



Latest boom in Bolivian cinema

Ricardo Bajo

Last July 20th Beatriz Palacios passed away; significant other and producer with Jorge Sanjinés and co founder of the Escuela Andina de Cinematografía Ukamau. The author of this article, the editors, collaborators and all of the team of **El Ojo que piensa** join the filmmaker's and of all Bolivian cinema's grieving.

Bolivian cinema lives moments of agony and hope. Since after 1995 and up to the year 2002, only three films have been released. There are fifteen theaters dedicated to new films in a country with eight million people. Cities like El Alto, a suburb of La Paz, with more than seven hundred thousand residents does not have a single film theater.

The exclusive monopoly of the North American film distributor, the company Manfer, (the other one, Waza, that used to distribute DreamWorks and Universal among others went broke by the end of last year) reduces the panorama of diversity to scandalous levels. Filmgoers are only directed to see big productions such as **Matrix** and **Terminator**. The new building of the Cinemateca Boliviana with their announced three theaters has never been completed because of economic problems. The level of audiences has diminished to half in the last ten years... we could go and on like that for hours giving information of the shameful situation of Bolivian films in the last years.

But 2003 marks a new beginning, at least as far as new releases is concerned. This year the country produced a small film boom, more because of accumulated projects, than because there's a favorable and stable situation. This renaissance of Bolivian film reminds us of the last boom, in 1995 when five films were premiered, when that long gone year became one with the most film productions Bolivia's history, now left behind by this fructiferous 2003. In 1995 five fiction films were produced in Bolivia. The titles were: **Para recibir el canto de los pájaros** by Jorge Sanjinés; **Jonás y la ballena rosada** by Juan Carlos Valdivia; **Cuestión de fé** by Marcos Loayza; **Sayari** by Mela Márquez; and **La oscuridad radiante** by Hugo Ara, a miniseries originally produced in video that was re edited in film version and transferred to 35 millimeters for its exhibition in movie theaters. The eight that are currently in production or have been released this year with the comeback of our national cinema's heavy weights, outnumbers all these five productions from 1995. The films are **Los hijos del último jardín** by Jorge Sanjinés; **El corazón de Jesús** by Marcos Loayza; **El atraco** by Paolo Agazzi; **Alma y el viaje al mar** by Diego Torres; **Faustino Mayta visita a su prima** by Roberto Calasich; **Hombre llorando** by Angelino Jaimes; and a production by Fernando Aguilar that will be filmed in Buenos Aires, starting September.

The situation for these eight films is diverse. Some have been released in this part of the year; others are in post-production, others are being filmed, and others in preproduction.



Without doubt some of the most awaited ones are the new films by Sanjinés, Loayza and Agazzi, to be premiered by year's end, if the exhibition monopoly of the *gringo* subsidiary allows it. Let us go film-by-film and show their situation and importance.

Let's start with the most important Bolivian filmmaker, Jorge Sanjinés. The director of ***La nación clandestina***, which won a golden conch at the Festival in San Sebastián in 1989, had not filmed since eight years ago since his project on the war of El Chaco, a struggle that confronted Bolivia and Paraguay during the thirties because of oil, has never found financial backing. Facing the difficulties that would confront his great production, that was set to be the most expensive production in Bolivian history, Sanjinés has chosen this year to film a low budget work in the city of La Paz. The film in the works as of July under the name ***Los hijos del último jardín*** and has non-professional actors among its protagonists. Sanjinés works with sheer will and his own resources and with a technical team from his film school, Ukamau, which has followed him in the last productions. Among them we can name his mate, Beatriz Palacios, responsible for production and the Peruvian cameraman César Pérez in photography. A cameo from the old actor of the mythical film ***Ukamau***, Néstor Peredo, is one of the few bits of information known from the production that is filmed, as always, with the discretion and silence of the mythical Sanjinés.

The sudden death of the producer and Sanjinés' significant other Beatriz Palacios, the past July 20th, has been a hard blow, not only to the Bolivian filmmaker's film, as to his complete life, and by extension to all of Bolivian cinema. Palacios had been the Sanjinés' right hand all along his trajectory. Together they founded the Escuela de Cinematografía Andina Ukamau. Palacios had in preparation a children's film, ***La tierra sin mal***, to be filmed next year. With her death, Sanjinés' movies loose a huge support.

