



La Corona (The Crown) is a prison documentary unlike any other

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The women-behind-bars movie has been a staple of B-moviemakers for half a century. But *La Corona (The Crown)* is a documentary that gives a whole new look to the genre. The 40-minute film from Colombia will have its first screening at 2:30 p.m. tomorrow at the Jane Pickens Theater, on a double bill with the hour-long documentary *The Big Question* as part of the 11th Newport International Film Festival.

Rather than a grim tale in which prisoners rattle tin plates in the dining hall or fight each other for that last cigarette, *La Corona* features women selecting evening gowns, rehearsing intricate dance numbers, braiding their hair, applying makeup.

This captivating film, directed by Amanda Micheli and Isabel Vega, is about a beauty contest in the largest women's prison in Colombia, an event staged annually to give the prisoners a reason for hope and something to ease the dreary sameness of prison life. They get ready weeks in advance, fixing their hair, selecting a gown, preparing flashy dance numbers. Each cellblock is represented by a contestant and each contestant has fans to cheer her on. "Cellblock 9 rules!" shout the ladies promoting their contestant.

The filmmakers interview each contestant to give us a close-up look into each sad past — a woman doing eight years for homicide, another who is in for 13 years for guerrilla activity, still another who has gotten three years for robbery and assault. They all get a chance to explain their motives, one woman saying

that she robbed grocery stores to feed her family. The interviews are candid. The women even discuss homosexuality behind bars.

The most poignant interview is with a new prisoner who cries when she discusses the little son she had to leave behind. When he comes to visit, she tells him she is in school and can't come home with him because she hasn't finished her homework.

The beauty contest is shown in all its glory, an event that rivals the Miss America Pageant. Afterward, there are media interviews and photos for the winner — and tears for the losers. One woman takes her loss especially hard.

The camera then returns to the prison one month later, after reality has set in and it's back to the old routine, to see how the women are coping.

La Corona (The Crown), which is in Spanish with English subtitles, is a fascinating slice-of-life look that's compelling and genuine. Its accompanying film, The Big Question, looks at astonishing acts of forgiveness by people who have had their lives tested by murderers and thugs. It features interviews with Desmond Tutu, Deepak Chopra and others.

La Corona (The Crown) will be screened at 2:30 p.m. tomorrow and 9:15 p.m. Saturday at the Jane Pickens Theater. Tickets, \$10, are sold at the festival box office, at 22 Broadway, online at www.newportfilmfestival.com and at (401) 835-5356.

****La Corona (The Crown)

Rated: Not rated, contains adult themes, profanity.