

Q+A

Amanda Micheli and Isabel Vega

Every year, behind the walls of the women's penitentiary in Bogotá, Colombia, beauty contestants shimmy and shine under the South American sun, outlined by prison bars, metal wire and oppressive concrete structures. Young bodies—with tattoos, wounds and maternal stretch marks—preen and pose primarily for the gaze of fellow inmates and celebrity judges.

Unlike other beauty contestants, these women have pasts that run deep into the heart of Colombia's poverty, sexism, Catholic stranglehold and civil war. And the winner of these prison pageants will not be paraded through an array of frivolous public events.

Oscar-nominated for Best Documentary Short, Amanda Micheli and Isabel Vega's *La Corona* looks into the dichotomies (or ironies) facing contemporary notions of femininity that you would expect from the director of documentaries like, *Just for the Ride*, about the women's pro rodeo circuit; *Double Dare*, about professional movie stuntwomen; and (as cinematographer), *Thin*, a documentary about eating disorders.

In this exclusive interview at the Sundance Film Festival, Micheli and Vega talk about a film that saw the projection light thanks to the fiscal sponsorship of the San Francisco-based Film Arts Foundation. — *John Esther*

Why did you want to make this documentary?

Micheli: It was Isabel's baby. I like to see myself as the midwife [laughs]. We had two months before the contest. We jumped on a plane with frequent flyer tickets. We didn't know we were there to make a film. We were there just checking it out. Next thing you know, we were embedded with these great characters.

Were they suspicious of your intentions?

Micheli: The local Bogotá press is invited to the event. They're used to having cameras at the pageant, but the difference with us being a verité film was how difficult it was to explain to them why we needed to be there so many days before and after the pageant.

How were the shooting conditions, regarding safety?

Vega: Things do happen there. You don't necessarily see the terrible side



Amanda Micheli



Isabel Vega

in the film. While we were there, it was a month of festivities culminating in the beauty pageant. In the film, the prison looks like a high school. I never felt unsafe.

Micheli: It was only when we left the prison [that] we felt unsafe sometimes. The difficult thing for us was how hard the girls say it is in there. They wear street clothes, but only because the prison can't afford to buy them uniforms. Half of them don't even get

bedding upon arrival.

In beauty pageants, women are objects, typically of the male gaze, and act "very feminine," but here they are performing for other women. Moreover, these contestants are women who have engaged in what is frequently perceived as unfeminine behavior.

Micheli: It's so full of irony. You have a "hit girl" who pouts because she doesn't like her dress. You have a woman who was married and had a child. When her husband was killed, she goes to prison and falls in love with a woman. Defining femininity is a bit complicated. It's a pretty sexually charged place. When we first started talking to the warden, one of her big concerns is that journalists often come in and take pictures of two women kissing and [then] they leave. She was like, "I don't want this film to show that." We tried to assure her we weren't there to make a titillating girl-on-girl sex piece.

Vega: Girls would tell us that during the week they're "manly," and when the family comes on the weekend they would go to the beauty salon and become "feminine" for their families.

Angela, one of the main subjects, a lesbian, wins the pageant—only adding to the social dichotomies of the documentary.

Vega: She was killed 10 months after being released from prison.

Micheli: The irony is the prison is a safe haven. The city is really tough. But there's the loneliness and the boredom of prison life. Also, you might be safe, but you're separated from your family. It's a Catholic country, so these women are having babies when they're young.

When Angela wins I was thinking, "OK, is this going to get racial or homophobic, or both?"

Vega: You thought that? That's good.

But it only got racial. Is lesbianism widely accepted in the prisons?

Micheli: They got that Catholic closet going. A lot of them will have girlfriends in prison and then go back to men when on the outside. Viviana, who tends to be everybody's favorite, had a girlfriend in prison and she didn't tell us for a long time. She was very shy. She got released and ended up moving in with her girlfriend.

Your documentaries tend to refute these idealized standards of femininity.

Micheli: Yeah, definitely. I hate to pigeonhole any filmmaker, but I am definitely drawn to women's stories. I'm kind of obsessed with the tough-girl thing and how femininity intersects with that. I've played sports my whole life and I know there are stereotypes with that. Everybody is always trying to figure me out. Am I an art fag, a jock, a dyke, a straight, queer, bisexual? And nobody accepts, "I'm Amanda, nice to meet you." ■



La Corona premieres on HBO in September