

Buenos Aires 4th International Festival of Independent Cinema

Steel and the Virgin Mary

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Ciudad de María (Mary's City) is a documentary about the cult of the Virgin Mary in San Nicolás, a town in the north of Buenos Aires province. The origin of this enormously popular religious phenomenon was the claim made by Gladys Quiroga de Motta, a resident of San Nicolás, that the Virgin appeared and talked to her for the first time on September 25, 1983.

Nowadays more than 400,000 people go to San Nicolás on pilgrimage every month to visit the Virgin's temple and to try to meet the enigmatic Gladys, who has never given an interview or made a public appearance. What makes the film and the social phenomenon truly remarkable (and tragic) is the fact that this town used to be the center of the steel industry decades ago. SOMISA (Sociedad Mixta Siderurgica Argentina) was the most important steel mill in the country and represented the main economic support of the area, until it was privatized by Carlos Menem's policies in 1991. More than 8,000 workers lost their jobs.

Ciudad de Maria, directed by 29-year-old Enrique Bellande, opens with images from old television news reports about the controversial shutting down of the factory. The filmmaker then presents residents, priests and journalists commenting on the details of this complex and vast religious phenomenon. People of all ages and places gather together the twenty-fifth of each month to pray to the Virgin. They pray for food, work and health. Most of them come just to give thanks.

Bellande, who was born in San Nicolas, approaches the story from a point of view that combines curiosity, surprise and respect for the people who come to the town. But he is never naïve about the economic and social context, and that is what gives the documentary its revealing and insightful character. First, he shows the influence of the media—especially popular tabloids

and television news—in the development of cult. Then he interviews representatives of the local church, and even a so-called “skeptical scientist,” to make clear that they have helped to spread the myth surrounding Gladys by believing (or claiming to believe) in her spiritual encounters with the Virgin.

The most interesting aspect is to notice how San Nicolas has become a tourist pole of attraction because of the religious events. From the traditional cards to the most fashionable T-shirt, one can see parades of vendors selling all kinds of products containing the Catholic icon. Such apparently fragile and abstract material as faith is now the main source of income for many people in a town that used to live by making steel. With a colorful and precise description of everyday habits and attitudes, *Ciudad de Maria* succeeds in getting to the heart of that strange contradiction.

Ciudad de Maria won the Best Picture award in the category “Lo nuevo de lo nuevo” at the Buenos Aires film festival. Screenplay, production and direction: Enrique Bellande; executive producer: Pablo Trapero (director of *Mundo Grúa*).



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