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Paulina

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VICKI FUNARI

PAULINA

BY PATRICIA THOMSON

WHO SAYS THE ME DECADE ISN'T ALIVE AND well in the nineties? That's certainly the case looking at the documentary field, where first-person films now rule. Some might say with an iron fist.

Vicky Funari ran up against this when she screened *Paulina* as a work-in-progress to some fellow filmmakers. Although her film is about someone else—a Mexican woman named Paulina Cruz Suárez and her devastating childhood experience—their first response was “Make it personal. Put yourself in.” The reason was the San Francisco-based filmmaker’s relationship to Paulina, who served as a maid to the Funari family when the filmmaker was a child, the daughter of a diplomat who resigned over Vietnam and went to work for the Ford Foundation in Mexico.

And so Funari tried, with a variety of intellectual justifications, to include herself. “Since the film is so much constructed around perspectives,” Funari explains, “it was important that the audience know the filmmaker’s perspective is North American, and her voice was the voice of someone who had been a child in a family that Paulina worked for. And that could not help but influence Paulina’s behaviour towards the filmmaker, and the filmmaker’s conception of Paulina.”

But the story was Paulina’s, plain and sim-

ple. It’s about a spill she took as a young girl, falling on the edge of a metal washtub and cutting her genitals. It’s about the parents’ immediate assumption that she was raped by the town boss and the ostracism this uncomprehending eight-year-old faced as a “bad” woman, her parents willingly handing her over to the boss to be his sexual toy. It’s about her escape to Mexico City, her psychic scars, and her slow healing. And it wasn’t until Funari removed herself as a character that the film felt right. “I was like a splinter that the film was trying to work out of itself,” she admits. “It finally pushed me out at the end, and the film was done.”

What remains is a harrowing and heroic story told through a variety of means. There’s Paulina’s first-person narration, shot in classic talking-head style. There’s her trip back to the village, where she confronts her parents. There are verité scenes with Paulina’s daughter, a professional nurse one generation removed from the cycle of poverty and abuse. And woven



< Taylor, Funari (r), & Paulina. Below: a dramatized scene from the hybrid doc *Paulina*

throughout the narrative are dramatic reenactments of Paulina’s accident, captivity, and escape. These fictionalized scenes make *Paulina* something other than a by-the-book documentary.

This dramatic strand was something Funari had in mind from the beginning. “The very first example of why that mattered to me,” she recalls, “was when Paulina kept telling me how she was perceived in the town because of being white. I had never thought of her as a white person; I’d always thought of her as a mixed-blood Mexican . . . Since we left Mexico, I had idealized Paulina’s indigenous characteristics. When I met her again, and she talked about how she was white and how the color of her skin had actually caused her problems, that was

the first germ of thinking this film needs to address those issues, because those issues have completely determined the shape of her, of what people have done to her.”

Funari placed people’s conflicting perceptions of Paulina front and center in one memorable dramatized scene, in which Paulina as a young adult boards a bus to return to her village to confront the town boss. When a man gropes her, she bites his hand and a furor erupts. We then see a series of shots of Paulina as others on the bus see her: as a mad woman, a superwoman, a harlot, an Aztec goddess, sacrificial heart in hand.

While such fictionalized scenes add resonance to the film’s thematic concerns, this hybrid approach didn’t sit well with funders used to purer documentary. Particularly for social-issue foundations, “ours was a stretch,” Funari admits. Nonetheless, during the 10-year filmmaking process she and producer/collaborator Jennifer Maytorena Taylor managed to obtain grants from the Pacific Pioneer Fund, the Threshold Foundation, the U.S.-Mexico Fund for Culture, the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund, and the National Latino Communications Center, among others, plus in-kind support from KQED. But “the first funders were my parents,” says Funari. “They lent me the money to buy a Hi8 camera in 1991, and they also lent me some money to go to Mexico to do the first video shoot.” No less important was the final funder: the Banff Centre for the Arts, which came aboard as coproducer. “They provided us with lodging, technicians, an Avid, our on-line, our ProTools suite for sound cutting and sound mix, and a wonderful sound cutter. Basically, without them, we’d be sitting on our butts in San Francisco.”

Instead, Funari, Taylor, and Paulina have been travelling the festival circuit for the past year. The experience has been particularly cathartic for Paulina, who has met numerous other women with stories of abuse. “When we started this, I wanted to send everything to hell. Everytime Vicky called me, my stomach got upset,” she says. Now “they’re like my fairy godmothers. Someone sent them to me, and I’m thankful. They took all the shit out of me that I was carrying around inside. *Verdad. Gracias.*”

Paulina is being distributed by Turbulent Arts, 673 Oak St. #1, San Francisco, CA 94117; (415) 552-1952; fax: (415) 552-3620; turbarts@sirius.com

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