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MOVIE REVIEW | 'ROMÁNTICO'

In Clutches of Poverty, Not Despair but Survival



Kino International

Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez, an illegal immigrant who ekes out a living as a mariachi musician but returns to his impoverished family in Mexico.

By STEPHEN HOLDEN
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"Romántico" is a sympathetic portrait of Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez, an illegal Mexican immigrant living in San Francisco who, after scuffling for three years as a mariachi musician, returns home to care for his ailing mother.

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Chubby, careworn and pushing 60, Mr. Sánchez is presented as a noble soul from a humble background, selected from the ranks of countless illegal immigrants to represent a struggling shadow population that is all but invisible in the United States.

When first glimpsed, he is working with his musical partner and old friend Arturo Arias, playing and singing mariachi songs (reasonably well) in bars and restaurants in the Mission District. During his time in America, he has earned enough to keep sending desperately needed money to his impoverished family in Salvatierra, a small Mexican city more than a thousand miles south of the border.


But after learning of the declining health of his mother, who has lost both legs to diabetes, Mr. Sánchez makes the painful decision to go back. Although he will be reunited with his mother; his wife, Carmela; and their daughters, Lupe and Juanita, the family will be much the poorer for his return. And because of the arduousness of the

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border crossing for a man of his age and physical condition, there may be no going back to the United States.

Mr. Sánchez's story, told largely in his own words, is a case study of a life defined by poverty. He recalls his original border crossing, which cost \$1,200 in borrowed money, and his journey to Ciudad Juárez and across the Rio Grande into Texas to a safe house for illegal immigrants. Eventually transported to Los Angeles, he wound up homeless, with only \$10 in his pocket.

Prepared to go back to Mexico, he called home, and his wife suggested that he call Mr. Arias, who she heard was making a living as a musician in San Francisco. Mr. Arias invited him to stay with him in the tiny, drab apartment he shared with half a dozen others.

Because it didn't originate as a story of reverse immigration (Mr. Sánchez didn't decide to return to Mexico until the movie was a week into production), this modest, unassuming documentary, directed by Mark Becker, feels more like a mosaic than a narrative film with a clearly defined continuity.

Once back in Salvatierra, Mr. Sánchez ekes out a living selling "snow" (sweetened, flavored crushed ice) from a cart he pedals on the street. Before long, Mr. Arias also returns to Salvatierra, and they team up again. But the few pesos they earn playing in local bars patronized by prostitutes and their clients are a pittance compared to what they made in the United States, and Mr. Arias is hospitalized for alcoholism. Mr. Sánchez wants to give his youngest daughter a quinceañera (a Mexican girl's traditional coming-out party when she turns 15) but can afford only a small dinner. Still he perseveres.

"Romántico" shows how grinding poverty instills a fatalistic view of life in which good fortune is dependent on prayers and miracles. In a revealing confession, Mr. Sánchez recalls a personal turning point when, after 11 years of misery and domestic strife, a drop of holy water restored his spirit. As "Romántico" draws to an end, and he vows to "just keep going," the strength of that spirit remains undiminished.

ROMÁNTICO

Opens today in Manhattan.

Produced, directed and edited by Mark Becker; in Spanish and English, with English subtitles; director of photography, Mr. Becker; music by Raz Mesinai; released by Kino International. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 80 minutes. This film is not rated.

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