

## **Maria Full of Grace**

You mention the South American country of Colombia these days and the standard American vision is of a dangerous, drug-ridden, violence-prone place with cartel kings and narco-terrorists ruling the roost. This happens to be a slightly dated picture, with the cartels broken up, the terrorists isolated, and a new Colombian president who is challenging both. Still, beyond its trends in political and policial matters, the country remains a major feeder of America's drug habit. *Maria Full of Grace*, though written and directed by American Joshua Marston, is a thoroughly Colombian film, but what it offers is a fascinating, if unsettling, look at what makes the drug war proceed at the micro-level.

*Maria Full of Grace* ("Maria, Llena de Gracia") shows the making of a "mula" (mule), a (typically poor) person hired by drug-runners to engorge packets of drugs to hide them from customs agents and get them into markets in the States. Teenager Maria (Catalina Sandino Moreno) hardly stands out in her small town outside the capital Bogota. She lives with her grandmother and her snippy sister with no adult male in sight. Her boyfriend is benign but ambitionless and has gotten her pregnant. She works, grudgingly, at a cut flower factory but wants a better life. A tiff at work gets her fired and she looks to escape from her narrow circumstances.

A semi-cool guy, Franklin (Jhon Alex Toro) with a motorbike offers the promise of escape, and he gets her to the big city and introduces her to a man who can hire her for some serious money as a *mula*, with a trip to the States through in. The work, which entails swallowing dozens—yes, dozens--of thumb-sized plastic pellets full of heroin, is shown in graphic detail. Talk about gag me with a spoon! This is almost as rough on the viewer as it is on Maria.

She survives that ordeal and gets on a plane with three other women, including her whiny friend Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega) from her home town, only to confront another ordeal when she is taken in as a suspect by U.S. customs officials in New York. She ekes through that trial only to find yet another: eliminating the drug pellets at a sleazy New Jersey motel accompanied by some real toughs. The death of another mule colleague Lucy (Guilied Lopez) leads Maria to try to get out of this brutal business and leads also to her being taken in by the dead girl's family living in Brooklyn. Can she escape the vicious circle? The film's answer is as open-ended as Maria's possibilities in Gringolandia...

This is Marston's first feature film. He is a native Californian with a political science degree from the University of Chicago and a film degree from N.Y.U. A resourceful man, he found he could not film in a politically troubled Colombia, so he shot his South American scenes in neighboring Ecuador. He has thoroughly embraced his subject and delivered us a memorable young woman and her world.

What makes this film special is its clear-eyed realism and unflinching focus on the personal story. The intricate--and messy--background of Colombia's real political turmoil doesn't come to the fore in the film; instead, we concentrate on what happens to this one Maria and how her struggle could happen to thousands like her. She stands in as the prototype of how the drug war grinds on, but she remains a fully-rounded character, not simply an exemplar. Further, the figures who surround Maria on her journey are never obviously facile caricatures. Her drug contact is an avuncular, soft-

spoken fellow, her fellow *mulas* are desperate, yet sympathetic creatures, the customs agents who grill her are human beings just doing their job. All very real and convincing. And the person who runs a NYC shelter for wayward *latina* girls is in actuality Orlando Tobon, a guy who has long run a NYC shelter for young *Latinas*!!

At the film's core is young Catalina Sandino Moreno. She was studying publicity at the University of Bogota when she was cast out of 800 candidates for the role. It was a good call because, in her first role in motion pictures (during which she is almost never off the screen) her performance--her very presence--is riveting. This is a debut that is a pleasure and marvel to observe. For anybody who has ever wondered how the poor chose how to live, how one of the underclass both views and tests the world, this *Maria*, both complicated and simple, comprises a textbook. Pretty but seemingly unaware of her beauty, trying to be tough while being at bottom humane--Sandino Moreno embodies a Maria not only full of grace, but full of promise.  
(*This film is rated "R" and is in Spanish with sub-titles.*)

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