

Putting Yourself On the Line with the Camera

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As the source of 90 percent of the films shown in Mexican movie houses, Hollywood has a practically captive audience in a country that in the 1950s could boast of seeing itself reflected on the big screen with its own movies.

Just as the rest of the world's domestic film production has suffered from insufficient funds to compete with U.S. films, and with movie audiences who are very often reluctant to explore national productions, Mexico demands—and quite rightly so—quality cinema that it can be proud of.

Because of this, and above all because of their enormous passion for film, the Mexican directors Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Luis Mandoki and Gabriel Retes are today at the forefront of the art of motion pictures in Mexico. They have even transcended their borders and made their stories universal.

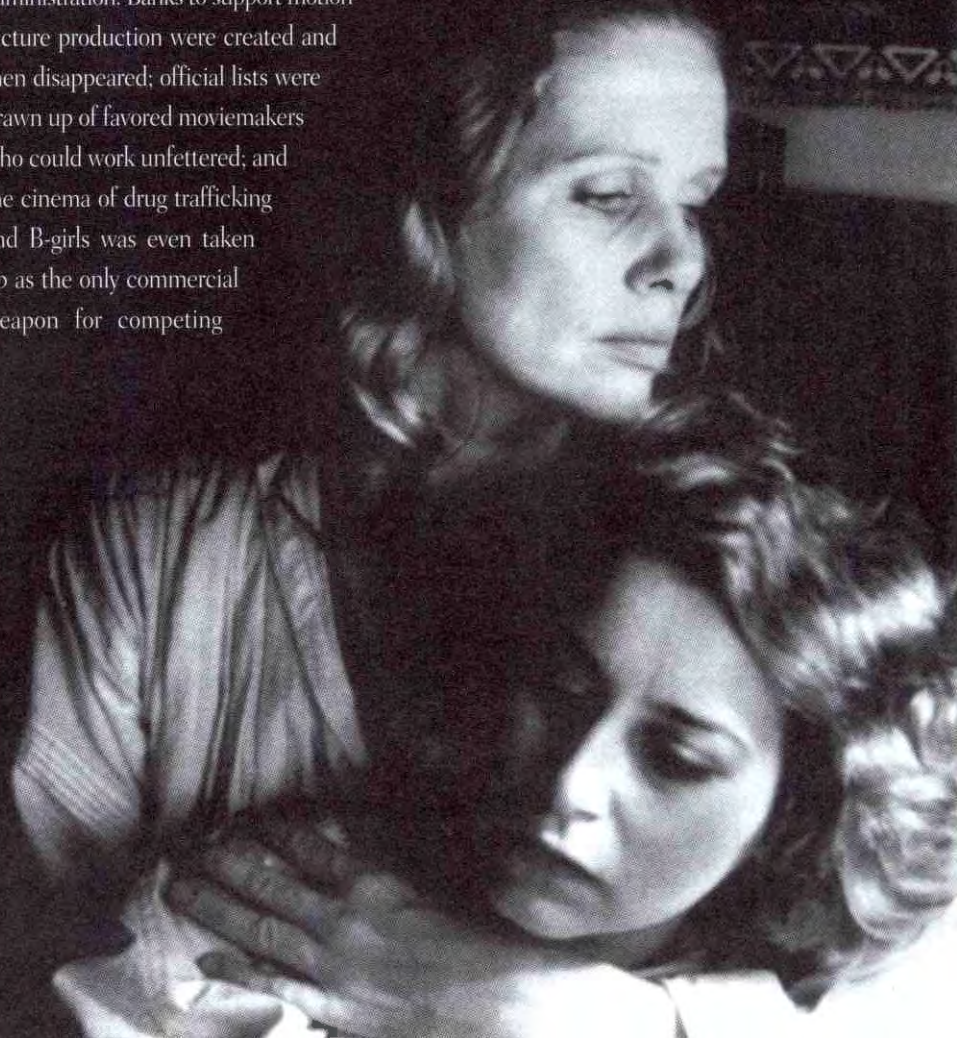
Only with Your Partner (1991), Cuarón's comedy of errors; Del Toro's vampire horror film *Cronos* (1993); Mandoki's urban thriller *Motel* (1983); and the family drama *The Package* (1991) by Retes are part of a conscious effort to return to the genres of the golden age of Mexican cinema.

For a long time, moviemaking was subjected to the zigzags of each presidential administration. Banks to support motion picture production were created and then disappeared; official lists were drawn up of favored moviemakers who could work unfettered; and the cinema of drug trafficking and B-girls was even taken up as the only commercial weapon for competing

Mexican directors Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Luis Mandoki and Gabriel Retes are at the forefront of the art of motion pictures in Mexico.

