

## ***DOCSDF 2012 a report on The Festival International de Cine Documental de la Ciudad de Mexico***

By Cynthia Close

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For all theatergoers who love documentaries and have feared the impending death of the cinema experience, I offer hope. It came to me in the form of DOCSDF, the premiere festival for documentary film audiences and filmmakers alike that took place this year from November 8<sup>th</sup> to the 18th in several venues across Mexico City. Most U.S. based doc industry news seems to be overwhelmingly focused northward and, historically, on our U.K. and European counterparts, while often ignoring our Spanish-speaking neighbors to our south. Mexico offers this vast, sprawling metropolis of over 22 million people, steeped in cultural traditions and hungry for new cultural, social and political experiences that often can only be found through documentary film. It seemed apparent to me the people of Mexico City embraced the festival occurring in their midst with a level of enthusiasm, dare I say fervor, that I had not felt at any international festival in a long, long time.

A relatively new fest on the doc scene, this was the 7<sup>th</sup> iteration of an annual event that featured 334 screenings selected from over 1,380 submissions as well as special curated events, over a ten-day period. What I found to be most impressive was the level of audience engagement and the ability of the organizers to create an inclusive program that vast numbers of people, from all walks of life, felt was accessible to them. The opening night film, *El Alcalde (The Mayor)* was a perfect selection to set the tone and to communicate the fact that this brave festival was going to offer challenges to the status quo. Shot in Mexico by the filmmakers Emiliano Altuna and Carlos F. Rossini it looks at Mauricio Fernández, the polemical Mayor of San Pedro Garza Garcia, the wealthiest and one of the safest municipalities in Latin America. He uses whatever means he deems effective in cleaning out the drug cartels, and his methods open up discussion of how this country can address policies used to combat organized crime and drug legislation. The screening was free and open to the public, which reinforced the fact that this event was intended to reach out and touch as many minds as possible.

Another film project, *Por qué la Pobreza? (Why Poverty?)* was a series of 13 selected shorts from South Africa, Haiti, Brazil, Uruguay, Kenya, Germany, Columbia, Bolivia, Spain, and Venezuela that explored the conditions surrounding the ongoing problem of poverty that seems to be entrenched in many parts of the world today. All were made in 2012 so we had the opportunity to reflect on an up to date overview of this important global problem.

Besides the rich variety of international screenings at venues across the city, the fest has launched the DOCSDF Video Library and Doctober both of which are programs designed to reach audiences in every Mexican state, well beyond the city itself. Offered specifically for filmmakers, and a first time in Mexico, was the Latin Side of

the Doc and from November 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> the 5<sup>th</sup> annual DocsForum, a mini film school of master classes and conferences featuring invited guests; Mika Kaurismäki, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Michael Glawogger, and representatives from Observatorio, Escuela de Cine Documental, Movies that Matter, the Sundance Institute and Polish Docs.

For those filmmakers and others who were invited guests of the festival, there were the wonderful parties, fabulous food, and amazing history and architecture of the city to explore. As I meandered through the many fountain festooned parks and public plazas in my free time it was hard to ignore the ever present reminders of the ancient cultures upon which this city was built as well as the many museums designed to preserve them. The National Museum of Anthropology was a most impressive structure, and so vast, it would have taken me days to see it all. Judging from the masses of people lining up at the entrance it was clear many Mexicans share an interest in exploring their own cultural history along with the rest of us who have embraced the rich heritage left by Mayan, Aztec and Inca people among many other indigenous populations.

I was lucky to have played a small role in helping to organize one of the festival's special screenings, a retrospective of the ethnographic filmmaker, John Marshall. It was sponsored by Cine entre Culturas (Cinema Among Cultures) the only organization in Mexico dedicated to the study and promotion of global ethnographic cinema. Prior beneficiaries of their focus have been Robert Gardner, Jorge Preloran, Kim Longinotto, and Vincent Carelli. Curated and organized primarily by Antonio Zirión and his colleagues at Ethnoscopio (a non-profit, educational organization) in conjunction with Documentary Educational Resources and DOCSDF this major tribute included a separate, beautifully produced catalogue featuring essays on Marshall's oeuvre by Valeria Vega and Antonio Zirión of Ethnoscopio, Pau Montagud curator/director of DOCS DF, Karma Foley Archivist formerly of the Smithsonian's Human Studies Film Archive, Patsy Asch ethnographic filmmaker and educator, John Bishop filmmaker and Marshall colleague, and John P. Homiak of the Anthropology Department at the Smithsonian Institution. Published commentary and analysis of John Marshall's major contribution to film and culture (his body of work was declared a Memory of the World by UNESCO in 2009) is extremely rare, even in English and until this publication, was virtually non-existent in Spanish. The festival and Ethnoscopio took on the challenge of subtitling in Spanish all the films included in this major retrospective. Considering how difficult a task accurate and authoritative translation can be, they did a masterful job, both aesthetically and linguistically. Given all of this, the most exciting moment of all was the initial screening which was also the inaugural program for the long awaited opening of the magnificent new Cineteca Nacional, an architectural monument to the belief in government supported access to cinema and culture. I literally cried when I saw the long lines of Mexican citizens, waiting in line to buy tickets to what became sold out screenings of all the Marshall programs, including the six-hour marathon of his final film, *A Kalahari Family*, scheduled in the smaller, downtown, La Casa Del Cine. The fact that some dedicated moviegoers were willing to sit in the aisles of the packed theater for 6 hours

and watch this masterwork was thrilling. How I wish John Marshall could have been there to respond to the audience questions after each episode. While he died in 2005 his legacy will now be accessible to Spanish speaking film aficionados, researchers, students and an informed public for years to come, thanks to all the wonderful work of the staff of DOCSDF and our friends at Ethnoscopio.

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