

It must have been the fourth day of the Sundance Edit and Story Lab. I'd had a dream that woke me up. "Intent not content" was repeating in my head like a mantra. I walked down the mountain in the fresh morning air. Everyone was either at breakfast or asleep. I unlocked our edit suite and sat in front of my film for the first time in days.

Daniela Alatorre, my producer, and I had arrived with a 75-minute rough cut of *El General*, the film I had been invited to bring to the lab. I was at that stage in the edit when you see the film as a film for the first time. After years of seeing fragments of a film, of imagining how it would be, there it was, stretched out on the Final Cut Pro timeline with a beginning, middle and end...of sorts.

This gave me some confidence when the lights faded and my grandmother's voice filled the theater during the first screening of the lab.

About five years ago, I was given six hours of audio-tape recordings that my grandmother had made about her life. These were the genesis of my new film, *El General*, titled after my great-grandfather, El General Plutarco Elias Calles, a general in the Mexican revolution who became president in 1924. The list of names ascribed to him is long and colorful: "A Latin Lincoln"... "A Mexican Mussolini"... "A Latin American Lenin"... "El Jefe Maximo"... "Iron Man." He was exiled from Mexico in 1936.

The screening ended, the lights went on and we made our way out to the circle of chairs arranged for our discussion. *El General* was the first of four works-in-progress to screen, and I still didn't know everyone's name. Although the circle is intended to be a neutral seating arrangement, at that moment I felt as if I were a sacrificial virgin in an Aztec ceremony. Luckily, I had Daniela, my guardian angel, by my side!

Two years earlier, I had returned to Mexico with a suitcase and the beginnings of a film. I set up my edit system on my grandmother's desk and with the soundtrack of Mexico City pouring in through my window, I set out to finish making my film. In some way I feel that it is the film that guides me and not I who directs the film. I need to look through the camera and edit with the materials to uncover and shape my thoughts. Until this point,



A discussion session at the Sundance Institute Documentary Composers Laboratory. Left to right: Composer/Creative Advisor Miriam Cutler, Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program Director Cara Mertes, Composer Fellow Vivek Maddala. Courtesy of Sundance Institute. Photo: Jill Orschel.

Daniela had been the only person I'd really let into my process. And so, it was strange and intimidating to enter a trailer full of people.

The days that followed the screenings had a strange rhythm. The room was crowded with rolling chairs, and advisors came in pairs one after the other. Sometimes we cut, sometimes we just discussed. Often the views and opinions were conflicting: Mary Lampson wanted to float in my dreamy subjective visuals, while Sam Green wanted to be grounded with more historical clarity. The questions came at me with a penetrating sharpness: What was I trying to say? What was my film really about? And that Final Cut Pro timeline that had felt so reassuring was now full of gaps. Every morning, Daniela served me a dose of courage as we walked down the mountain to the trailers.

Art school had taught me to be skeptical of criticism because often critique is not used to better achieve the vision of the artist, but rather, to advance the agenda of the person giving the critique. I also never believed in consensus—the opposite of a singular vision that is so integral to the work that I admire. But really good critique is invaluable as it allows you to see the work from different angles. I was afraid that rather than finding something, I would lose something that was integral to my film.

Often in the middle of cutting a scene, we'd all be rounded up to go into the theater for the advisors' presentations. Inevitably, these seemed like a huge distraction in the moment, and to leave the gaping hole in the timeline was terribly unsettling. It was difficult to silence the dialogue in my head and to stop trying to solve the problems that were being pointed out in our film. But in listening to other filmmakers talk about their process and watching their work, my own process was put into a different perspective. They had faced the same questions and doubts that were plaguing me and they were not seeking to answer the questions for me, but lead me to a place where I could answer them myself.

The night I had my dream, I went to sleep feeling exhausted and worn thin. What if in this cacophony of opinions I'd lost my voice? Or worse yet, did I have a voice at all? What was the reason and the meaning of all this criticism? What did they see that I somehow couldn't see? Why couldn't I get them to see the film that was in my head? And then, in the morning, something happened for me. I sat in front of my film, alone for the first time in days, and I was able to edit. Sam Green and Lewis Erskine, the primary advisors assigned to me, peeked into the edit suite and then quietly disappeared. I later learned that this was not by accident. It was the careful

continued on page 24



Producer Daniela Alatorre (left) and director Natalia Almada reviewing their film *El General* at the Sundance Institute Documentary Composers Laboratory. Courtesy of Sundance Institute. Photo: Jill Orschel.

orchestration of the advisors and documentary film program director Cara Mertes, who met every morning to discuss our progress and were watching and calculating. They'd push me and challenge me until I reached some kind of limit, and there came the clarity that I hadn't been able

goal of continuing the work we'd done at the lab. I found myself staring at my computer and, to my surprise, I really missed Sam, Mary, Lewis, Cara, Woody Richman, Kate Amend, Laura Poitras and all the others. I missed knowing that in the room next door there was another filmmaker staring at

to find.

The final day of the lab we all returned to the theater, where we began to see the results of the week's journey. Everyone's film had transformed and it was as though each filmmaker had found her own voice and each film its own language. It was clear to me that my internal drama and struggle with my film had been a collective experience.

Daniela and I returned to my grandmother's desk with the

a hole in the timeline. So, I decided that I wanted to try to continue the work that we'd begun at the lab, and I was lucky that Sam and Mary were in New York and were available. I packed up my film and my suitcase and flew to work with them.

Our return to Sundance for the Documentary Composers Lab a month later had a very different challenge. Ours was the only film to be invited to both. The Edit and Story Lab had been a deep untangling of my thoughts so that I could articulate them in the film through the editing and the story. At the Doc Composers Lab, the conversation shifted from a focus on story to one on sentiment as we spent hours trying to define and translate the feeling of the scene into sound.

Doc Composers is a joint lab, run by Peter Golub, who directs the Film Music Program and Composers Lab at Sundance, and Cara. Peter assigned composer Vivek Maddala to work with us. While he was writing, Daniela and I headed off to Cara's room to look at a cut of the film with directing advisor James Longley. We'd watched a few minutes of the cut when James turned the DVD off and decided that what we really needed to do was re-record the narration. An hour later, he had made a sound recording studio. It wasn't just that James had all his audio recording gear that had surprised us, but that he knew that recording the narration then and there was what the film needed the most.

I can't imagine Vivek's process in the trailer down the hill, but one morning when we came to watch what he'd done, the music had this lovely, strange sound. In the middle of the night, Vivek had resorted to recording the sound of his hand rubbing his stubbly beard...and it was beautiful.

There are few institutions that are really able to be facilitators and guardians of the artistic process, and not sacrifice artistic vision to institutional needs. The Sundance Labs were this kind of sanctuary for me, a place that I came to understand was there to protect and nurture my creative process as I chose to define it. □

Natalia Almada is a Mexico City- and Brooklyn-based documentary filmmaker whose films have screened at Sundance, the Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Biennial, PBS and ARTE, as well as other international venues. Her directing credits include All Water Has a Perfect Memory, Al Otro Lado and El General.

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