'Paulina's' Pain and Passion

By Peter Stack
Chronicle Staff Critic

ough edges and dreamlike sequences add to the turbulent passions in "Paulina," a compelling feature about a Mexico City domestic worker's bitter past that mixes re-enactments and documentary footage.

"Paulina," 10 years in the making by San Francisco director Vicky Funari and her co-producer Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, opens today at the Lumiere (in Spanish with English subtitles). It's an unusual film whose emotional energy is sustained by a verite style interwoven with flashbacks.

The true story of Paulina Cruz Suarez, a maid who appears as herself in the film — younger actresses portray her as a girl and a teenager — grabs from the start.

At age 8, living in poverty in Vera cruz, Mexico, Paulina is a playful child until she slips near a well and cuts her private parts. Bewildered and in pain, the bleeding girl is carried home, where her parents claim she was raped by a bullying cacique, or town boss. The charge ruins Paulina's reputation and her childhood — she's ostracized from church, school and village and called a prostitute.

Exploiting the situation, the boss claims Paulina as his future wife and in exchange gives her parents rights to a piece of land. As a teenager, Paulina is in fact raped and abused by the boss, a married man with mistresses. This only further lowers her station in the community. Finally, at age 15, she escapes by bus to Mexico City, where for many years she works as a maid.

The film's structure is odd, but as it intercuts between the young Paulina in re-enactments and the adult, real-life Paulina (who also narrates), it creates a jumbled hyper-realism that is both fascinating and painful.

The adult Paulina returns to Vera cruz to confront her parents and the boss about their part in her terrifying youth. Demanding answers, she's a woman of such resolve that her quest for the truth grows into a powerful force. But the answers, as in Kurosawa's "Rashomon," aren't necessarily what one wants to hear.

"Paulina" addresses the sometimes chilling ways in which poverty affects women born into poverty. But while she clearly bears the scars of her stolen childhood, Paulina isn't one to generalize or preach. That adds a convincing tone to the film.

"Paulina" was shot at last year's San Francisco International Film Festival, where it won the grand jury prize for feature documentary.

Filmmaker Funari met her subject when she was a child growing up in Mexico and Paulina worked in her family's home.

MOVIE REVIEW

PAULINA: Drama. Starring Paulina Cruz Suarez, Maria Manzano Duran, Enika Isabell de la Cruz Ramirez and Mathyrielle Henriquez Castillo. Directed by Vicky Funari. (Not rated. 88 minutes. In Spanish with English subtitles. At the Lumiere.)

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Paulina
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By Vicky Funari & Jennifer Maytorena Taylor

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