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Outside at Cinépolis, the main venue (and sponsor) for the Morelia International Film Festival. Photo by Jonny Leahan for indieWIRE.

## A World Class Cultural Event: Morelia Fest Focuses on Mexican Docs and Shorts in 3rd Year

Documentary coverage provided by **SILVERDOCS**

by Jonny Leahan (October 19, 2005)

The third **Morelia International Film Festival** wrapped on Sunday, bringing to a close an ambitious eight day program that included 42 Mexican shorts and 17 Mexican docs in competition as well as dozens of narrative features and films in special sections, from both Mexico and around the world - bringing the total number of titles screened to nearly 200. The festival, which this year ran from October 8-16, takes place in Morelia, Michoacan, a magnificent 16th century colonial city designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site.



The festival opened with a screening of "**Los Tres Entierros de Melquiades Estrada**" ("The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada"), directed by **Tommy Lee Jones**, starring himself along with **Barry Pepper**, **Julio Cesar Cedillo**, **January Jones** and **Dwight Yoakam**. The film, which won best screenplay at Cannes for **Guillermo Arriaga**, is a morbid yet fascinating tale of a man who

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is shot in the high desert of West Texas and hastily buried. When the body is found and reburied in the town cemetery, the deceased's friend, rancher Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones), kidnaps the suspected gunman and forces him to disinter the corpse. Perkins then takes the murderer and his friend's body on a dangerous quest into Mexico by horseback, unleashing a series of shocking and sometimes gruesome events.

There were many other excellent narrative features programmed, but that was not the main thrust of the festival. "This is a festival about Mexican shorts and Mexican documentaries, and our emphasis is obviously in that area," festival director **Daniela Michel** told indieWIRE. "I think that Mexican cinema has been in a long crisis, and what really has kept the spirit alive for young Mexican filmmakers are the shorts and documentaries."

To that end, the festival's competition categories are only for the Mexican shorts and docs, while the other programs, however rich and varied, remain out of competition, save the audience awards. "The reason is because we don't want those feature films to rob the attention from the young documentary and short filmmakers," says Michel. "What happens a lot of the time is when you have a competition of features... that just draws all the attention. We are very delighted to have these feature films, because our mission is to promote young Mexican talent, but in particular the shorts and documentaries would take second place, and we don't want to have that."

Perhaps because of this nurturing and support, the shorts programs were of a far better overall quality than at many festivals, covering a wide variety of fascinating topics. For example, the tragic trend of people committing suicide by throwing themselves in front of subway trains in Mexico City is explored in **Adrian Ortiz's "Subterranos"** ("Undergrounds"). Using interviews with the subway drivers themselves, it becomes clear that these deaths are taking an intense emotional toll. Many of the drivers remember every detail of these incidents, right down to the station, the date and the exact time the suicides occurred. One woman even left a note explaining that she could no longer endure the suffering of her unbearable headaches.

Another short doc showed the brighter side of the Mexican rail, this time above ground, chronicling the history of the Pan-American Railway and its effect on the city of Tonalá, Chiapas. In "**Los Rieles Con Alma**" ("Rails with Soul"), director **Nerransula Reyes Lechuga** interviews the old time rail workers, and the rusted trains come to life as these weathered men tell tales of the birth, explosion, and inevitable decline of the industry that shaped their entire lives. Many of these men still live in old railway cars that have been converted to trailer-park style homes by the train companies.

Other shorts with connected themes included those focused on Mexican youth, including **Juan Carlos Martin's "Casi Nunca Pasa Nada"** ("Almost Nothing Ever Happens"), about a teen at a crossroads, walking the streets searching for himself. **Jorge Michel Grau's "Mi Hermano"** ("My Brother") tells the story of Oseas, a teenager who tells a lie in order to gain stature in his neighborhood, only to discover that his bravado has endangered the life of his younger brother by tying him to the girlfriend of a gang member. In "**Escupir Contra el Viento**" ("Spitting Against the Wind"), director **Michel Lipkes** follows the life of **Cyrille Henri Revueltas**, a young alcoholic musician who travels through Belgium and encounters a life-changing rehabilitation.

The Mexican documentary section was also quite strong, including **Natalia Almada's "Al Otro Lado"** ("To the Other Side"), which begins in Sinaloa, the drug capital of Mexico and home to some legendary figures of corrido - a form of street music that tells the true stories of every day people. The film beautifully captures the contrasting hues of the Sierra Mountains and the Sea of Cortez, as young songwriter Magdiel plots his escape from a poverty-stricken life. When faced with the option of trafficking drugs or crossing the border, he finds a coyote (illegal border crossing guide) who is willing to cross him in exchange for a corrido song about the coyote's adventures.

