated on weekends across Mexico, as troupes of dwarf bullfighters thrill audiences at fairs, patron-saint festivals and nightclubs. Some of them tour the United States, where they bring a dose of nostalgia to Mexican migrants from Oregon to Florida.

Although some activists worry that they propagate stereotypes, the troupes — known as cuadrillas — provide steady jobs in a country where employment discrimination is rampant and people with disabilities have trouble getting work.

"We've become part of Mexican culture," said Antonio Garcia, one of the Original Bullfighting Dwarfs. "You can't deny the attraction of a dwarf fighting bulls."

The tradition started in the 1970s, when a Spanish promoter first toured Mexico with a troupe of dwarf bullfighters, said Livia Corona, a New York-based photographer who has documented Mexico's dwarf bullfighters for eight years. Her book about them, "Enanitos Toreros," comes out in December.

There are now 10 to 20 bullfighting troupes employing about 200 little people nationwide, said Rigoberto Madrigal, president of the Little People of Mexico, a support group for people with dwarfism.

The Original Bullfighting Dwarfs of Mexico, despite its name, was founded 13 years ago.

"But our act is the most original, you see," manager Eduardo Ferandel said.

Competition among groups is intense, so many cuadrillas have added other attractions to their shows. The Bullfighting Dwarfs of Torreon jump through burning hoops on all-terrain vehicles. The Bullfighting Dwarfs of Guadalajara pride themselves on singing and impersonations.

But the heart of each show is a bullfight, usually using calves from the same fierce strain used in full-size bullfights. Unlike real bullfights, the animals are not harmed.

"It's the show of a lifetime! A unique experience! The Original Bullfighting Dwarfs of Mexico, here in Acapulco!" a barker blared through a speaker outside the Toro de Guerrero nightclub on a recent Saturday night.

Behind the nightclub, Ferandel bustled around a makeshift bullring, settling last-minute details with the singers and rodeo riders who were to be the opening acts for the cuadrilla.

The kids hung over the railing, gawking at the seven toreros in their bright bullfighting suits.

Dwarf bullfighters said they tread a fine line between being laughed at for their height and respected for their skill.

"When we run around, our movements are just naturally humorous," said Gustavo Vazquez, manager of the cuadrilla Giants of the Bullring. "But we also put on a quality variety show, and the bullfighting is real. The goal is for the audience to see past the fact that we're little people."

In the United States, dwarf shows have gone the way of the circus freak show. But political correctness is still an unfamiliar concept in Mexico.

Here, negrito (blackie) and flaco (skinny) are terms of endearment, and the country's best-loved comic-book character is a big-lipped caricature named Memin Pinguin.

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