* Film critic.

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with Hollywood and reaching a broader audience in Mexico. There were those, however, who thought things could be different.

THE REBEL

An ideological survivor of the 1970s, Gabriel Retes sees in the cinema the possibility of rebelling against the system. Even today, his films reflect dissatisfaction with things as they are, at the same time that they show the minute care taken to transmit the message in a clear, entertaining way to the audience.

To finance his work, 30 years ago Retes and a group of moviemakers created the Río Mixcoac Cooperative, which became a living example that Mexican

"I don't think there was sufficient awareness for the 5 percent of box office take to be put back into production, but I'm pleased that the Chamber of Deputies unanimously approved that 10 percent of all films projected in the country's movie houses must be Mexican," he said early this year when a new attempt at reviving the domestic motion picture industry made some gains in terms of showings.²

Son of actors Lucila Balzaretti and Ignacio Retes, Gabriel grew up in an environment where theatrical ability is one of the most valued traits, particularly as a means to bring to the fore the different ways society throws the human spirit into crisis.

In the early 1970s, Retes took a super-8 camera and began making movies that

divorced from their subordinates' concerns and dreams.

A year later, he would create a polemic with *A New World*, that presents the idea that the appearances of Our Lady of Guadalupe were a fabrication of the Spanish conquistadors to control the Mexican population. But it would be in 1991 that Retes' style showed signs of having reached maturity, with the film *The Package*, of interest both to general audiences and intellectuals. Editorialists



When a Man Loves a Woman by Luis Mandoki (1993).

Spielberg bought the story rights to Rete's *The Package* to adapt it to make a film about a Vietnam vet who wakes up after decades in a coma.

directors do not need the government to make movies. "Moviemakers cannot wait for a paternalistic government, but we can expect more solid support from the state," explains the 52-year-old director.¹

In keeping with that thinking, Retes participates in as many round table discussions and fora as possible to talk about how to make more and better movies. He also supported the New Law of Motion Pictures that proposed earmarking 5 percent of every movie ticket to a film production fund.

helped him discover his voice. In 1975 he debuted in the industry with *Chin Chin the Drunk*, in which he developed one of his favorite themes: the clash between generations. In the Tepito³ neighborhood, kids from the generation born in the 1960s fight with their parents, born in the 1940s.

His 1977 *Paper Flowers* narrates the kidnapping of an industrialist by his employees. Here, Retes was trying to create awareness of what happens to workers when company executives' lives are



Cronos by Guillermo del Toro (1993).

dedicated their columns to the journalist Lauro (played by Retes himself), who after the violent June 1971 government-student clashes goes into a coma and wakes up 20 years later to find himself in a very different Mexico, far from the ideals he had pursued.

Steven Spielberg bought the story rights to *The Package* from Retes with the idea of adapting it to make a film about a Vietnam veteran who wakes up during the Gulf War after two decades in a coma.



Only with Your Partner by Alfonso Cuarón.



In 1994, Retes premiered his tragicomedy *Bienvenido-Welcome*, about a couple (played by Luis Felipe Tovar and Lourdes Elizarrarás) who get AIDS because the husband has a fling, at the Toronto Film Festival. Here, as in other of his films, Retes acts, writes and directs.

Retes always tries to include social criticism in his work. His most recent film, *The Sweet Smell of Death* (1999), a denunciation of this kind, deals with the conflicts in a town in the state of San Luis Potosí after a young girl is killed during the night and people speculate on who murdered her.

"It's a modern tragedy in which at some point I make a break and give myself the luxury as a moviemaker of putting forward many, many concerns about my country's problems with its

THE FIRST ONE TO DARE

In 1983, when movies about B-girls and drug traffickers were commonplace and experimental film was far from being accepted by mass audiences, Luis Mandoki premiered his movie *Motel*.

Motel is a thriller of dark passions involving two lovers who decide to murder the woman's husband. The two clash over where to put the body and how to get away with it, bringing out both characters' personalities as their weaknesses emerge.

Given the crisis of the industry, Mandoki has said that if he had stayed in Mexico, he would not have been able to continue making films at the rate that his maturation as a director required. His solution, naturally, was to emigrate.

A specialist in dramas dealing with conflicts in men-women relationships, Mandoki directed Cuban actor Andy Garcia and Meg Ryan in *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1993).

twisted human situations," says Retes. "I wanted to get close to an unknown Mexico —rural and savage— because with the crisis that Mexican motion pictures have been through in recent years, it was way too expensive to shoot in the countryside."⁴

Retes' next project, *The Two Corners of the Circle*, will focus on trafficking in children in Mexico and try to bring out the family tragedy that results when the lives and freedom of children are threatened.

"I never thought I would come to Hollywood. It didn't interest me. But circumstances decided differently....At that time I had to make *Gaby: A True Story* (1987) in English, because it was the only way I could get funding. People began to see it in the U.S. and like it, so much so that actresses Liv Ullmann and Rachel Levin were nominated for the Golden Globe and the Oscar.

"So I said to myself, 'They're opening the doors for you. Don't leave.' Later came the chance to do my first Hollywood

movie, *White Palace* (1991). I realized that if they were using me it was because I had something other people didn't. So I stayed."⁵

As a specialist in dramas dealing with conflicts in men-women relationships, Mandoki later directed Cuban actor Andy García and Meg Ryan in *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1993), in which Ryan plays an alcoholic.

For a long time, Mandoki was a standard for many Mexican moviemakers, who saw in him proof that it was possible to be somewhere where the work was well paid and had international projection. Ironically, for a Mexican, access to mass audiences in his own country continues to be easier with a movie made abroad, in this case in the United States, than with a movie made at home.

"In Mexico, there is no movie industry, no system, no continuity. Sometimes working is the whim of a particular administration. Everything depends on

an independent financing council. Very few have the ability of an Arturo Ripstein (*Divine*, 1998) or a Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (*The Homework*) to hook up with people in Europe to make their movies.

"I'm delighted that my career is an incentive to other Mexicans because we are a people who need the stimulation of recognition, and it doesn't seem out of the ordinary to me. To me it's just a job, a job I love, but in the end just a job.

"Here in Hollywood they don't care where you come from; just that you have talent and are dedicated to your work," says Mandoki.⁶

The Little Princess (1995) made Alfonso Cuarón the most sought after director of the moment.

In 1999, Mandoki became a lifeline for Kevin Costner, star of *Dance with Wolves*. Costner had had a series of box office upsets with his *Water World* (1995) and *The Postman* (1997). Luis says it is the first time an actor had called to offer him a movie; Costner thought Mandoki's intimate style would make him look good on the screen with the plot of *Message in a Bottle*, where he shared billing with Paul Newman and Robin Wright-Penn.

"Mandoki was the one who opened up the field for Mexican directors in Hollywood, and my movie *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) opened the door for people like Cuarón, Del Toro and myself," says director Alfonso Arau.⁷

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Alfonso Cuarón began with the most difficult genre, comedy, and the most complicated topic, AIDS, and the final product, the film *Only with Your Partner*, put his name up in lights in Mexico and abroad.

Though *Only with Your Partner* never showed in the United States because of the U.S. public's reticence to use the tragedy of AIDS as a pretext for fun, the film was Cuarón's letter of introduction because it shows his ability to create interesting characters and tell their stories visually. An editorialist of the show business daily *Variety* said of the film, "Everybody wants the director, but nobody wants the movie."⁸

Cuarón was ready to run in the big Hollywood race. He did not see this as an end in itself; he saw it as a means to access bigger budgets and audiences and the possibility of making his career.

Cuarón soon received kudos from the industry when his direction of an episode



Bienvenido-Welcome by Ignacio Retes (1994).

of the cable TV series *Fallen Angels* won him the ACE award for best director.

"During filming I was very nervous: I had Alan Rickman, Laura Dern and Diane Lane on the set. But they came to me and asked me to relax: they had chosen to work on this low-paying television project simply because they liked my way of telling stories," explains Cuarón proudly in a restaurant in New York, his new home.⁹

His first full length feature, *The Little Princess* (1995), based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel, which got great reviews, made him the most sought after director of the moment.

Newsweek film critic David Ansen said it was good to see Mexican movie makers like Alfonso Cuarón, who put his own stamp on *The Little Princess* even though he made it in the United States. His film was two votes away from beating Mike Figgis' *Leaving Las Vegas* for best picture by Los Angeles critics, which is why he predicted a good future for him in this industry.

Despite its not doing so well at the box office because of what Cuarón said was Warner Brothers' not knowing how to promote it, the film was nominated for two Oscars: one for best production design, a nomination that went to Bob Welch, and the other for best photography, to Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki.

Classmates at the University Film Studies Center of Mexico (CUEC), Lubezki and Cuarón have created a visual narrative style based on back lighting, green tones and warm lighting to accompany their characters.

They gelled their visual style with the premier of their next project, *Great Expectations* (1998), starring Ethan Hawke,

Gwyneth Paltrow and Robert de Niro. The film's box office take came in second as the new version of *Titanic* (1997) was still monopolizing first place in the U.S.