The second important film is called ***El corazón de Jesús*** by Marcos Loayza, this will be his third film after his successful debut with ***Cuestión de fé*** 1995 and his failed second feature filmed in Argentina, ***Escrito en el agua*** 1997. Loayza is currently in Germany where he's working in post-production. The release in Bolivia of a work defined as a metaphor of subsistence is expected for October. ***El corazón de Jesús*** narrates the comings and goings of a retired bureaucrat that faces heart problems and a furious economic crisis in the country. The stars are Cacho Mendieta (Jesús), Raúl Beltrán, Elías Serrano, Nicolás Bauer, Rosa Ríos, Julio Kempff and the Spanish sing song writer Ismael Serrano. This film is under the auspices of the program Ibermedia. Conacine (Consejo Nacional de Cine, National Film Council) is putting up a hundred thousand dollars and Ibermedia \$90,000.00. Also the German *Ena Film Company* is in charge of all post-production and *Sahara Films* from Chile has cooperated with lights and cameras. In total a budget of \$700,000.00 dollars. Another film with co-production characteristics thanks to Ibermedia is ***Hombre llorando*** from debuting Angelino Jaimes. The film is a love history inside a jail in San Pedro de la Paz, between a convict and a social worker that is doing some research. The jail is a universe that builds differences, in front of everything that lives outside its walls. Jail seen as a society in itself, with its own codes and its own rules. There, violence meets pain, but also love in its multiple



surroundings. The budget is similar to the Loayza film, \$700,000.00 dollars, distributed as follows: \$159,000.00 dollars that came from Ibermedia and Conacine, plus \$350,000.00 dollars that will be put up by Mexican company *Dulces Compañías* and the Spanish *Igeldo Comunicaciones* from the Vasque producer Angel Amigo. The remaining 20% will be funded by the mythical ICAIC from Cuba and Bolivian producer Bar Film. Jaimes has already filmed some test scenes in the San Pedro jail with actors like Sergio Caballero and Guido Arce, men that come from the La Paz company Pequeño Teatro.

Thanks to Mexican and Spanish co production it is expected that actors and actresses from those nations such as Vanessa Bauche from ***Amores perros*** will be available.

Another major from Bolivian film that returns is the Italian-Bolivian Paolo Agazzi, with his film ***El atraco***. The film, now in post-production, deals with the celebrated heist in Calamarca, in the Bolivian altiplane, that ended with three deaths and that hit Bolivian society during the seventies because of its crudeness. Yet, Agazzi sets his thriller in the present time. In spite of having a budget from Ibermedia, the director who is now responsible for a Bolivian TV network, PAT, has been forced to re-release in June a previous film, one great success, ***Los hermanos Cartagena*** from 1984, in order to gather money with which complete his current production. Agazzi is responsible for the production of mythical films in Bolivian cinema history, such as ***Mi socio***, from 1982 that won the Cartagena Film Festival in Colombia and ***El día que murió el silencio*** from 1998 with Argentinean actor Darío Grandinetti. The Italian, born in Cremona resides in Bolivia since 1976 and has also been known as a producer.

The only two films that have been premiered so far are ***Alma y el viaje al mar*** by Diego Torres and ***Faustino Mayta visita a su prima*** by Roberto Calasich. Both have been released in digital format since they have not obtained the necessary budget for a transfer to celluloid. ***Alma y el viaje al mar*** is the second work by Diego Torres right after ***La calle de los poetas*** from 1998. The film tells of a young artisan girl from La Paz who wishes to know the sea. The film has a budget of \$70,000.00 dollars obtained by the director (from Conacine and the Dutch embassy). Torres has combined experimental actors such as Sandra Peña and David Mondacca and youngsters right out of castings like the protagonist Mariana Alandia Soto, Antonio Reque and Killa Tedesqui. The film has been released in a non traditional film theater and in the Cinemateca Boliviana.

The second film that has been already premiered is ***Faustino Mayta visita a su prima*** which has been on showcase for more than two months in a not very used film theater; Cine Mexico, that has been closed for over ten years. The work is also filmed in digital and was released in video and tells in a very artisan way the travel of Faustino to Argentina in order to rescue his cousin from slavery at the Bolivian textile sweat shops in Buenos Aires. The scatological humor and the creoles scenes that come right out of the highly criticized "popular theater" are characteristics of a film that has set a record of permanence in showcases for a Bolivian production. A singer of "Chicha" or cumbia music and actors of the



so-called teatro popular play the main roles. Calasich is known in Bolivia because he directed the successful TV series ***La bicicleta de los Huanca***, in the early 1990's.

Thus, Bolivian film has lived a long and felt lethargy that has yielded to this boom that comes to quench the thirst of a national public who is anxious and willing to see themselves reflected in the big screens that so far have been inundated with poor and rutinary offer.

Not having a constant and quality cinematography harmful to the building of collective imaginaries which are so needed in these times of galloping globalization with the ALCA (Área de Libre Comercio de las Américas, Free Trade Area of the Americas) and similar poisonous herbs.

This new impulse of Bolivian Films is due exclusively to the force, strength and fighting spirit of those who make the seventh art, fighting against the elements, they bring their projects forth with a lot of blood, sweat and tears but also happiness. There's not much to say about the state, which also in this subject, plays deaf and shuns away from a responsibility that should be a priority, the promotion of art and culture of our country.

All we have to do now is hope that the quality of the mentioned productions satisfies the Bolivian public as well as the international one. Hopefully we won't have to wait another eight years to write another note such as this talking about another Bolivian cinematographic boom.

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