

Producing Reality:

An Interview with Marian Rees and Anne Hopkins

Q: Why did you decide to film *Almost a Woman*? What were the values of the book that most appealed to you?

A1: A very important part of A.L.T. Films' mission statement was diversity. In selecting this film, a yearlong process, we knew we wanted to tell a story about Latino culture. As we didn't know what the story was, or who the author would be, most of the material we looked at was fiction. However, when we found this book, because it was a memoir, it really challenged our excitement--our creativity--and enthusiasm. It is a contemporary story written by a living woman who could speak and consult with us. That seemed an important part of the commitment that we felt to the American collection: it is a story of two cultures, of expanding one's vision of life, and of having an opportunity that might not have happened in a different situation.

A2: One of the important tasks to us in our selection process was tackling the questions of what is the American character, if you can speculate on that, and what is the American story? Consistent with that, we knew the answer lies historically in the immigration story. Esmeralda Santiago's memoir, ***Almost a Woman***, is probably the most contemporary immigrant story that addresses these issues: coming to this country, trying to find the American dream, and dealing with the two cultures in conflict. And, especially in this memoir, Santiago's sense of family is very, very fascinating. In particular, the conflict between the mother and daughter is a universal story inherent in the American immigrant experience. We are a land of immigrants. That was something that excited me. The memoir can't be judged against the classic sense of literature that others may think of when they view this as a contemporary film. Its writing is beautiful, and we got involved in the sense of memoir. Could we create a memoir and keep the integrity--keep the tone? We made serious efforts to do that, not only through developing the screenplay, but also in developing the production. It really excited us, given our mission statement.

Q: Have you ever made a film before that dealt with the Latino community? If so, did you approach this with any special trepidation, or any special sense of challenge?

A1: No, we had not produced or created a film about the Latino culture, so it was a special challenge to us. It's a world, a language, and a culture that we had no personal history or experience of. We made every effort we could to surround ourselves with people who knew a lot more than we did. In the process, people joined us as consultants and hands on professionals to be part of the filming behind the scenes and in front of the camera.

Q: One of the first decisions you made was to have Esmeralda script the film--can you tell us about the script development process?

A1: As in any script development, you have to flush out, what is the story that you want to present dramatically...the arch and all those words that one uses in script development. What particularly concerned us was that we keep the integrity of the material. We began by conversing with Esmeralda even before we thought of an outline or of how to tell the story. We flew her in from New York and spent a weekend sitting and talking about the integrity of the piece. Of course, what was important to her was that her family is still living--it's a family of nine children. She wanted to be sure and comfortable--to trust us, so that those siblings who would see the film, would see themselves rather than somebody else's version of who they were. How could she feel comfortable that these Hollywood producers would understand what she has written and the intimacy of her memoir? During the two days we spent talking about the project, we were able to give her those kinds of assurances. It took another weekend, as well, of sitting and talking, not to persuade her to let us film it, but for us to be comfortable that we would know how to do it. Her assurances and our sense of commitment to integrity set the tone. Then, we determined that Esmeralda should take a crack at the screenplay herself. She didn't insist on it, but she has a good, strong story sense--

she's a storyteller--and she began finding out for herself how one writes a screenplay. Then, she began working with Ann.

Q: Ann, can you address the process just a little bit?

A2: I think a very special dimension to the script development, amplifying what Marian said, is the dramatic choice of whose point of view the story presents. Creating a screenplay always begins with a sense of point of view, and because it is a memoir, it is written as an adult's perspective of looking back. The protagonist is really a 13 year-old girl--a girl who goes from 13 to 18; dramatically that's an unorthodox story to tell for prime-time television. As we met with Esmeralda about our script, we had many conversations about how we could heighten the drama, how to create arches and turning points--all the things that we traditionally do in creating screenplays, most of which emanate from novels. What we learned as we went through the process with Esmeralda, is the difference between adapting a memoir and adapting a novel. The memoir defies the traditional conflicts and turning points--it is a gentler story. Interestingly, the emotional point of view, and I think this is the point that was most challenging, was that of the young girl who had no perspective of her own. It led to many conversations about narration, which Esmeralda was nervous about. But, we felt that the character in the middle of a life experience was too young to have the opportunity for gaining or knowledge of emotional perspective and that narration would be important to the film. As the screenplay emerged, we developed narrations; then, we changed them later as the film began to have its own sense of identity. I think that emotional perspective and dramatic insight were unique aspects to creating this script.

