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ERICA DE LA CRUZ IN PAULINA

twice told tale

As a child in Mexico, Paulina was abandoned by her family and traded for land. Years later, she returns with filmmakers Vicky Funari and Jennifer Taylor to uncover the secrets of her past. Holly Willis reports on the resulting film, *Paulina*.

Combining handheld Hi-8 documentary footage with lushly composed 16mm narrative sequences, *Paulina*, Vicky Funari's first feature, breaks all the rules of marketability and yet is entirely captivating. "It's a hard sell because it's a documentary," she says, explaining the difficulty first of getting funders, and now of getting a distributor. "But it's not just a documentary — it's a narrative documentary, which is hard to explain to people without it sounding like it's some hokey docudrama. It's also about a Mexican maid, which means that for a lot of traditional funders interested in funding docs on social issues, *Paulina* presents a problem because it seems to be so personal; it's about just one woman. And it's in Spanish."

As a "docudrama," *Paulina* takes the best attributes of both forms — whether it's the verité of certain key emotional sequences or the beautifully composed images that comprise the narrative scenes — and combines them to the film's advantage.

In the film, Paulina recalls her childhood in Mexico where, as an eight-year-old, she slips, falls and injures

herself. For some strange reason, her mother claims that the girl has been raped, and Paulina is summarily ostracized from both her family and the community. She is eventually traded by her father to the town boss, and things get increasingly worse for the young girl.

But this is just Paulina's version (and only the beginning of her longer life story). Funari and collaborator/producer Jennifer Taylor follow Paulina back to the hometown she left behind many years ago to find out why she was treated so abominably. The stories they find vary, and we watch Paulina attempt to come to terms with who she is relative to her own recollection of her childhood and others' interpretations of it.

Funari's interest in this story was personal — Paulina worked as a maid for Funari's family when she was a young girl. After finishing film school in 1985, Funari reestablished contact with Paulina, and it was then that further parts of her dramatic childhood were revealed. "I knew that there was more to her story, and I also knew I wanted to make a film about her," says Funari. "But I knew I was too new as a filmmaker

to tackle something like this, and we decided to stay in touch."

Funari eventually began shooting interviews with Paulina on video. Initially intended as research material only, the emotionally intense footage eventually ended up in the final project. After working alone on the project for several years, Funari decided she needed help and approached Jennifer Taylor to come on board as a producer. "The idea of presenting Paulina as a person who's been identified and defined by other people was already in place, and I found that fascinating — my own work is a lot about hybrid identities and how hard that is," explains Taylor.

The pair next began the long process of raising money for the more expensive 16mm production side of the project. "Our approach was very orthodox," explains Funari. "We applied for grants. We also tried to get private donors, but neither one of us was very good at that. So it was initially mostly grants. And the deeper you get into something, the harder it is to turn back, so then we started using credit cards. Basically every-

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-thing we had went into the film."

Taylor goes on to explain that the pair gradually began to refine their process, finally garnering a coproduction grant from Banff [a festival and co-production mart] in Canada. "Once Banff decided to help, it was an astonishingly quick and painless process. And based on the coproduction grant, we could go back and tell potential donors that the film's completion was guaranteed. Banff gave us an institutional stamp of approval."

Paulina joined the filmmakers at Banff, helping smooth out the rough spots. "We stress that the film is by all three of us," says Taylor "and I think after the Banff experience, Paulina gained a sense of ownership. She would walk around with this notebook, writing and thinking about what she wanted to say in the voice-over. She also got a card that said she was an artist, and I think that gave her sense of legitimacy."

Both filmmakers hoped that the very long and painful process for Paulina would end up being somehow beneficial to her. "The nature of what happened to her totally affected her sense of identity and who she is," says Funari. "It was always my hope that the process would be for her a positive one." She adds, "When she's happy with the process, she tells me it's therapy. When she's unhappy, she tells me to go to hell!" ▼

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions