

## *Maria Full of Grace*, 2004



Writer/Director Joshua Marston  
R-Rated, 101 minutes

2004 Sundance Film Festival, Dramatic  
Audience Award  
2004 Berlin Film Festival, Silver Bear, Best  
Actress

### Cast

Maria Alvarez	Catalina Sandino Moreno
Juana	Virgina Ariza
Blanca	Yenny Paola Vega
Supervisor	Rodrigo Sanchez Borhorquez
Felipe	Charles Albert Patino
Juan	Wilson Guerrero
Diana Alvarez	Johanna Andrea Mora
Pacho	Fabricio Suarez
Pacho	Mateo Suarez
Rosita	Evangelina Morales
Feamle Pharmacist	Juana Guarderas
Franklin	John Alex Toro
Javier	Jaime osario Gomez
Lucy Diaz	Guilied Lopez
Pellet Maker	Victor Macias
Pharmacist	Hugo Ferro

Stewardess	Ana Maria Acosta
Carolina	Ada Vergara De Solano
Constanza	Maria Consuelo Perez
Customs Inspector	Ed Trucco
Customs Inspector	Selenis Leyva
Wilson	Juan Porras Hincapie
Carlos	Oscar Bejarano
Gas Attendant	Singkhan Bandit
Taxi Driver	Patrick Rameau
Pablo Aristizabal	Fernando Velasquez
Receptionist	Monique Curnen
Carla	Patricia Rae
Don Fernando	Orlando Tobon
Doctor	Lourdes Martin
Enrique	Bobby Plasencia

### Crew

Line Producer	Becky Glupczynski	Cinematography	Jim Denault
Associate Producer	Rodrigo Guerrero	Film Editing	Anne McCabe, Lee Percy
Line Producer/Ecuador	Gigia Jaramillo	Production Design	Debbie DeVilla, Monica Marulanda
Producer	Paul S. Mezey	Art Direction	Yann Blanc
Co-Producer	Jaime Osorio Gomez	Se Decoration	Carrie Stewart
Associate Producer	Orlando Tobon	Costume Design	Sarah Beers, Lauren Press
Original Music	Leonardo Heiblum, Jacobo Lieberman		

## Awards for *Maria Full of Grace*, (2004)

2005 Argentinean Film Critics Association Awards, Silver Condor, Best Foreign Film  
2004 Berlin International Film Festival, Alfred Bauer Award, Joshua Marston  
2004 Berlin International Film Festival, Silver Berlin Bear, Best Actress Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2004 Chicago Film Critics Association Awards, Most Promising Performer, Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2005 Dallas-Fort Worth Film Critics Association Awards, Russell Smith Award, Joshua Marston  
2004 Deauville Film Festival, Audience Award, Joshua Marston  
2004 Deauville Film Festival, Critics Award, Joshua Marston  
2004 Deauville Film Festival, Grand Special Prize Award, Joshua Marston  
2004 Gotham Awards, Breakthrough Award, Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2004 Gotham Awards, Breakthrough Director Award, Joshua Marston  
2005 Imagen Foundation Award, Best Actress Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2005 Independent Spirit Awards, Best First Screenplay, Joshua Marston  
2004 Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, New Generation Award, Joshua Marston & Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2004 Los Angeles IFP/West Film Festival, Audience Award, Best Narrative Feature, Joshua Marston  
2004 New York Film Critics Circle Award, Best First Film, Joshua Marston  
2004 Newport International Film Festival, Jury Award, Best Film, Joshua Marston  
2005 Online Film Critics Society Awards, Best Breakthrough Performance, Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2005 Premios ACE, Best Actress, Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2004 San Francisco Film Critics Circle, Best Foreign-Language Film  
2005 Satellite Awards, Golden Satellite Award, Best DVD extra for the commentary  
2004 Seattle Film Critics Award, Best Foreign-Language Film  
2004 Seattle International Film Festival, Golden Space Needle Award, Best Actress, Catalina Sandino Moreno  
2004 Southeastern Film Critics Association Awards, Best Foreign Language Film  
2004 Sundance Film Festival, Audience Award, Dramatic, Joshua Marston  
2004 Sao Paula International Film Festival, Internationsl Jury Award, Joshua Marston

2004 Toronto Film Critics Association Awards, Best Feature Film, Joshua Marston

## Chapter 1. Maria and Blanca

Filming Dates 4 August 2003 - 8 September 2003, Copyright Holder © 2003 Home Box Office, Inc.