A1: One of the most cogent concerns and issues for the screenplay, i.e. the film, was how to manage and how to treat the language. Much of the film, at least the first third or more, is subtitled. In the film, as in the book, we did follow the text in that Esmeralda's mother never spoke English. The household spoke a Latino language. We puzzled over it--again, it seemed important to the authenticity of the material that we be true to the language. This was Exxon Mobil Masterpiece Theatre. We were breaking out of some perimeters here, but it was a challenge--I thought it was a great challenge to have subtitles, have them technically placed on a screen in such a way. That it would be easy having the eyes--the movement from the faces to the line of the subtext--so comfortable, that very soon it would flow. They would be hearing Spanish, reading English, and thinking they were involved. That was a risk that we wanted to take. Esmeralda felt very encouraged by that. Puerto Rican is the language, and it is, itself, a very specific dialect. Therefore, we had compound issues to deal with, but that was what was so exciting and challenging about this. I just trusted the film: if we told the story right, if we cast it with the right effort by having Puerto Ricans in principle roles and Puerto Ricans and Latinos in front of and behind the camera, we would help create an authenticity. I keep using that word, but it was a requirement. The material demanded that, if you trust the material, it would find its way to the camera and on to the screen as long as we were vigilant about it. The subtitling works, and the acting is so good. The actors are wonderful, and, suddenly, you are hearing language that is universal because these issues of family, of love, of separation, of abandonment, of just growing up.... You just hear a common language, and I think the film will have its real audience that will go beyond the masterpiece theatre audience. I think that's one of the goals that we have been encouraged to try and meet. It's been daunting, challenging, and fatiguing--I think it might be our most rewarding film, in a way.

Q: In addition to having Esmeralda do the script, you created a very unusual working relationship with her that extended throughout the shooting period. Can you characterize or describe that a little and tell us what you got from it?

A1: We invited Esmeralda to be a consultant to the production and on the set during the later part of pre-production. Then, she was invited to stay and participate throughout the whole shooting. This invitation is unusual and a risk. For instance, we have done previous true stories as producers where it hasn't been suitable for the person whose life story is being presented to be on the set with the actors and during production. This situation, however, was very positive and fulfilling, in a large part, due to Esmeralda herself and her own giving nature, sensitivity, and intelligence. She respected the process, she respected the actors and what everybody on the set was responsible for doing. What she gave us all was support, she gave

us confidence and the courage that we could do it, and she was there as a resource for our questions. She also understood where things had to be changed. We gave her our word that we would not betray any of her or her family members' experiences in our portrayals. If we needed a little license for various minor things, she was very understanding of that; and so, it was a two way street that was mutually supportive. It gave her the assurance, and it gave us a great deal of reassurance...whether it was in designing the sets for the apartments or the language itself as Negi's language evolved from no English to proficient by the time she graduated from school. Esmeralda was there to support everybody.

A1: She had her own chair. She had a spot on the set so people knew where she was, and she anchored herself. Everybody was able to go to her with a question. She wasn't controlling, rather she was just there to be accessed. And, you'd see little kids run over, and ask, "Did I do that right?" And, Wanda (Miriam Colon) would find her way to her. Everybody felt so secure--Esmeralda is a great credit; she's a hugely gifted human being. And, her sense of compassion, her passion, and her gentle intellect were just a deep wellspring from which everybody on the set could drink. And, they did. Really, we couldn't have done it without her. Sometimes, there was conflict, when she disagreed with something. She and the director would have some disagreement, and Betty, the director, was learning, as well, because we were really stringent about the Puerto Rican accent, the specificity of the culture, and things would have to be changed even after a shot had been made. Esmeralda was discreet; she would come to Ann, she'd go to Ron, or she would come to me, and she would suggest that something wasn't quite right and ask was it something that we could do again--and, if it was significant we did it again. We allowed for a lot of flexibility within such a very arbitrary schedule. We were really functioning as a film family. I call it that, because we were able to be that flexible within the limited time we had each day. And, she had a great deal to do with setting that tone. One day, she did get upset and she said, "That isn't right!" She was very outspoken, and everybody listened. But, it was so important that none of us would have known otherwise. That told me how right it was that we decided to have her there--not at her insistence, but really at ours.

