

## Cinema

### The Mexican Public Rediscovered its Own Cinema

The success of Paul Leduc's film *Frida*, which opened earlier this year, gave rise to something no Mexican film had produced in a long time: now both movie buffs and average movie-goers are once again attentive to national cinema.

*Frida's* impact was reinforced by *Luz's Motives*, directed by Felipe Cazals, which opened around the same time and was also highly polemical. Feminists charged the film was misogynist, opportunistic and sensationalist. The movie is based on the real-life story of Elvira Luz Cruz, a poverty-stricken woman sentenced a few months ago to ten years in prison for having killed her four children in a fit of despair because of her economic situation. *Luz's Motives* was awarded the Silver Conch at the Saint Sebastian Festival in 1985.

Thus, Mexican interest in locally-produced films is at a new high. We are currently awaiting two new openings, following others that are in the editing stage and expecting shooting to begin on another film shortly.

We are all awaiting the opening

of *How Does it Look?*, Leduc's latest film. Marginal youth in Mexico City constitute the movie's theme: punk gangs, tenant farmers who have migrated from the countryside, transvestites, prostitutes, and under-employed young people. Additionally, some of the most important figures in Mexican rock are woven into the plot, such as the TRI and its mythological leader Alejandro Lora, singer and song-writer Rockdrigo González (who died in last September's earthquake, shortly after the shooting of the film was completed), composer Jaime López and singer Cecilia Toussaint.

The same team who wrote the script for *Frida*, Leduc and José Joaquín Blanco, wrote the script for *How Does it Look?*, although this time they were aided by the renowned Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis. The actors include Blanca Guerra and Ana Ofelia Murguía, as well as members of the theatre group "Vámonos recio" and the dance group "Barro rojo."

Arturo Ripstein's *The Wheel of Fortune* is the other awaited film debut. This is a re-make of *The Golden Rooster*, based on a script especially written by Juan Rulfo, the famous Mex-

ican writer who died a few months ago. Interest in the film is great despite the fact that previous attempts to translate Rulfo's world and characters into film have failed (*Pedro Páramo*, played by John Gavin, is one example.)

Another film about to be completed is the documentary *Ulama: The Ball Game*, directed by Roberto Rochín. Arturo de la Rosa is director of photography, and the script is by Tomás



Fons in *The Bricklayers*.



Felipe Cazal's *The Three of Clubs*.



Pérez Turrent and José Manuel Pintado. This 100 minute-long documentary goes back to the origins of the pre-columbian ball game, a Mesoamerican ritual-cum-sport that is still practiced by a small group in north-western Mexico. Shooting for this film began nearly four years ago, so it is clearly not another by-product of the World Soccer Cup (held recently in Mexico.)

Shooting has also begun on Felipe Cazal's new film, *The Three of Clubs*, set at the end of the 18th century among former guerrillas who fought alongside Benito Juárez, the Mexican president who saved the country from the French intervention. Angel Goded is doing the photography (*Frida* and *Luz*, and the script is by Jorge and Xavier Robles. The film stars Humberto Zurita, Pedro Armendáriz Jr., Alejandro Camacho, Gabriela Roel and José Carlos Ruiz. Interest in this new Cazals film isn't just because of the polemics unleashed over *Luz's Motives*. Felipe Cazals is responsible for many of the more memorable Latin American films, among them *Canoa Remembrance of a Shameful Event*, *The Poquianchis*, and *The Apando*.

An important factor in most of these films is that they have been or are being produced by independent film companies. This is the case of Mejika, producers of *Ulama*, and of Casablanca, producer of *The Three of Clubs*. In the past, Casablanca co-produced two long documentaries by Paul Leduc, one with Canada, *Mezquital*, *Notes on a Case of Ethnocide*, and another with El Salvador: *The Forbidden Stories of Tom Thumb*. A formula proposed for independent film-making years ago, the co-op, was adopted for Leduc's film *How Does it Look?* The cooperative is formed by artists and technicians who participate in the production. The most recent experience of this sort was for José Luis García Agraz's film *Nocaut*, and even *Frida* started out as a cooperative project.

Additionally, there are new possibilities for producing directly for television. In 1985 the Mexican Television Institute, IMEVISION, co-produced a TV series called *Early Morning Stories*, directed by Cazals and yet to be aired. Chimalistac is a company originally founded by independent film-makers, which got its start in the in-

dustry with *Luz's Motives*. And Chimalistac and IMEVISION are preparing a new series based on the great Mexican muralist and controversial political figure, Diego Rivera. José Agustín and Jorge Fons will write the script.

Jorge Fons is one of the most representative Mexican film-makers to have emerged during the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), when the film industry received considerable government backing. He directed *The Bricklayers* in 1976, based on a novel and play by Vicente Leñero, winning the Berlin Film Festival's Silver Bear Award. With the change in the presidency (José López Portillo, 1976-1982), Fons was no longer given the opportunity to work in the industry. Like many of his generation, he was forced to work in advertising in order to survive. But he was not silenced. Since he couldn't film fiction, in 1979 he shot *This is Viet Nam*, and between 1982 and 1986 he worked on a long documentary on India and Indira Gandhi which is currently in the process of being assembled, both with the backing of Cinematográfica Insurgente.

This is a group of film-makers



A shot from the *Bricklayers*, 1977 winner of the Silver Bear Award in Berlin.

## odds and ends

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who have managed to keep independent film-making alive despite the erroneous policies followed in the industry since the mid-seventies, despite the voracity of the producers of "churros" (a term used to denote bad-quality films), who have cornered film distribution and showings, and despite the economic crisis. These people have accumulated both dignity and strength and have attracted young and not so young—producers, they have supported and guided new directors fresh out of school, and they are slowly pushing open the gates to the industry.

The National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM, is about to start a project to make low-cost movies with few characters, based on the problems of life in Mexico City. Three directors are apparently slated to get the project off the ground: Jorge Fons, Felipe Cazals and Paul Leduc.

Leduc has been the firmest bastion for independent 16mm film in Mexico. He refused to enter the established industry even during President Echeverría's government (he must have had his reasons for this). But the same stubbornness that reduced him to marginality and was misunderstood even by many of his own generation, finally payed off with *Frida*. With this film, Leduc proved a point held by independent filmmakers for years: that fine, international quality films are possible on a low budget, dispensing with the headaches caused by the mediocrity, the ostracism and the condescensions the national film industry has fallen into. This, of course, requires a lot of talent and implies having access to the necessary equipment.

Felipe Cazals also broke into independent 16mm films in Echeverría's time, when he made *Canoa* and other films which brought him international recognition. Afterwards, Cazals had to work in advertising and direct commercial films under the orders of others. Yet he somehow managed to continue directing, both within and outside the industry, finding new producers. Both *Luz* and *The Three of Clubs* are proof of this.

Jorge Fons has been one of those most thoroughly thrashed by prevailing film policies, but he has not given in. He has

resorted to documentaries or silence, even, rather than film a "churro."

The films we have reviewed here will either have been completed or will be showing within the next few months, and the UNAM project will be underway. However paradoxical it may seem in the midst of the current economic crisis, Mexican films, as an art form and as a form of Mexican expression, seem to be in the process of taking firm steps down a newly found path.★

Manuel Sorto