

By Ulysses de la Torre for Inter Press Service News Agency

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A young man arrives at a fork in the road and neither choice before him presents a lesser risk to his survival, neither one is less traveled and neither one is morally higher or lower than the other. Option one is a livelihood sustained on the lucre from trafficking drugs to a wealthy northern neighbor with seemingly insatiable demand; option two is embarking on a journey so physically trying that it may very well leave him for dead. No U-turn allowed.

This is the situation in which Magdiel, a 23-year-old Mexican corrido musician from the state of Sinaloa finds himself in “Al Otro Lado” (To the Other Side), a 70-minute documentary whose world premiere screened last week at New York City’s Tribeca Film Festival.

“I was really interested in that moment young people have when they decide what to do with their lives, they don’t have a lot of education and there’s an economic crisis in the industries their families are traditionally in,” director Natalia Almada told IPS. “In smaller towns, people who would have followed in their parents’ footsteps and become fishermen or farmers just can’t, it’s not an option anymore.”

From this beginning premise, Almada, a native of Sinaloa now living in Brooklyn, New York, leads us into the nexus where narco-trafficking, immigration and corrido music collide in the form of Magdiel, whom drug-traffickers pay to write songs about their exploits. Throughout the film, he openly wavers between joining his friends in the drug-trafficking business versus going “to the other side” to realize his dream of making it as a corrido musician.

Entwined in the story of Magdiel is the story of corrido music, a genre with heavy polka influences whose origins date back more than 100 years and have traditionally served as a type of “musical newspaper” through which the voice of the people could be heard. During the Mexican Revolution, corrido ballads frequently spoke of legendary figures such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. In keeping current with the times, the art form has evolved over the past few decades into a medium through which the stories of drug traffickers are told, roughly mirroring rap music's rise as an artistic representation of urban blight in the United States. As the drug capital of Mexico, Sinaloa has served as an easy breeding ground for the genre and is the birthplace of the corrido group Los Tigres del Norte and the legendary singer Chalino Sanchez, who was gunned down in 1992.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that corrido music was until recently banned from Mexican radio stations for being perceived as celebrating drug trafficking and gangsterism, it has now become a \$300 million industry in the United States and is the most popular form of Latin music on the market.

“Music is an ideal way to talk about immigration and drug trafficking because the musicians are singing those songs and they’re really the closest thing to giving access to the voice of the immigrants and the drug traffickers instead of me as a documentarian coming in and imposing that voice,” said Almada.

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Indeed, the lyrics of Magdiel's compositions set the tone for the film:

“Yo soy de un campo pesquero
Que siempre rifo mi suerte,
Con mi vida he jugado
Y a los riesgos le he ganado
Con mis 500 caballos a las leyes he burlado.”

(I come from a fishing village
And I always try my luck;
I've gambled with my life,
And have beaten the odds;
With my 500-horsepower engine
I have outsmarted the law.)

From opium- and marijuana-laden mountains, to Magdiel's seaside hometown of La Reforma where drugs are shipped northward in fishing vessels, to the streets of East Los Angeles, Almada allows the cheeky lyricism of the music to infuse a sense of lightness into an otherwise tragic phenomenon. As with most discussions about Mexico, the issue of immigration is an inevitable subtext and is addressed directly when a coyote offers to cross the composer to the United States for free in exchange for a song about the coyote's way of life. It is at this point that the story reverses its focus: all of a sudden we are viewing the life of a man through the issues rather than the issues through the man, culminating in an emotional finale that pulls back the curtains of corrido music's subtle wit and reminds us of the gravity of the situation.

“There's a really strong influence and pull from the United States. There's a consciousness about how the shrimp that the fisherman catch is for the Americans and the drugs that they make and they traffic are for the Americans and of course people are migrating to the United States,” Almada told IPS. “It's very easy for Americans to villainize the drug traffickers and put all the blame on the production of drugs in Mexico and not take responsibility for consumption in the United States. The views on immigration often don't take into account how important illegal labor is to the American economy. It's a really complex issue and I really wanted to give it a more human face on the Mexican side.”

Ms. Almada previously won the best short documentary prize at the 2002 Tribeca Film Festival for “All Water Has a Perfect Memory.” Her next film will be about her great-grandfather, Plutarco Elías Calles, who was the President of Mexico from 1924-1928 and the founder of the Mexican political party now known as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

More information: www.altamurafilms.com.