A2: It's true. Someone must have enormous trust to take their life experience and that of a living family--her mother, brothers, and sisters. To convey their trust to strangers requires an enormous leap of faith. We took that as a very powerful responsibility. It was very important to have her there as a resource, because we had given our word that we would not betray her.

Q: What was her reaction when she saw her film family assemble? What was her reaction when she saw the sets that represented the apartments that she had lived in?

A1: I think she was very teary at places. It was a very emotional truth for her. It took her back in time and place, and she complemented each of the departments that created those universes. She felt at home. She walked onto the set and felt as if it was a place that she had lived in. It was a very emotional experience for her.

A2: One of the things that was really spontaneously funny... the young Negi, the young Esmeralda... at 13 and during that span of 13 to 18...had an infatuation. Her first love was Nestor--in our casting process there was this really handsome, young actor, and, I just thought wow. Fortunately, he could act so he was set as Nestor, the love interest of this young Negi. When Esmeralda came on the set and encountered Nestor, she said, "Oh my, had he been Nestor, I wouldn't have turned him down. I would have married him in an instant." Then, the whole story would be different. She just fell in love with him, instantly. I thought, well, I guess we did that right. But, we had trouble trying to work out the ending of that relationship consistently with how it was in the book; but she didn't mind that at all. She thought he was heaven.

Q: How did she work with Ana Maria? Since, essentially, she is the person Ana Maria grows up to be, how did that work on the set? What was their relationship like?

A2: Instantly good. Instantly trusting. Ana Maria did not have any of the accoutrements of being an actor--she was learning. She has a gift, you could tell, and Esmeralda embraced her instantly. It was uncanny how much they looked alike--looking at that Ana Maria physiognomy now and seeing Esmeralda's picture on

the front of her book, **Almost A Women**, it's spooky. It was just uncanny, and Esmeralda saw that instantly. She said she thought she was looking at herself, not through a mirror, but really at herself. It was really amazing... a very easy relationship for the two of them. She was an eager student, and Esmeralda was a great tutor in that sense.

A1: I think, because it was easy, there were very important emotional insights that Esmeralda could give to Ana Maria about her relationships to her mother and with her father, which was a very complicated one. He was a man who basically let them down, emotionally abandoned the family and her. Yet, she deeply loved him and got a great deal of her creativity from her father, who was a poet and a writer. Ana Maria could never have understood fully the complexity of those relationships and those emotions had Esmeralda not been accessible and available to really speak and consult with her. There's one scene in particular that's a flashback between Negi and her father, where he teaches her a poem. Ana Maria understood the words, she understood the Spanish, but, emotionally, she wasn't getting the deep connection of what it meant between the father and the daughter. It was through discussing that connection with Esmeralda that Ana Maria really could reach into a deeper place of understanding; as a result, the scene is very powerful.

Q: Tell me about your cast. Specifically, tell me about the three ladies who play the three generations of Santiago's.

A2: Well, as I said, Phyllis Huffman is a really astonishing casting person. She understands character, and she has such an ability to match the character with the right actor. She's been consistent about that in all our films. There was someone who very much wanted to play the role of mommy and really begged to audition for it. We were curious about her, but Wanda was really Phyllis's choice. She said she really is the one to do the film. Wanda, who is Puerto Rican, was out of the country, and when she came back, fortunately, we were able to have an audition. Everybody, of course, had read the book, and anybody from Puerto Rico knows who Esmeralda is -- knows of her or about her. She is an icon in that country, and Wanda came with no real expectations. What was unforgettable to me was her passion to do this. She liked what this series was about. She was so excited to think that it was going to be on Masterpiece Theatre. She was very eager to be a part of it at any cost. So, she was exceedingly nervous for such a gifted actress, but her desire was so deep for both the culture and the opportunity. Not for herself, interestingly enough--her ego ever came forward in any of this. There wasn't a choice. Miriam was one of the founders of the Puerto Rican traveling theatre and brought a richness of not only the culture, but also of acting. She's a gifted actress, and Esmeralda was so excited for Miriam Colon to be a part of this movie. The sense of it coming to life through these people was something that she hardly believed could happen. And, again, we've been blessed in so many ways with these films. When these actors came together, they were an instant family--they had chemistry between them that isn't always there among actors who often bring their own anxieties, self-expectations, and sometimes even, trepidation. But, these actors reinforced each other--particularly Miriam, who has also been a dramatic coach. She knows all about theatre, acting, and writing. She brought a wealth of the craft. So, it was wonderful for Ana Maria to be surrounded by these two really talented pros. They guided her, they were careful with her, but they demanded of her. The way they approached their own work taught her volumes about how to become an actor.

