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'Paulina's' Pain and Passion

Abused girl's story is fascinating, true

By Peter Stack
CHRONICLE STAFF CRITIC

Rough 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 Veracruz, 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

MOVIE REVIEW



PAULINA: Drama. Starring Paulina Cruz Suarez, Mariam Manzano Duran, Erika Isabel de la Cruz Ramirez and Mathyselene Heredia Castillo. Directed by Vicky Funari. (Not rated. 88 minutes. In Spanish with English subtitles. At the Lumiere.)

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 jagged hyper-realism that is both fascinating and painful.

The adult Paulina returns to Veracruz to confront her parents and the boss about their part in her terri-

fying 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 powerlessness 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 shown 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.

LUMIERE & P California/Polk. 352-0810. **Another Day in Paradise** Wed-Thurs, 2:10, 4:30, 7, 9:20. **Hurlyburly** Wed-Thurs, 2:15, 4:50, 7:20, 9:55. **All the Rage** 2:20, 4:45, 7:10, 9:30; Fri-Tues, 2:30, 4:45, 7:15, 9:40 (also Fri-Mon, 12:10). **Paulina** Fri-Tues, 2:15, 4:30, 7:10, 9:30 (Fri-Mon, noon). **Still Crazy** Fri-Tues, 2:10, 4:20, 7, 9:35 (also Fri-Mon, 11:50a).

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