

GUARDIAN

The selling of women: 'Sacrifice' and 'Paulina'

WHEN THE NATIONAL film media descended on the Sundance Film Festival this winter, the resulting coverage was as predictable as ever in its obsession with discovering the latest twentysomething guy with Hollywood potential. To attract similar attention, documentaries had to busy themselves chronicling the already famous (Courtney Love, Woody Allen). As a result, the press missed this year's real news: Examinations of sexual abuse and exploitation, expressed as never before, across a range of inventive and moving documentaries. Fortunately, two of the best were made by Bay Area filmmakers and can be seen now at the festival.

Sacrifice by Ellen Bruno and *Paulina*, directed by Vicki Funari and produced by Jennifer Maytorena-Taylor, both detail the lives of women living in the Third World whose very existences have been determined by sexual exploitation. They are both complicated stories that get beneath tabloid headlines and organizing statistics to capture, with great visual invention, the subjectivity and dignity and damaged nobility of a Mexican survivor in one case, and a group of Burmese victims whose survival (in Thai brothels) remains in doubt in the other.

So why no attention at Sundance, where the one sexual-exploitation doc to grab attention focused on Hollywood-made soft-core product and the women who make them? Hate to say it, but I guess the sexual marketing of women with brown skin just doesn't inspire the same empathy as damage to Valley girls. Further, these are complex tales that mark multiple targets: most of the women have been sold by their mothers and fathers or tricked by family friends or pounced upon by village power brokers.

What *Paulina* and *Sacrifice* offer is a view of the terrible odds faced by women born into poverty in parts of the world (the Burmese hills, a Mexican village) where the only commodity available for sale are the bodies of the family daughters. The young women in *Sacrifice*, really girls in most cases, have a philosophy about their terrible entrapment in prostitution: they have to help their parents, and this is the lot of a female birth. The mature protagonist of *Paulina*, a Mexican maid (who once worked for Funari's family), has a different attitude: she fought against her fate and escaped the odds, yet she's still scarred by her childhood trauma.

These films, by devising subjective camera work and voice-overs to capture the perspectives these women can bring to their own experience, do something even more important than dispatching with the middleman of objective reportage: they reveal the lives of these women to be the stuff of fairy tales, a poignant series of narratives in which magic goes bad and the ogre, the witch, the ogre, and the monster win the day. It's a chilling view of sexual expropriation and family betrayal, and one we have never seen before.

B. Ruby Rich

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions

