



# The C. New Mexican Cinema

Four Directors Put Their Vision of the Country on Camera

*Mario Pacheco Székely\**

Mexico is a country worth looking at from different angles. You need the imagination of the artists of the movie camera, observers, witnesses and narrators of the marvelous complexity of the imagination that comes from living under an Aztec sky.

Directors Carlos Bolado, Fernando Sariñana, Antonio Serrano and Alejandro Springall are artists of the big screen who go out hunting for the many existing Mexicos: in the countryside, the mountains, byways and grottos, in the streets and even in skyscrapers.

Audiences have welcomed the premiers of these film makers' movies with smiles.

How could they not be pleased when a film becomes a mirror; the stories are their own, a reflection of the feelings of a people rich in characters and customs, and at the same time tremendously universal.

I will say a little something about these four visions and how each sees in the cinema a vehicle for their Mexican stories.

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\* Film critic.

Fernando Sariñana. Director of the polemical film *All Power*.

A SIMPLE BUT PROFOUND TRIP  
WITH CARLOS BOLADO

*The goal of the hero's trip down to the jewel point is to find those levels in the psyche that open, open, open, and finally open to the mystery of your self.*

*That's the journey.*

Joseph Campbell<sup>1</sup>

For 35-year-old director Carlos Bolado, born in Veracruz, traveling means knowing when to stop and listen to your soul, delve inward to try to cover your defects and heal the evils caused by your stumbling through life.

This is what he shows us in *Under California: The Edge of Time* a film that has gotten rave reviews from Mexican critics and international viewing audiences alike. In France, for example, it has won prizes and festivals, like the Golden Unicorn for the best full-length feature at the Amiens International Film Festival.

The movie is the story of Damián, a man who hits a pregnant woman on a California highway and then decides to cross the border to take refuge in the desert of Baja California, Mexico, in an area called San Francisco de las Cruces.

Damián hears that there is a cave covered with prehistoric paintings whose red brush strokes testify to the fact that ancient people felt the need, just like he does, of seeking a new direction in their lives.

"Bolado's movie is wonderfully acted by Damián Alcázar (*Two Murders*) and Jesús Ochoa (*No Return Address*), both of whom won Ariels<sup>2</sup> for their efforts. It is a real lesson in simplicity, subtlety and sensitivity seldom achieved by our cine-



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*Under California: The Edge of Time* won several awards at the October 1999 Ariel ceremonies, including Best Picture and Best First Film.



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*All Power* cost two million dollars to make.

matography," said critic Rafael Aviña, after its screening at the Fourteenth Guadalajara Film Festival in 1999.<sup>3</sup> Aviña had already described it as one of the biggest stretches attempted by the Mexican film industry in the last 30 years.<sup>4</sup>

"Before being a film maker, I am a traveler. I have traveled almost the whole world over and there's some of that in *Under California: The Edge of Time*. The character Damián Alcázar—more or less my alter ego—[is] a traveler who comes to Baja California searching for himself," says Bolado to explain why he picked a story outside the usual commercial paradigm.<sup>5</sup> His experience as editor of the successful Mexican film *Like Water for Cho-*

*colate*, and of *A Bride Who Might See You, Married Life* and *Unto Death* made Bolado a passionate lover of supple, meaningful visual language, which is reflected in *Under California*, a film full of still-to-be-discovered treasures.

FERNANDO SARIÑANA  
WITH AN URBAN LOOK

*The police get money outta you/  
but they live on what you give them/  
and if they treat you like a criminal/  
it's not your fault/  
thank Mexico City's mayor...*

Molotov<sup>6</sup>

Setting up his camera in the streets of Tijuana and Mexico City has been an absolute need for Fernando Sariñana. He wants to deal with today's issues, those that concern him, which makes his cinema a rich, up-to-date, modern experience.

"My new movie, *All Power* is to a certain extent a denunciation, but without being just verbiage or didactic. It simply tries to show with no tricks the corruption of the police, public officials and even ourselves," says Sariñana. His film premiered in January 2000.<sup>7</sup>

After a success at the 1994 Toronto Film Festival of his first film, *Unto Death*, that portrays the lives of two young rebels, Sariñana's comedy *All Power* illustrates police corruption and how one of their victims (Demián Bichir) urges a group of people to take justice into their own hands.

Sariñana underlines his intention of making his film a collective experience by interviewing his actors who tell stories about real robberies that show the police in a less than favorable light.

His way of dealing with this issue that worries 20 million Mexico City residents as well as people from other unsafe cities throughout Mexico ensures Sariñana a positive audience reaction from a public anxious for catharses. And what is better than movies for that?

#### ANTONIO SERRANO PSYCHOANALYZING MEXICAN COUPLES

*I don't deny it. I'm a fanatic of the orgasm, that little explosion that holds the meaning of everything.*

**Ana (a character in the play and film *Sex, Shame and Tears*)<sup>8</sup>**



*Under California: The Edge of Time* shared Best Picture with *Little Saints* at the 1999 Los Angeles Latino Film Festival.

