

Maquilopolis

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(Docu -- U.S.- Mexico)

An Independent Television Service (U.S.) production, in collaboration with Grupo Factor X, Colectivo Chilpancingo, Women's Rights Advocates (Mexico). Produced by Vicky Funari, Sergio De La Torre. Executive producer, Vivian Kleiman. Co-producers, Darcy McKinnon, Annelise Wunderlich. Directed by Vicky Funari, Sergio De La Torre.

By JAY WEISSBERG

Making explicit the slogan "knowledge equals power," "Maquilapolis" is the rare activist docudocu that really does empower the individual women at the heart of its story. Helmers Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre provided a six-week video workshop to the factory workers on the Mexico-U.S. border, lent them cameras and gave them free rein in presenting their lives. Results dispense with the kind of pitying formula of many labor-centered docus, instead presenting intelligent women awakening to their rights and doing something about it. Fests of all stripes should take note.

Maquiladoras are the multi-national factories in Tijuana and other border points, where slightly better than average wages lure tens of thousands of women workers into becoming anonymous, and expendable, cogs in the globalization machine. Though Mexican labor laws are geared toward the workforce, the country casts a laissez-faire eye on corporations like Sony and Panasonic.

The result has been a judicial outrage and an environmental disaster. Workers' rights are ignored, and the amount of toxic waste spewed into the surrounding area leaves residents with a litany of chronic health problems.

A group of women banded together to act as "promotoras," educating themselves about their rights and ensuring that their colleagues have access to the kinds of information most corporations want to suppress.

"Maquilapolis" focuses on two women in particular, Carmen Duran and Lourdes Lujan. A single mother of three kids living in a spit-and-glue home created out of discarded U.S. garage doors, Carmen became an activist when Sanyo relocated to Asia and refused to pay severance wages.

Lourdes lives alongside a toxic stream which turns into a raging torrent of chemicals and sewage when the factories release their waste following each rain. Unwilling to sit idly by, she co-founded a community group to fight for environmental justice.

Though other docus have focused on the maquiladoras, none have made the workers interactive players in their own presentation, as the helmers do here. By making the women themselves an integral part of the filmmaking process, Funari ("Live Nude Girls Unite!") and De La Torre enable them to successfully tackle challenges many would consider hopeless. Refusing pity, these women exhibit a determination and faith in the future that can only be described as uplifting.

Helmets plan on making the project a continuing collaboration with the factory workers, who received donated cameras to keep a visible documentation of both their lives and their struggles. Sound is fine but mixed video quality will best be viewed on small screens.

Camera (color, DV/16mm-to-DV), Daniel Gorrell, Sophia Constantinou; editor, Funari; music, Pauline Oliveros, Bostich and Fussible of the Nortec Collective, John Blue; sound, Phil Perkins; associate producers, Sasha Khokha, Avilla Peterson. Reviewed at Rotterdam Film Festival (Time & Tide), Jan. 30, 2006. Running time: 68 MIN. (Spanish dialogue)