

In The Director's Chair: Betty Kaplan

Betty Kaplan discusses the challenges and the unique opportunities involved in directing a film based on a memoir.

Q: When you read this material, what about it made you want to do it?

A: I was very moved by the immigrant experience of coming from somewhere in Latin America, because I think Puerto Rico is kind of Latin American, even if it is part of the United States. [I was moved by someone] making a way in a big city like New York, especially [as] told through the eyes of this girl who, I think, wins our hearts.

Q: What is your own background in Latin America? Tell us about films you've made that have Latin Americans...

A: My background, I think, brought me a little closer to understanding the story, because I came from Venezuela to New York and experienced some of the same things in making a way for myself in the United States.

Q: Is there a difference--in terms of how you have to handle the material--between a novel, which is a structured piece...and a memoir, which is structured but has a different basis--a factual basis. Is it pretty much the same kind of challenge, or is it different?

A: I think with a novel or a memoir--a book is always a challenge because there are many things the author writes and leaves to the reader's imagination. As a director I have to show concrete things. The big challenge is not only structuring the story so it feels like the book, but also filling in the realistic spaces that are left to the reader's imagination.

Q: Had you ever worked with a writer as closely as you worked with Esmeralda on this show? What did that bring to the mix, as far as you are concerned as an active participant?

A: I thought it was very important to have Esmeralda on the set, because this is her story, and I wanted as much information as I could get from her. For me to be able to turn around and say, "Esmeralda, would this be like this?" or "would this be like that?" gave me richness to my storytelling.

Q: Writing a memoir is very intimate and very personal; however, making a film is very collaborative. Were there issues about how you interpreted Esmeralda's story while you were making the film?

A: I don't think there were any major issues. I think one of the big ones was the casting of the main character, Esmeralda, herself. Because, I had no Esmeralda when we cast Ana Maria Lagasca. When Esmeralda flew in and we saw the two of them together, I think we were all shocked to see how closely they resembled each other. The younger version and the older version looked exactly the same. That gave us, I think, a lot of confidence. Then, she had no pictures of her brothers and sisters at all, so, we blindly cast the family. When Esmeralda walked in, she said, "Oh, that one, that actor looks just like my brother Hector, and this actress looks just like my sister Delsa."

Q: What do you think people are going to take away from this family? It is an extended family; it's a different kind of thing--for a lot of us. What do you think is the impression that we are have about the Santiagos?

A: I think the Latin Americans are really going to identify with this story. I think there is a great possibility that everybody can identify with this story, because we have all left someone in another country or state. This story, of making one's way in a different environment, I think it touches all of us. Our relationship, [when we are] growing up, between our parents and ourselves--I think this story will touch on that, too.

Q: It's a generational story, too. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship among the three generations in this story?

A: I love that piece about generational relationships between the grandmother, mother and daughter. I think, in a lot of Latin American families, the father doesn't take responsibility, so it ends up being a world of women. The relationships are very interesting, because I find, at least in my family and a lot of families that I know, the grandmother relates better to the granddaughter than the mother relates to the daughter. There is often tension between mother and daughter-- the grandmother is another person that the granddaughter can go to. It's very interesting, that play between the three of them. Also, we see the relationships reflecting or echoing each other, between the mother and the daughter, and the grandmother and the mother. That's really interesting.

Q: The generations have different experiences of coming into New York life. Each of them relates to it slightly differently. Can you talk about each of them finding her way in New York?

A: At the end of the day, I think this is a story of courage--of great courage. We think about this mother, who takes seven kids from rural Puerto Rico to Brooklyn, in this story. She begins to make a life for herself, to find a job, and to send her kids to school. This is a really brave woman, and her daughter is brave in that she fights--she keeps fighting for something better. She opens doors, or doors are opened for her, and she walks through them with, I think--as I said--a lot of courage.

Q: At the same time that she's opening the doors of America for her family--that means as an interpreter, dealing with the welfare people--she's also sort of hatching her own dream. It's a dream of being an artist, a dream of...

A: I think that the dream--It's a dream of a better life. Our character is on a voyage of self-discovery of what her talents are. We see the reversal of roles in that the younger generation learns English faster than the older generation. Therefore, it--she almost mothers her mother, at times, even though we never lose sight of her mother's strength. In the case of Tata, the grandmother, we see that she, perhaps, hasn't been involved as much in the outside world as the mother and daughter are forced to be.

Q: This is very much the pattern for all immigrant families. The grandmother and the grandfather stay at home and go to the stores. The mother and father do the best they can to find jobs, while the kids act as the guides. That can actually lead to some upheaval in terms of the traditional family roles, which you've touched on. There is some of that in this film; can you talk about any of that--the strains on the relationship between mother and daughter?

A: The strains of a family, of course, are that when the daughter goes more into the American life and goes to school, high school, she feels conflicted, because the American way of life is different from the traditional Puerto Rican life. Just like the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, or Armenians, there is kind of a closer family knit. A knitting of respect to the elders in a way of being that the American culture does not have. In the American culture, kids split as fast as they can. The grandparents are somewhere else. The family is broken up, and I personally think that the traditional Latin American way of keeping the grandmother involved in the life of the family is so helpful.

I think that the Americans--even the American studies have found--they are trying to bring that family group back. But, the strains are hard because Esmerelda wants to be like the rest of her classmates. She wants to wear the dresses like they do, wear her make-up like they do. She wants to go out on dates. What

she wants is to be like an American, and the mother wants to keep her as the traditional girl. That's where you start seeing the strains on the fabric of a family.

Q: What would you say the experience was for Esmeralda, personally, in terms of seeing the life you created like this?

A: I think that, at the beginning, she really didn't have an idea of how this process was going to happen. At the beginning, she was a little fearful of really seeing her family portrayed. I remember we were basically first shooting all the locations that were of the family and the outside world. Then, when we were going to go to the stage, she said to me, "Oh Betty, this is going to be hard because now this is really inside my family." I think that, except for maybe one day that was a little delicate, I think she really felt that we captured her family. In fact, I think several times she broke down and cried, because it reminded her so much of her family. It is a dramatic story--but there is a lot of humor in that culture--in the story, we have a lot of humor.

Q: It seems to me, there was a lot of effort made, too--you hear criticisms that Latino television shows and movies sort of treat the Hispanic community as a generic blur. What have you done in this film, if anything to create a specific identity for these people? A specific Latino identity.

A: I think, first of all, that the producers have been very brave to allow us to cast this movie correctly. They haven't pressured us in signing a star, so I think we've got a very authentic cast. Our cast is Puerto Rican Cuban--it consists of authentic Latino actors playing Latinos. That, I think, makes a big difference; and, we have gone for the truth. Our search in everything, in production design and wardrobe, in story and dialogue...we have tried to find the truth of how they would live, how they would talk. And, Esmeralda has helped us very much. We've put her with all the different departments, so she could tell them how her family dressed, how the apartments were, how they looked, even though we didn't have one picture. In that sense, I think it's a complete memoir, because it's completely her memory of it and our research and what we have worked out between the actors and myself.