

Jacobo Morales

In 1990 “What Happened To Santiago” [*Lo Que Le Paso A Santiago*] was, to this author’s shock and the collective pride [by collective I mean hear to say not just Puerto Rican pride but the pride of U.S-based / bred Latinos everywhere] nominated for best Foreign Film at the Oscars. As a child I heard quite a lot about this unique *evenement* at home, developing a keen interest in the work of one of today’s most lauded Latin American filmmakers, Jacobo Morales.

A native of Lajas, Puerto Rico Jacobo was born in 1934 and began his artistic career at the ripe old age of 14 as an actor in the theatre and radio, having participated as an actor and playwright in more than 30 productions for the stage. The prolific Jacobo is also a published poet and the driving force behind important cultural programming such as “Jacobo y El Arte”.

Arguably his most important contributions and greatest legacy however have been those afforded to the cinema. Starting with his unforgettable roles in such Hollywood fare as *Bananas* with Woody Allen or *Up The Sandbox* with Barbara Streisand [one as a revolutionary and the other as Fidel Castro.] until arriving at his own auspicious cinematographic beginnings, the first two being *Dios Los Cria* {1980} and “Nicholas And The Others” [*Nicolas Y Los Demas*] {1985}, sharp commentaries on modern society and reckless passion.

Honoured at the Havana Film Festival with the prestigious Coral Prize for Best Film and Best Actress, *Dios Los Cria* is made up of 5 vignettes, each being distinct but somehow related, with their suprising Bunuelian elements and surgical dissections of the emotional state of today’s modernized Caribbean. In “Nicholas and The Others” we already sense the formation of an auteur aesthetic, with its narrative acrobatics and intriguing dialogue-splinterings, Jacobo portrays a protagonist and a way of life under assault by its own decadence and sense of vengeful nostalgia.

“What Happened To Santiago?” [1989] marks a true historic moment for the Puerto Rican cinema. Not only because of its overwhelming critical success but, more importantly, because of what it meant for the idea of Puerto Rican cinema itself. Here was proof-positive on an international level that there existed and island, a cultural idiosyncrasy, a filmic expression deserving of more attention.

The story of a “viejito” [old codger] who finds love at 60, it works on all levels [of especial mention is the extraordinary performance of Gladys Rodriguez as his “ obscure object of desire”] never once waning its popularity in all these years.

Jacobo followed up with *Linda Sara* [1995] and *Jugando En Serio* [1998], the first made with participation of stars Dayanara Torres and Chayanne, it ties the poetic exploration of memory with complication of class frictions, the latter a playful exploration of the important notion of continuity in Puerto Rican cinema, part of the series of films commissioned by Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez to commemorate the hundred years of the cinema.

What can one really say in the end about Jacobo? One can only expect more great contributions from the man. His work and person coming together like a sort of living institution of the national cinema , the same of which is often said of El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico who popularized a song which could very well describe the nature of this most deserved of homages.... “Whatever you want to do for me, you’d better do it while I’m alive...”

Sinnel Sandoval