A1: I'd like to make a comment about Wanda in addition to what Marian already said about her. I recall some very specific conversations with Wanda, where she said one of the reasons she wanted to do the film was for her mother--and for all Puerto Rican mothers. She fully understood that the film was not Mami's story, that it's Negi's story. Negi was the protagonist's dramatic focal point. In many regards, Wanda had to invent and create a subtext that wasn't always written in the script for the character of Mami, because the story's being told by a 13 year-old--from a teenage point of view. That sense of character and integrity was so important to Wanda and how she worked with Esmeralda to create, flush out, and fill out that character. She spoke often about the sense of dignity, the sense of respect that she as a Latina mother wanted to invest in her children. She felt Esmeralda's own mother did so with her children, and she wanted to find subtle ways, as an actress, to visually invest the character with that subtext, whether or not it was expressed in the script. I think that it's important to recognize that Wanda, as an actress and as a woman, a Puerto Rican actress, felt a tremendous responsibility to bring a quality to the film that she felt would enrich the telling of the story.

Q: Great. Now, this is a story about an immigrant family. It's also a story about coming of age; but also, it's a story of someone gradually discovering that she's an artist. How much weight did you give that in the film, and how is it manifested in the film?

A1: I think it's manifested in the film in a subtler rather than very overt way, because the young character of Negi didn't know that she was going to become a writer. She hadn't set her goals to become a writer. She discovered her artistic expression as she was living her life. She kept journals because her father inspired her to. Her father was a writer and a poet, and I think that was the greatest connection between the two of them as daughter and father. Her father's parting gift to her when she left Puerto Rico, which is the opening of the film...he gives her a composition notebook and says to "write your thoughts." It wasn't until Esmeralda had graduated from college, from Harvard, that she began to write. She didn't know that was going to be her life's goal. It wasn't until, as she says herself, she was nursing her first child Lucas that she had the inspiration to keep diaries, which she then published as her first book, **When I Was Puerto Rican**. That knowledge imbues itself into the film through a young woman who was observant, inventive, and creative. These are the qualities that the character of Mr. Burnett, her guidance counselor in junior high school, recognized, and that is why he would feel it appropriate to recommend that she audition for the high school of performing arts. She, the character, says, "I'm not an actress, I've never studied dancing. I don't know music. Why are you recommending me?" Yet, he saw a quality in her that she, herself, didn't know; but, with the proper nurturing, which is the best of what teachers do, those qualities fomented and germinated in her until they fully came forth when she was a woman. That is, obviously, the gift that she expresses now.

A2: I think that one of the driving forces in the memoir and in this part of the book has a great deal to do with the education of Esmeralda Santiago. At the heart of it, it's the self education and education in a bi-cultural context: being pulled by very adolescent forces within herself and remembering how strong they were, and the Latino culture which is tight, and staying in your own culture. Forces that the movie presents as saying, "Don't become like those American girls." I think there's a strong theme of courage in this character. It's not always subtle, but you always can feel it pulsing in her. Esmeralda and I would talk about the creative things that Esmeralda felt but whose specificity she couldn't necessarily find until later, and the fact there was this pulse in her, a great curiosity. She was very careful not to be defiant, but she needed to follow the pull of those energies going to the Manhattan School of Performing Arts, one of the recognized institutions for the arts. To go as the first student from this high school was terribly challenging, and added to the conflict at home. All of those things that are in the book are in the film.

We end the film with the graduation, which is what's real and idealistic. The film has an exuberant ending, which I think Ana Maria caught as the actress. The music, by Lee Holdridge, supports this with wonderful eloquence and elegance. As Esmeralda told us--that conflict that resulted in the graduation in which she hands her mother the diploma and saying, "this is as much for you as it is for me," and she gives her mother the diploma. As Esmeralda said, that it was really her declaration of independence, because she had formed within herself that identity. She knew who she was to become in a way, because she was going to become a woman of great curiosity, of well-formed values. Some people do have a creative force about becoming who they are. They don't just flow as on the river; they're in the river and are creating some of the flow and the current. Esmeralda is like that today. She is churning with this kind of life force and great humor--wonderfully observant and possessing all of these qualities I hope are there in this young actress and the young woman becoming almost a woman. And, at the end, you know that she has a journey ahead of her.