In a very different Mexican music documentary, **Diego Gutierrez's "Las Canciones del Valle de los Perros"** ("The Valley of the Dog Songs") looks at the lives of six young subjects from Jakarta, Buenos Aires, Lima, Mexico City, Amsterdam and Los Angeles through the eyes of a San Diego-based musician named Phil. He composes songs for each of these young people based on video portraits presented to him by Gutierrez, and the music is truly outstanding and unique. Although a solidly original concept, the film suffers from too much contrived filler footage of Phil himself, but otherwise delivers a



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Now in its 19th year, [AFI FEST](#) presented by Audi is the longest-running film festival in Los Angeles and one of the most influential festivals in all of North America.

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moving message - that we are all worthy of having a song written about us.



Mark Becker, director of "Romantico", with the film's subject, musician Carmelo Muniz Sanchez, who had just seen the film for the first time and had an emotional reaction. Photo by Jonny Leahan for indieWIRE

Music is such an integral part of Mexican culture that it becomes central to many of the films about its residents, and **Mark Becker's "Romantico"** is no exception. Part of the Cinema Without Borders section, this extraordinary documentary follows Mexican musician **Carmelo Muniz Sanchez**, a street performer in San Francisco's Mission District where Becker lived at the time of filming. Shortly after he began shooting this gorgeous 16mm film, Sanchez decided to move back to his hometown of Salvatierra, not very far from Morelia. Becker followed, and an emotional story unfolded - one that moved crowds at the festival to give Carmelo a standing ovation after

a special outdoor screening in the city's main square, in the shadow of Morelia Cathedral.

Also part of the Cinema Without Borders section, **David Baum** and **James Scurlock's** short documentary "**Parents of the Year**" tells the remarkable story of **Yolanda Garcia**, a mother living in South Central L.A. who is far more complex than she first appears. As her first born son graduates from MIT, we discover how this remarkable woman made that happen - by spending years collecting cans and bottles from the dumpsters on Venice Beach. There is no Hollywood ending here, however, as Yolanda has reached such depths of depression that she can't even feel joy at her son's graduation.

The festival welcomed several special guests, including **Raul Ruiz**, who presented a retrospective of five of his brilliant films. Since leaving Chile in 1974, Ruiz has spent time absorbing, or more accurately becoming a part of, many countries and cultures. In his fifth decade of filmmaking, Ruiz created "**Le Temps Retrouve**" ("Time Regained"), an epic cinematic fusion of absinthe-induced dreamscape and baroque soap opera, adapted from Proust's novel of the same name. The 1999 film, starring **Catherine Deneuve** and **Emmanuelle Beart**, not only boasts some of the best art direction in recent years, but features an impressive French-language performance by **John Malkovich**.

The Morelia International Film Festival is not only becoming known for its superb programming, but also for the incredible parties, which boast enough great food, plentiful drink and gorgeous atmosphere to give most top festivals a run for their money. "It wasn't supposed to be this big, it was supposed to be a little bit smaller," says Michel. "But I think that this size is perfect because it's still a very private film festival, and it allows room for intimacy... it's important that people know each other and talk to each other."

Morelia Film Festival award winners:

Best Screenplay for Short Film from Michoacan: "**La Caza**", written by **Luz Gabriela Leveroni Castro**

Best Short Film from Michoacan award: **Dante Cerano's "Cheranasticotown"**

Audience Award for Best International Feature: **Roman Polanski's "Oliver Twist"**

Best Mexican Feature Film: **Maria Ines Roque's "Un dia mas"** ("Another Day")

Audience Award for Best Documentary in Competition: **Alejandra Islas' "Muxe's: autenticas, intrepidas, buscadoras de peligro"** ("Muxe's: Authentic, Fearless, Seekers of Danger")

Best Short film in Competition: **Carlos Sama Hari's "Con la cola entre las patas"** ("Tail Between Your Legs")

Documentaries in Competition/ Special Titra Award: **Beto Gomez's "Hasta el ultimo trago... corazon!"** ("Till the Last Drop... Corazon!")

Best Mexican Documentary: **Carlos Armella y Pedro Gonzalez Rubio's "Toro Negro"** ("Black Bull")

Short Films in Competition:

Short Film in Animation, **Luis Felipe Hernandez Alanis' "Esfera"** ("Shpere")

Best Short Documentary Film, **Jaime Munguia Ortiz's "Teatro Magico"** ("Magic Theater")

Best Short Fiction Film, **Roberto Fiesco's "David"**

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