

GUARDIAN

Perils of *Paulina*

The "nonfiction feature film" — after 10 years of skeptical funders, changing technology, and clueless distributors — makes its national debut. **By Jim Mendiola**

IN 1988 VICKI FUNARI clicked on a Nagra audio tape recorder and began an interview with a middle-aged Mexican woman named Paulina Cruz Suarez. Over the years, the tape recorder gave way to a Hi-8 home video camera, then to a 16mm film camera, and finally to a full-fledged movie crew working deep in the jungles of Suarez's home state of Veracruz, Mexico.

A decade after that first interview, Funari and Suarez — along with collaborator Jennifer Maytorena Taylor — premiered *Paulina*, a feature-length documentary on Suarez's life, at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. And while one part of the story is the all-too-familiar grind of independent filmmaking — no money, funders not "getting it" — on a deeper level the film embodies issues of gender representation, in front of and behind the camera, and provides a critique of the very nature of documentary filmmaking, as well as a potential model for grassroots film distribution.

Already an audience and critical favorite on the international film festival circuit, *Paulina* is set to make its national theatrical debut

this week in San Francisco. The two Bay Area-based filmmakers have been busy with a year's worth of festival screenings in addition to Sundance — including a world premiere at the 1997 Havana International Film Festival, a sold-out show at the Castro during the San Francisco International Film Festival, and a packed, primarily Mexican American opening-night crowd at the San Antonio CineFestival, the nation's oldest and most prestigious Latino film festival. Enthusiastic reactions from audiences as diverse as those in Park City and San Anto's Westside speak to the film's appeal.

"Even Sundance snow bunnies were coming up to Paulina after the screenings," Taylor recounts, "thank-

ing her in their broken Spanish for the film."

Going home

In a complex and thematically motivated mix of film and Hi-8 video footage, the self-described "nonfiction feature film" follows the adult Suarez on a return visit to her home village. After a conventional vérité doc-style arrival — in which Suarez often talks directly to the camera — the film twists the formal approach further by combining straightforward doc-style interviews with expressive reenactments of her traumatic childhood. Friends, family, and Suarez herself tell the story of a horrible childhood accident and the chain of events that ensued. We learn how she was ostracized by the village, and of her parents' eventual complicity in allowing the town's *cacique* (boss) to take the then teenage Suarez — in exchange for some land — into a brutal life of indentured servitude and rape. A *Rashomon* structure emerges, as Suarez's family and friends conveniently forget their particular roles in the events of 30 years ago.

"The narrative flashback scenes look different on purpose," Taylor says,



Looking askance: Mathyslene Heredia Castillo plays young Paulina in a feature film that challenges the conventions of documentary.

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions



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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Looking back: The altered production of Paulina's flashback sequences, with Mariám Manzano Durán as the title role's child incarnation, encourages viewers to challenge notions of truth.

"They were produced in a different way, to underscore the fact that they are constructions by the filmmakers, who want the audience to challenge themselves when they watch the supposedly 'truthful' documentary."

Paulina is definitely not a here-are-the-facts, noble farmworkers kind of film, and though the filmmakers' experimental approach to the documentary storytelling contributes to a layered, rich understanding of Suarez's life, they were not always received with great enthusiasm during the all-too-necessary fundraising process.

"It was scary to funders who were used to giving money to more traditional documentaries," Taylor says. "The fact that we pushed the envelope stylistically and formally meant that people weren't so sure we could pull it off—especially since we were both first-time feature filmmakers."

And if structural transgressions against safe Ken Burns-PBS territory weren't enough to scare away foundation money, the film is all in Spanish, examines the life of a 55-year-old Mexican maid who has very little relationship to U.S. culture, and tells a story that does not always present good guys on one side and bad on the other.

"People in the foundation world would ask questions about the story's

relevance," Taylor says. "And while we feel that the film is incredibly relevant to anybody, that was—and continues to be—an educational campaign that needs to be made."

Undercutting convention

Paulina is not only a complex exploration of a particular woman's place in an oftentimes oppressive culture but also a dynamic subversion of the conventions of documentary film itself. The fundamental imbalance of power between the filmmakers and their subject—a potentially contentious paradigm most documentarians and their movies choose to ignore—becomes a self-aware, self-critical, and ultimately acknowledged force. This approach leads to a more fully realized, sensitive interpretation—an empowering strategy that's all the more important when you take into account, as the filmmakers did, the legacy of privileged North American filmmakers documenting the lives of third-world subjects.

