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John P. Dwyer

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NORMA ALEANDRO AND ARGENTINA'S "OFFICIAL STORY"

An interview with Norma Aleandro
John P. Dwyer

Nineteen eighty-five has been an important year for Latin American film both within Latin America and abroad. For the first time since the 1970s, the world's cinema capitals have turned their attention to films produced by or in collaboration with Latin America. For example, the U.S.-Brazilian production of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, based on Manuel Puig's novel, has been a critical and financial success.

The Official Story with Norma Aleandro, released in November in the United States, has already received considerable critical attention. Aleandro has garnered the 1985 Cannes award for best actress, Ellen Stewart featured her in a one-woman show at New York's Cafe La Mama, and festivals in France, Spain, Canada, and Latin America have given the film major billing.

Aleandro's role in the movie signaled her return to film after having been banned from television and cinema by the Argentine military regime. After bombs were planted at her home and the theatre where she was performing in Buenos Aires, Aleandro left Argentina in 1976 for Uruguay and, later, Spain. She returned to Argentina in 1981 to star in the world-premier of Mario Vargas Llosa's play *The Young Lady of Tacna*, which she later took on a two-year tour throughout Latin America. In 1983, she returned to settle in Buenos Aires and began to work on a script by Luis Puenzo and Aida Bortnik based on the theme of the *desaparecidos*, those who "disappeared" during Argentina's military rule that followed the 1976 ouster of Isabel Perón.

In the *Official Story*, Aleandro is the wife of a Buenos Aires executive who prospered during the period imme-

diately following the overthrow. Childless, the couple adopts a baby girl. The adoptive mother, a high-school history teacher, never questions the girl's background until she is drawn into a series of events that force her to recognize what had really happened to the country under the military regime. As her political consciousness is raised, she seeks desperately to unravel the details of her daughter's adoption. Her search for the "real" rather than the "official story" leads to an emotionally gripping end as the family's equilibrium is shattered. The role of Alicia has earned Aleandro critical acclaim: in one review a New York critic compares her to Anna Magnani and Sophia Loren.

Directed by Luis Puenzo and co-starring Hector Alterio, *The Official Story* was filmed in 1984 and cost \$800,000, a record high for Argentine cinema. Begun during the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, the film was released in the early months of the Alfonsín administration and drew large crowds, including thousands of viewers who returned repeatedly to see the film. For them, as Aleandro points out in this interview, the film serves as a counterpoint to the "official story."

Norma, what was the reaction to *The Official Story* when it was shown in Argentina?

The film received very positive reviews from critics and people involved in the industry, but the way it affected the people who saw it was even more interesting from my point of view. It first played in Buenos Aires and then traveled to

John P. Dwyer formerly taught Latin American literature at Yale University and was a U.S. foreign service officer from 1978 to mid-1985. He is presently Director of Public Affairs for Latin America at the Americas Society, and is a member of the editorial board of Review.

the cities and towns in the interior of Argentina. Everywhere it went, something strange happened. Whenever I met someone who had seen it, they would come up to me and thank me for what the film had done for them. Many, literally hundreds, made a point of telling me that they had seen the movie two or three times. Young people, especially teenagers and people in their early twenties, would tell me that they had gone to see the movie almost by necessity in order to find out about another version of history—not the official or government one—that they themselves had lived but about which they did not know enough. I remember, for example, that Luis Puenzo, the director, and Aida Bortnik, the film's co-author, and I would often be stopped on the street and a person would say to us things like "Up to a while ago, I too had been like Alicia," the woman whom I play in the movie.

No one accused the film of stirring up feelings against the military regime that had overseen the types of activities discussed in the movie?

In general, there was no negative reaction or even irritation. People from the Left and the Right generally accepted the film as a personal statement on a subject that had affected the entire nation. The film also showed them about another tragedy that befell all of us, even if it affected us in different ways. This other tragedy was that of the young girl, my adopted daughter in the film, who was a victim of what had happened. This, of course, is a tragedy that will take generations to resolve.

The movie has provoked a similar response in the reviews that it has received in the United States. Were you surprised by the success it enjoyed at Cannes and in the different festivals it has played? To what do you attribute the depth of interest *The Official Story* has aroused?

It is always hard to judge why a film is successful or not, but there are specific points about our work that perhaps explain the way it has been viewed. For one thing, many people felt it would be difficult to produce such a film so soon after the events on which it is based occurred. Stories like this one usually end up as melodramas or would-be epics. We tried to deal with this theme on an intimate level. Basically, we dealt with human behavior, not just Argentine or Latin American behavior. No one is born to be the protagonist of a tragedy. Most of us try to avoid this role, and the movie focuses on a woman who did precisely the same thing.

Because this film was being made during the transition from military rule to democracy, as you were filming, you did not know whether the film would ever be shown. How did you feel as filming progressed?

All of us felt a certain fear as we began to work on this movie. We were not very sure as to the type of reaction it would cause. After all, it was the first time that this subject was being touched upon in a movie made in Argentina. You have the families of the desaparecidos, the children lost, and you have the feelings of their adoptive parents as well. You also have the parents of these children and their grandparents, both natural and adopted. We knew that we would be opening wounds for many people. I discussed this situation at length with my husband because we had lived the pain of exile and feared reprisals as we were filming and right up through the actual release of the movie. Thank God nothing happened! Curiously enough, as we have seen front testimony given during the different trials and public investigations surrounding the missing persons in Argentina, the reality of what happened goes far beyond the tragedy we describe in the film.

Hundreds of intellectuals, writers, and performing artists



in Latin America have shared a familiar fate of exile. How did you feel once you were able to return to Argentina and work freely?

It is a very strange feeling to return after being exiled. For one thing, you have the question of returning to a professional family of sorts made up of people who had to leave the country, like myself, of those who stayed but couldn't work, and of those who stayed and worked. But I have to say that this story, unlike the ones you may hear outside, is more complex than one where those who left were the good guys and those who stayed were the bad guys who had cooperated with the regime. When I returned, I sensed among many who had remained a deep-seated sense of guilt for having stayed and worked while I was forced into exile. I spent a lot of time talking with these people to let them know that in no way did I consider this to be a problem. I let them know that I personally felt that we had all been exiles in a certain way, some within the country and others abroad. I explained that I would not have left the country if the bomb incidents had

not occurred, and that I would have tried to remain and to work, just as they did. I would not have done anything against my conscience, but I would have worked if I had not been blacklisted and denied the right to practice my profession. I do not think that it is a sin to work in a country that has a dictatorship. We all have to live, and if we do not do anything dishonest to survive, we are not to blame for a dictatorship that may happen to rule the country. It is unfortunate when the artistic family breaks down into factions.

What is happening in Argentina today? What can we expect from the arts as the country rebuilds its institutions?

The theater is one area that is very exciting. Argentina has always had good actors, good directors, and good teachers of theater arts. We have not had many playwrights. Things are changing now, and I am very hopeful about some of the groups of younger people getting involved with the theater in Buenos Aires and elsewhere in Argentina. As they work their normal jobs in television and in the theater, many of our younger professionals are also getting involved in nontraditional projects. They are bringing their work into the streets and into the neighborhoods. Instead of discussing acting in theoretical terms, they are simply doing acting and getting involved with innovative themes. Many were influenced by experiments in theater they saw during their exile or during their studies abroad. Right now, for example, there is great interest in studying clown techniques and returning to a very important aspect of popular culture that in many ways has not been included in a performing artist's usual training. I see this as an important phenomenon that will eventually lead to a renovation of the theater and the role it plays in our society. This can only be healthy and will contribute to an art form that is truly our own, truly Argentina's, as well as truly universal.