"*Great Expectations*, based on Charles Dickens' novel, is a movie with lots of different levels....It's a story about destiny and a study of class differences dealing with human behavior when this kind of difference comes to the fore," says Cuarón, who explains that he is interested in making more personal films that do not need a big budget and whose characters say things that engage him.¹⁰

"Guillermo del Toro is a brilliant star in the firmament of horror," said director David Cronenberg (*The Fly*).

A HORROR STORY

One midnight in 1993, Guillermo del Toro found himself impatient, nervous and just a little drunk, walking down the streets of New York, waiting for *The New York Times* to come out with the review of his movie *Cronos*, his ticket to Hollywood.

What Del Toro read as his destiny changed before his eyes called him "the new blood" of horror films.

Ecstatic, Del Toro ran back to the hotel where his family was staying and announced that there was a future for his moviemaking career in the same country where his teachers—and now friends— Stan Winston (*Jurassic Park*) and James Cameron (*Terminator*) honed their craft.

An obsession with comic books and monsters marked the artist that Del Toro would become before the horror movie magazine, *Fangoria*, and the music pub-



The Little Princess by Alfonso Cuarón (1995).

lication, *Rolling Stone*, put the Guadalajara-born director on the map as one of the genre's new talents. When he founded his own make-up company, Necrofilia, to create the characters for the Mexican television series *The Appointed Hour* (on which his friend Alfonso Cuarón also worked), Del Toro trained in the art of the horrific and spent six years of his life writing the script of *Cronos*.

Cronos is the story of a mature man (played by Federico Luppi) who discovers a strange mechanism in an artifact that pricks his hand and sucks his blood, and thanks to this, the old man is rejuvenated.

Del Toro's first surprise was that *Cronos* won 9 Ariels (the Mexican equivalent of the Oscar), including best picture. His second surprise was participating in the Cannes Film Festival and winning the Critics International Grand Prize.

"The film was finished using my credit card, and just when I was making the last expenditures, they rejected the card because it was maxed out. But I didn't care because we had finished it," he said at the time. "I was also about to lose my house because we bet everything we had on that production. But it was worth it because people received it enthusiastically all over the world."¹¹

Producers offered him *Alien IV*, the long awaited sequel of the *Alien* trilogy, and the thriller *Seven*, but Del Toro turned them down. He preferred to tell a story that said more to him. That decision was the beginning of *Mimic* (with Mira Sorvino and F. Murray Abraham), a horror film set in the New York subway, where mutant cockroaches kill people left and right.

"In *Mimic* I say that humans are dysfunctional animals, with almost no sense

of community and only a few survival traits. The monsters in the movie are not terrifying because they're bad or perverted, but because they're trying to survive."¹²

Another director, a passionate devotee of the horror genre and characters who make it possible to make analogies with human nature, David Cronenberg (*The Fly*), said, "Del Toro is a brilliant star in the firmament of horror."

At 34, this October Del Toro will begin filming *The Devil's Backbone*, co-produced by well known Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar, at the same time that his project *The Count of Montecristo*, backed by Francis Ford Coppola, goes into pre-production.

"Supporting new directors is a commitment I have made since I got into this very difficult business. I prefer helping people who have already done something and, well, that's not easy because even though I already filmed a movie in Hollywood, I realize I'm in the same boat I was in when this dream began, because getting financial backing is one of the most problematic things about the job," says Del Toro.¹³

THE LONG, WINDING PATH

"It's a lie that we Mexicans are gaining ground in Hollywood. These people—most of whom are my friends—have had to fight a lot," says Roberto Sneider, the director of the film *Two Murders*. "In Mexico, the audience is not big enough for our movies. That's why some of us see in Hollywood the possibility of doing stories with bigger budgets, but movies that would interest both Mexicans and Americans."¹⁴

After hearing the stories of these four directors, clearly, whether in Hollywood or in Mexico, the cinema continues to require the courage and passion of its artists. And while California requires scripts like Retes' and offers directors like Cuarón, Del Toro and Mandoki opportunities to work in the movies, they and those who come after them will take advantage of these opportunities, making it very clear that maintaining their own vision and personality is the most important thing. ■■■

NOTES

¹ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 8 May 1999.

² *Reforma* (Mexico City), 13 February 1999.

³ Tepito, one of Mexico City's most populated neighborhoods, is considered unsafe if you do not live there. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 15 March 1999.

⁵ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 19 March 1999.

⁶ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 22 March 1999.

⁷ Interview with the author.

⁸ Notimex News Agency (Mexico City), October 1995.

⁹ Interview with the author.

¹⁰ *El Norte* (Monterrey), 3 November 1997.

¹¹ *El Norte* (Monterrey), 10 September 1997.

¹² *El Norte* (Monterrey), 10 September 1997.

¹³ *El Norte* (Monterrey), 6 November 1997.

¹⁴ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 4 November 1997.