

## **The Buffalo News**

### **'ROMANTICO' Review**

3 1/2 stars (Out of 4)

STARRING: Carmelo Muniz Sanchez and Arturo Arias

DIRECTOR: Mark Becker

RUNNING TIME: 80 minutes

RATING: Unrated

THE LOWDOWN: An aging troubadour returns home to visit his family in Mexico following a difficult stint in San Francisco in this documentary.

By Christopher Schobert  
NEWS CONTRIBUTING REVIEWER

There are so many big, "sexy" documentaries these days that some of the finest, most probing, most important works get lost in the shuffle. If a doc is directed by Michael Moore, or features a quasi-Power Point presentation from Al Gore, or lovable penguins, or a heartfelt celebrity narrator, then it will probably make it to the multiplex.

But what if the focus is on someone who could easily be ignored? Like, say, an aging immigrant struggling to make a living as a musician in San Francisco?

If that's the case, the film is unlikely to gain a distributor or wide release. That's why the local appearance of filmmaker Mark Becker's beautifully devastating documentary, "Romantico," is cause for celebration. This is the type of documentary that comes and goes very quickly, so any true lover of nonfiction film should act fast -- "Romantico" is one of the year's best films. Becker's subject is Carmelo Muniz Sanchez, an aging, overweight dreamer who alternates his time singing gorgeous love songs in Spanish for tips in restaurants and working at a car wash. He is attempting to make enough money to support his wife and two daughters in Mexico.

All the while, Sanchez is tethered to his musical partner, Arturo Arias. The songs they sing are a testament to the difficulties and struggles of their lives. As one diner responds when Sanchez asks what she would like to hear them play, "We like happy." Yes, we do, but life and art do not always fall into this category.

When Sanchez heads back to Mexico, Arias is left behind a broken, alcoholic man. Eventually, he too returns home. But Sanchez needs money, and knows that a return to the States, harrowing as such a journey is, may be necessary.

Throughout, there are scenes that register strongly. I don't think there is a more elegantly moving moment on film in 2006 than the sight of Sanchez boarding an airplane home to Mexico. This is the 57-year-old's first flight, and his face is a mixture of fear, nerves and hope. The brief scene carries with it more emotional oomph and truth than most films ever achieve.

"Romantico" is, then, many things. It is a story of the struggles of the uneducated working class, a love story, a tale of friendship, an account of one man's winding journey through life, and an honest look at the joy and sorrow of attempting to make a living on the fringes of life, as a simple entertainer.

The film is also not without humor. Sanchez and Arias bill themselves as El Trio Cometa. A trio? As Sanchez explains, the duo is paid more if restaurateurs believe there are three musicians playing. Just one way of messing with the system.

It is also worth noting that Sanchez is an illegal immigrant. Becker's camera puts a face on this constantly controversial subject, one of 2006's most pressing, making this a useful teaching tool for teachers and a worthy approach to a thorny issue.

"Romantico" is difficult to watch, with its heartbreaking narrative, its sad, defeated faces and its overwhelming air of hardship. It is unlikely to be a film that most viewers will want to sit through more than once. But it is also, in its own small way, a masterpiece of personal, somber, yet hopeful cinema.