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 Mayores 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, and 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 FilmFestival, the nation’s oldest and most prestigious Latino film festival. Enthusiastic reactions from audiences as diverse as those in Park City and San Antonio’s Westside speak to the film’s appeal.

“Every Sundance snow bunny was coming up to Paulina after the screenings,” Taylor recounts, “thanking her in their broken Spanish for the film.”

Going home

In a complex and thematically moti-
vated 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 format approach further by combining straightforward doc-style inter-
views with expressive reenactments of her traumatic childhood. Friends, family, and Suarez herself tell the story of a horrific 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 paste. A Raschbonom 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.
"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-and-there-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 ill-timed fundraising process. "It was scary to funders who were used to giving money to more conventional documentaries," Taylor says. "The fact that we pushed the envelope stylistically and formally meant that people weren't sure if we would pull it off—especially since we were both first-time feature filmmakers."

And if structural intransgressions against safe Ken Burns–PBS territory weren't enough to scare away funding 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."

Undertcutting 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 paradox 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 documentarians documenting the lives of third-world subjects. "We were trying very hard to not make a movie about Paulina, but with her," Fumari says. "I wanted Paulina, in one sense, to be in charge of the story, so that it wouldn't be one of 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 slow yet growing body of work developed by groundbreaking Chicana filmmakers that challenges the patriarchal cannon defining the bulk of Chicano/a 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," Fumari says. "There's nothing out there that I recognized. Maldos, 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—Hi-8 video footage, the logs, and the digitized 16mm film—you can see the transition in the media from analog to digital. Tape or 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. Fumari 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 Latino 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 has been finding convincing enough Latinos to buy tickets for brown movies while still appealing to that all-important, primarily white, general audience. It's a delicate balance of commercialism and content designed to avoid the Selenas phenomenon—millions of Latinos saw the movie, but millions more Anglos stayed away.

The numbers of the U.S. Latino audience are compounded and are a mystery to most film marketing "experts." Demographics vary wildly 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 taste, 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 glossy 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, defunded, and marginalized we made it," Taylor says. "The audience's very presence in the theater sends a message to everybody else, flowers, and to skeptical film companies, and to reduce funding that our community cares about these kinds of images, and that we are, ultimately, a discriminating film audience."Fumari 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 observed a movie of survival and made it through some difficult times and who then tried to pick up the pieces of 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."

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A non-fiction feature film from CineMamá Productions

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