The following comments are collected from audio commentary by Josh Marston, the director and writer of *Maria Full of Grace*, and numerous other resources.

Biography for Josh Marston (Director/Screenwriter)



Mini biography Joshua Marston was born in California. His way to film direction has been atypical. Indeed, he first worked in Paris as a journalist for Life, then for ABC News during the Gulf War. He later turned to teaching in Prague where he was an English teacher for a year. Back in the USA he graduated in Chicago, becoming a master of political sciences before getting a film direction degree from the University of New York. He made his first short in 1999.

### Trivia

- Went to the same High School as Angelina Jolie, Michael Klesic, Nicolas Cage, Corben Bernsen, Lenny Kravitz, David Schwimmer, Jonathan Silverman, and Richard Dreyfuss.
- Speaks Spanish.

"About a year into the process, I realized that aside from making the film about a girl who lived very far away, I was making a film about a girl who was doing something universal in trying to figure out the meaning of her life." [on 'Maria Full of Grace.']

### Director - filmography

1. The Iraqi Convoy Project (2006)
2. "Six Feet Under" - The Silence (2005) TV Episode
3. Maria Full of Grace (2004)
4. Bus to Queens (1999)

### Writer - filmography

1. The Iraqi Convoy Project (2006)
2. Maria Full of Grace (2004) (written by)

### 3. Bus to Queens (1999)

#### Editor - filmography

1. Bus to Queens (1999)
2. Day and an Arabian Knight (1999)

#### Producer - filmography

1. Bus to Queens (1999) (producer)

#### Himself - filmography

1. The 20th IFP Independent Spirit Awards (2005) (TV) Himself

This project was five years in the making. Five years previous to the release of the film Josh Marston wrote the script in 48 hours of insanity. The idea came from a story about a technique used by drug mules called Shot gunning. It is where they will load a flight full of smugglers knowing that at least one of them would get caught. The one that gets caught will cause a distraction thus the other will get through. It is such a common practice that sometimes drug traffickers will leak the identity of one of the drug mules in order for the others to get through.

The original idea was for four or five drug smugglers on the same plane with the same kind of similar circumstances, relying on one another and at the same time knowing that one of them will go down, thus in a sense competing with one another to succeed.

Josh stated that he got sucked into writing the script and then two days later came out with a finished script. He stated that he really didn't want to stop writing, as he didn't want to lose the characters in his head.

Two reasons that Josh Marston was interested in this story was 1) feelings on the "war on drugs, not working, 2) fascination with immigrant stories.

The goal of writing this was partly because he got this amazing hook and also he had been following what was going on in the drug war for many years and he was interested in world

politics and he was reading about Columbia. Columbia had been going through a forty year civil war and that there were guerrillas fighting paramilitaries and that there was insane drug trading.

Josh was also fascinated with this story as he likes immigrant's stories; his grandparents like many Americans were also immigrants. Josh stated that when he meets someone with a different accent, he always inquires where were they from, why did they leave, so living in Brooklyn New York he had a lot of experience with Columbians who have migrated to the United States.

This is intended to make a comment on the *War on Drugs*, and Josh is adamant that the *War on Drugs* is not affective and we are going down the wrong road in trying to stop the drug trade and the drug problem. He also shows you what it is like to live in the United States as an immigrant and doing it in a way that is compelling to watch.

After his 48 hours of writing he spent months revising his work. You cannot just make a political film, you need something that is shown through the eyes of one character, and make it absolutely compelling point of view.