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Serrano's *Sex, Shame and Tears* became Mexico's biggest box-office hit of all time.

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Antonio Serrano is another film maker interested in being up to date and speaking intimately to his audience about always-attractive topics like love relationships, infidelity and what it takes to make a relationship work in an overpopulated city. His first movie, *Sex, Shame and Tears* (1999) passed the test of audience acceptance when it raked in the biggest box-office revenues in Mexican history. More than five million people saw it between its premier in May and when it left the big screen in November 1999.

The story, written and directed by Serrano for the theater in the early 1990s, where also had a successful run, is about two middle class, thirty-something cou-

ples and their friends. The war of the sexes breaks out when infidelity is uncovered: the men take refuge in one apartment and the women in another. They spy on each other through the windows as each group thinks out loud about the obstacles to finding love.

"*Sex, Shame and Tears* is the comedy of errors of six characters who by cheating on each other and fooling themselves emotionally and sexually end up knowing and forgiving themselves," says Serrano.<sup>9</sup> The director's main concern was making comedy a narrative vehicle for getting the audience to think about how they view the crisis of modern couples, trapped in the noise of the cities



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*Little Saints* won the Best Latin American Picture Award at the Sundance Film Festival.

and the war between women's liberation and machismo. But, far from being just another movie about personal relationships, Serrano's film will be visual testimony to the concerns and ways of understanding love of Mexico's Generation X, for the most part ignored in domestic films, but who, curiously enough, are the ones filling movie theaters today.

#### THE CELESTIAL VISION OF ALEJANDRO SPRINGALL

*Little Saints is a compassionate work about a woman who struggles against her own faith and emerges victorious.*

John Sayles<sup>10</sup>

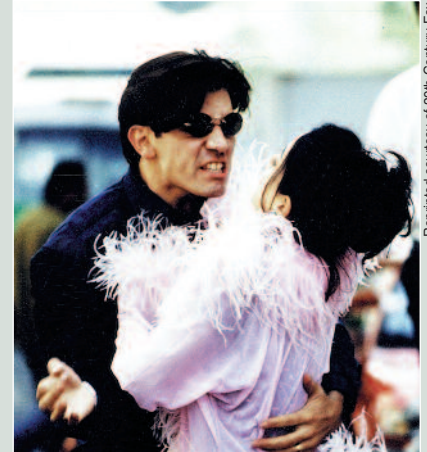
Faith is without a doubt still important for Mexicans, and María Amparo Escandón's novel, *Santitos* (Little Saints) (1997), and the movie of the same name directed by Alejandro Springall, depict a country where God's little ambassadors rush in whenever they are asked to help anyone with a problem.

One day, the patron saint of desperate cases, San Judas Tadeo, appears to the main

character, Esperanza (which in Spanish means "hope") (Dolores Heredia), in her oven, and tells her that her dead daughter is really alive, and she must go out in the world to find her.

In a kind of a road movie, Springall takes Esperanza from Veracruz to Tijuana, where she follows the supposed clues about her daughter's whereabouts. On the way, Esperanza is forced into prostitution and into crossing the Rio Grande as a "wetback," all the time with an innocence of spirit and the firm intention of carrying out the mission God has given her.

*Santitos* is so faithful to the Mexican spirit that when it was given the Best Picture award at the Third Los Angeles Latino Film Festival, the emcee, actor Edward James Olmos, said, "This movie is being honored for having understood the values and intentions of our destiny as a people, identifying with all its values, and because its plot and characters fully realize the Latino experience."<sup>11</sup> Springall uses humor to make Esperanza's trip a mythical experience; she runs into archetypal characters who symbolize government, Church and business intervention into the lives of ordinary Mexicans.



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*Sex, Shame and Tears*, a testimony to how Mexico's generation X understands love.

The work of these four film makers gives us a look at Mexico's different faces. Through them, film certainly is ratified as a medium that goes beyond entertainment and invites the whole audience—just out of curiosity or because they want to understand the country—to look through the window that Bolado, Sariñana, Serrano and Springall have opened for us. ■■■

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Joseph Campbell, *A Joseph Campbell Companion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 23.
- <sup>2</sup> The Ariel is Mexico's equivalent of the Oscars.
- <sup>3</sup> *Reforma* (Mexico City), 3 October 1999.
- <sup>4</sup> *Reforma* (Mexico City), 16 November 1998.
- <sup>5</sup> *Reforma* (Mexico City), 28 August 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> Fragment of the song *Gimme the Power* by Mexican rock group Molotov.
- <sup>7</sup> *Reforma* (Mexico City), 23 April 1999.
- <sup>8</sup> Antonio Serrano, *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Mexico City: Ediciones el Milagro, 1993), p. 83.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with the author, Mexico City, March 1998.
- <sup>10</sup> Dust cover of the book by María Amparo Escandón, *Santitos* (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 1997).
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with the author, Los Angeles, October 1999.