

Unholy circumstances

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Maria Full of Grace, written and directed by Joshua Marston

First-time US filmmaker Joshua Marston has written and directed the Spanish-language film *Maria Full of Grace*, a documentary-style movie about the experiences of a teenage girl working in the Colombian drug-trafficking racket. The film has garnered awards at the Sundance, Berlin and Cartagena Film Festivals.

Maria Full of Grace is a sincere and worthy effort, if not an inspired one. The straightforward treatment of narcotics transportation stands in sharp relief to the sensationalized approach taken by so many films about the subject (*Traffic*, *Blow*, etc.)

Maria Alvarez (Catalina Sandino Moreno) lives in cramped quarters with her grandmother, mother, sister and infant nephew in an impoverished town outside of Bogotá. She helps support the family by working in a pesticide-saturated rose plantation, where workers, largely unprotected against the chemical toxicity, labor in a sweatshop environment. (In an interview, director Marston points out that Colombia is the second-largest exporter of cut flowers in the world and that due to the toxic conditions of work, “there are still a dramatic number of birth defects associated with plantation workers in Ecuador and Colombia.”)

Pregnant and yearning for better prospects than are offered by the town—including a loveless marriage proposal from her child’s father—Maria sets off for Bogotá to connect up with a friend who is working as a maid. En route she meets Franklin, a young procurer for the drug mafia, who talks of hooking her up with a cool job that involves lots of travel. In the same breath, he mentions the word “mule.” Maria is well aware that he is talking about illegal drug transportation.

Marie is enticed by the \$5,000 mules are paid per trip, a sum that would radically change her family’s life. She meets with the disarmingly paternal drug boss, Javier. At this point the film becomes a graphic and horrifying exposé of the risks and perils endured by the most exploited layer of the narcotics industry.

The illicit heroin is stuffed into latex glove fingers and sealed with dental floss. After Maria’s throat has been numbed by an analgesic soup, she swallows 62 pellets and is told that no matter what, she is responsible for her internal cargo. Threats against her family are made.

With a grainy composition and its heroin-as-host metaphor, *Maria Full of Grace* is an exploration of one of the deadly avenues that young people and other layers of the population (mules are as young as 17 and as old as 82) take to mitigate economic blight in countries such as Colombia. But escaping poverty is not the only motivating factor. Maria is bold and rebellious enough to want a decent future for herself and her baby. She must therefore flee from the dead-end existence—centered on the flower plantations—of her village life. The film provides a glimpse into how bleak and crushing are the economic and social prospects, particularly for the youth.

The tagline for *Maria Full of Grace* reads, “Based on 1,000 true stories,” ostensibly referring to the fact that approximately 1,000 people per year make the journey as drug mules from Colombia to the United States. In the film’s production notes, director Marston states: “There are over a billion people on the planet that are living on a dollar a day or less; they’re not all drug mules. So the question poses itself: what does cause a person who is desperate straits to become a drug mule? Well, there are as many answers as there are people who do it.”

One of the film’s characters is Don Fernando, played by Orlando Tobón, a native-born Colombian. For the last 20 of his 35 years living in Queens, New York, Tobón has raised money so that the unclaimed bodies of Colombians who have died in the US as mules are not sent to Potter’s Field, the cemetery for paupers, and buried in unmarked graves. He has rendered some 400 bodies back to their families in Colombia.

In an interview posted on the online edition of *NOW* magazine, director Marston exposes the gruesome fate of many who, like his character Maria, undertake the risks of becoming a mule. He reports that “it’s not uncommon to find bodies by the side of the road two miles from the

New York airport, cut open with their intestines pulled out.”

Another interview, posted on the web site of the University of Washington’s student radio station, quotes the director elaborating on his motives for making *Maria Full of Grace*: “I think it’s very common with all the rhetoric and ideology of the drug war, to pitch drug mules and drug traffickers as criminals and demonize them. Reduce them and flatten them to two-dimensional cut-outs of people who need to be put in prison, and thereby justify a whole politics and machinery that’s geared towards spending more and more money on prisons, and tanks and helicopters in order to fight the drug problem. I think if we’ve seen anything in 40 years of fighting the drug war, it’s that that doesn’t work. And what we need to be doing is spending more money on the other side of the problem, on the human side.

“In Colombia that would mean spending more money on schools, and investing in the economy, and in creating more possibilities for somebody to earn a living with dignity. And on the United States side that means spending less money on prisons and police and putting non-violent offenders in prison, and more money on helping people to rehabilitate themselves and treating the drug problem as a public health problem rather than as a criminal problem.”

Marston’s humane and thoughtful approach to the conditions of young people like Maria and their cooptation into the drug world endows the film with its overall sincerity. The movie argues that mules are essentially victims, the most vulnerable and dispensable targets of the so-called “drug wars.” It makes clear that the real beneficiaries of the massive and lucrative international drug trade are not those who illicitly transport the contraband across borders.

The film shows that working as a mule is a form of cheap labor that, at its core, is not fundamentally different from other forms of exploitation—for example, being forced to slave away on a flower plantation. This interpretation has value in an atmosphere of chronic and hypocritical moralizing by the political establishment, which presides over the social misery that propels young people into the drug trade all over the world.

Maria Full of Grace locates itself politically as “taking the viewpoint of a person whose voice would be marginalized,” according to Marston. In an interview with *Film Threat*, Marston describes the conditions that lead Maria to get involved in the “mule subculture.”

“The largest economy in Bogotá is the oil industry.

There’s a lot of foreign industry that’s coming in and pumping oil out of the country. After oil, there are obviously drugs—cocaine and illicit narcotics, which a lot of people do get caught up in. Then there are other things, like coffee and flowers.... Beyond that, it’s very much a rural economy, mired in a civil war where in many regions the guerillas and the paramilitary are at odds. There’s a lot of crossfire in towns that causes people to leave in great numbers, and go to the outskirts of places like Bogotá. They end up living in shanties or small houses with no electricity and no power, trying slowly to rip into an economy that doesn’t have enough room for them, with unemployment being 15 to 20 percent,” states the director. This is the background to Maria’s decision to become a mule.

Marston has created a film with many convincing aspects. When the camera is firmly focused on objective conditions and processes, *Maria Full of Grace* is at its strongest. Unfortunately, when the filmmaker lifts his eyes and starts to generalize, his work loses its sharpness, assuming a more complacent and passive character.

The scenes of Colombia, of Maria, her family and the village youth, as well as those involving the drug muling—contrasting innocence with a terrible underworld—are compelling and authentic. The film’s story of Maria in New York is less acute, tending in the direction of a certain self-satisfaction. Airport security officers at New York’s point of entry are a little too benign. A more uncritical subtext begins to make itself felt, hinting that Maria will fulfill her dreams in America.

This attitude finds expression in the film’s production notes: “Maria finally emerges at the threshold of a new future, one that will be defined by what she wants rather than what she rejects.” This is a somewhat too rosy prognosis—indeed the opposite of the reality faced by many poor immigrants in the US.

This type of political softness detracts artistically, blurs the piece’s edges. However, by offering an honest, unvarnished look at one of the barbaric options pushed onto the economically disenfranchised, *Maria Full of Grace* offers a paradigm for how the virginal and pure of soul come of age under capitalism.



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