"We were trying very hard to not make a movie about Paulina, but with her," Funari says. "I wanted Paulina, in one sense, to be in charge of the story, so that it wouldn't be me or Jennifer deciding what Paulina could and couldn't say, but where she would actually be a powerful voice in the film. From the

beginning, the point was to have a respectful process."

While the difference in backgrounds added a layer of complexity to the relationship between the three women, they shared a perspective that brought out feminist issues. *Paulina* joins the small yet growing body of work developed by groundbreaking Chicana filmmakers that challenges the patriarchal canon defining the bulk of Chicano/Latino films.

"One of the most important considerations for me at the beginning of the project was looking at mainstream films and the images of Latinas that show up in them," Funari says. "There's nothing out there that I recognized. Maids, like Paulina, are always in the background—props for the 'main' characters, usually white people."

Battle of the box office

Paulina has valuable lessons for filmmakers cut off from the mainstream, in terms of accessible production strategies. The filmmakers joke that in the decade-long filmmaking process and in the accumulation of materials throughout—the Hi-8 video footage, the logs, and the digitized 16mm film—you can see the transition in the media from analog to digital. Tape-to-film projects such as *The*

Cruise and *The Celebration* have become the norm not only on the festival circuit, but also with successful theatrical releases, and the ramifications for artists "traditionally outside the American indie discourse—mainly women and so-called minorities—are enormous.

The next hurdle is getting their films in front of an audience. Culturally specific films like *Paulina* that have a built-in appeal to the largely ignored U.S. Latino market have the added, unique opportunity to expand to general and art house audiences.

Makers of these and other kinds of "marginalized" films know that the filmmaking process doesn't end on the festival circuit. They understand the need for hands-on involvement—even when a distributor picks up the film. Funari and Taylor, because they know the audience they've targeted, have been instrumental in developing marketing strategies along with *Paulina's* distributor, the San Francisco-based company Turbulent Arts.

"We're lucky to be working with a distributor that understands the value of grassroots outreach and shares the same passion that Vicki and I have," Taylor says.

Along with conventional art-house distribution strategies, they're making special efforts to contact grassroots

Bay Area social service groups that deal with Latina and immigrant issues. As the film is distributed to other cities across the nation, they'll launch similar strategies.

U.S. Latinos comprise a disproportionately large percentage of the mainstream moviegoing public—a well-known, frustrating fact for Latinos who deal with such things. The trick for makers of Latino films, so far, has been convincing enough Latinos to buy tickets for brown movies while still appealing to that all-important, primarily white, general audience. It's a delicate negotiation of resources and content designed to avoid the *Selena* phenomenon—millions of Latinos saw the movie, but millions more Anglos stayed away.

The nuances of the U.S. Latino audience are complicated (and are a mystery to most film marketing "experts"). Demographics vary widely from Spanish-speaking, newly arrived immigrants to third- and fourth-generation Chicanos. And then there are differences in region, class, skin color, age, religion, education, musical tastes, and what country's flag they fly during soccer matches (or whether they'd rather watch the NBA).

No one expects a feature-length documentary like *Paulina* to approach the box office numbers of a glitzy narrative backed by a large Hollywood studio. Still, the marketing lessons that will be learned in the documentary's national release—after the San Francisco run, openings are planned in New York and Los Angeles—will be a model for brown films to come.

"We want to say to people in every community the film travels to that despite the fact that films by and about people of color are censored, squashed, or underfunded, *Paulina* is out and has made it," Taylor says. "The audience's very presence in the theater sends a message to other theater owners, and to skeptical film companies, and to reluctant funders that our community cares about these kinds of images, and that we are, ultimately, a discriminating film audience."

Funari adds: "While [*Paulina*] is on some level a story about a woman being victimized because of her gender, on another level it's a more complicated story. It's about an individual who devised a means of survival and made it through some difficult times and who took a very sophisticated approach to how she was going to live. It's a story that crosses gender and becomes universal. And both men and women in the audiences so far have responded the same way. People take strength from her strength quite apart from the gender politics of the story." ■

"*Paulina*" screens Fri/12-Tues/19, Lumiere, S.F. See Rep Clock, in Film listings, for times.

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Paulina