

FILM-US: Latino Festival Celebrates Its Quinceañera

Rebecca Romani*

SAN DIEGO, California, Mar 20 (IPS) - Smack on the U.S.-Mexico border, the city of San Diego is also in the centre of one of the hottest debates in U.S. culture -- immigration and the "browning" of California. According to the most recent census, Latinos, people who list their origins as being from Latin America or Mexico, now make up 35.9 percent of the population.

That number hovers closer to 15 percent for the entire U.S.

In a region where immigration sweeps reach into communities far beyond the border and local Latinos often express concern about racial profiling, it is little wonder then that many Latinos flock to the San Diego Latino Film Festival, hungry for images that go beyond police raids, undocumented migrants working in the fields and domestic help.

The box office did a particularly brisk business this year, due in part, according to festival director Ethan Van Thillo, to the fact that the festival is celebrating a milestone -- one familiar to many Latinos -- the Quinceañera, the party given when a girl turns quince, or 15.

Featuring narratives, documentaries, and shorts from as far away as Spain and Peru, and as close as San Diego itself, this year's Mar. 6-16 festival offered over 110 films to choose from.

The festival honoured acclaimed Brazilian director Hector Babenco ("Kiss of the Spider Woman") and showcased Argentine cinema as the country to watch. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the end of Argentina's "dirty war", in which the military junta "disappeared" at least 30,000 of their own people. Excellent Chilean films such as "El Clavel Negro" (Swedish co-production) and "Fiesta Patria" also showed how the political turmoil wasn't contained within borders - other countries have had their own versions of dirty politics.

Latino interest in the festival has not escaped the notice of major corporations. State Farm, Bank of America, Southwest Airlines and Macy's were major sponsors. State Farm's opening commercial was particularly aimed at the Latino market, with analogies to soccer, featuring young players discussing insurance benefits.

The words "giving back to the community" were echoed by various sponsors at one of the gala events.

Chon Noriega, a University of California at Los Angeles professor and director of the UCLA Chicano Research Centre, is not surprised. In an e-mail interview with IPS, Noriega said, "These corporations get it in a way that the electorate does not: the population is increasingly Latino and, hence, Latinos are the future of the state's workforce, consumers, and tax base. Therefore, it is in their best interest to maintain a good relationship with the Latino community."

The current film festival is, Van Thillo told IPS, a far cry from its scrappy modest beginnings. "It started as a student-based, Chicano, Latino and Native-American film festival," said Van Thillo. "We had no money and showed mostly student made films."

Mario Torero, an internationally renowned muralist, remembers the beginnings well. "It was this little tiny thing being run out of the Centro Cultural de la Raza (a non-profit, Latino-centred art space in Balboa Park)," he told IPS at the festival. "And, it has grown from one screen to the size it is today."

The festival has since inspired similar events in the region, such as the San Diego Asian Film Festival and the Jewish Film Festival.

"This festival is well-positioned to become an important hub in the Latino-American film explosion," actress and director

Kamala Lopez told IPS. "It builds community and shows young people that there is a way to tell our stories and to speak for our culture in a way that is not heavy-handed."

While the growth of the festival has not been easy -- support money is not always forthcoming, sponsors have pulled out, prints get temporarily lost, performers have defaulted to higher paying gigs -- it continues to attract regulars and newcomers alike.

Maribel Siman-Delucca, who has been attending the festival for over 10 years, has noticed a gradual increase in interest on the part of non-Latinos. "Over time, the community has been more supportive. There is more cross-community participation."

According to Van Thillo, the audience is 80 percent Latino with growing non-Latino viewers. One of the hallmarks of the festival is its interest in diversity, according to Van Thillo, The festival roster has recently expanded to include programmes called CineGay, Cine Mujer, Cortos Españoles (Spanish Shorts), and feature length animation.

For veteran Mexican film director Arturo Ripstein and his wife and writing partner Paz Garciadiego, who premiered their new film "El Carnaval de Sodoma" (The Carnival of Sodom), about the last days of a brothel, the festival has a special appeal. "It's a warm festival, a very human festival with a very appreciative audience," Ripstein told IPS after his screening.

Two young friends named Ana and Rebecca would surely agree. "If we choose one in Spanish, I can translate," laughed Ana as they stood in the lobby of the theatre pondering what to see. "But let's go see something in Portuguese, that way we'll both have to read the subtitles."

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