#### Chapter 2 (0:06:04) Looking for Something More

Originally this shot of Maria and Juan kissing was the opening shot to the film. The goal of this scene is obviously to show Maria as this very determined young woman who is bogged down by several things, one being her boyfriend who is sort of a loser and a drag. They had to make this scene visual and dramatic by having her scale this wall.

It takes us inside an experience most of us know very little about, yet its focus remains always on Maria, a complex young woman in complex circumstances. Like Maria, we have no idea where events will lead; because of Maria, we care very much.

It didn't work to have this scene at the top of the film, so it was re-edited by Lee Percy.

Biography for Lee Percy (Editor)

- Studied acting under John Houseman at The Juilliard School, New York.
- Studied film at University of California. Currently resides in New York City.

Editor - filmography

1. Wind Chill (2007)
2. Mrs. Harris (2005)
3. The Ice Harvest (2005)
4. A Love Song for Bobby Long (2004)
5. A Home at the End of the World (2004)
6. Maria Full of Grace (2004)
7. Murder by Numbers (2002)
8. The Center of the World (2001)
9. Lift (2001/I)
10. The Believer (2001)
11. Bill's Gun Shop (2001)
12. Boys Don't Cry (1999)
13. 54 (1998)
14. Desperate Measures (1998)
15. Before and After (1996)
16. Kiss of Death (1995/I)
17. Corrina, Corrina (1994)
18. Against the Wall (1994) (TV)
19. Single White Female (1992)
20. Year of the Gun (1991)
21. Reversal of Fortune (1990)
22. Blue Steel (1990)
23. Checking Out (1989)
24. Slam Dance (1987)
25. Dolls (1987)
26. From Beyond (1986)
27. Troll (1986)
28. Re-Animator (1985)
29. They Call Me Bruce? (1982)
30. The Killing of America (1982)
31. Shogun Assassin (1980)

Miscellaneous Crew - filmography

1. Kiss of the Spider Woman (1985)

0:05:06 The wall that Catalina is scaling is a wall that they had to build. They hired a rock climbing expert to assist her in climbing the wall but she is climbing it herself, with some cautionary assistance. She was wearing a safety line that they were able to remove digitally later in post-production.

Biography for Catalina Sandino Moreno (Maria)  
Date of birth 19 April 1981, Bogota, Colombia, Height 5' 5"

Trivia

- Became interested in theater and stage at a very young age. Took acting classes at a Bogotá (Colombia) theater before getting "discovered" by an anonymous supporter who referred her name to the casting agent for *Maria Full of Grace* (2004).
- Studied advertising at a college in Colombia before moving to New York City around 2003.
- She is the first Colombian to be nominated for an Academy Award
- Went to a British school in Bogota, Colombia.
- Was in NY when she heard on TV that she was nominated for Best Actress in the 2005 Oscar for her role in '*Maria Full of Grace*.'
- Went to Saint George's School in Bogotá, Colombia
- Invited to join AMPAS in 2005.
- Became the first actress ever to be nominated to Best Actress at the Oscars for a role that is spoken entirely in Spanish.
- Won Best Actress at the 2004 Cartagena Film Festival in her home country Colombia.

Actress - filmography

1. Love in the Time of Cholera (2007) Hildebranda Sanchez
2. The Heart of the Earth (2007) Blanca Bosco
3. The Hottest State (2007) Sarah

4. Fast Food Nation (2006) Sylvia
5. Paris, je t'aime (2006) Ana - segment 'Loin du 16ème'
6. Journey to the End of the Night (2006) Angie
7. Maria Full of Grace (2004) María Álvarez

### Chapter 3 (0:14:26) With Child

Paul Mezey is the producer on this project and he came on board after Josh Marston was one year into the five year project. The two had known each other from film school and had made connections there.

A lot of producers that got involved with this project wanted it to be done in English; they even suggested the family had an English speaking nanny that taught English to the family. HBO pictures came along and loved the idea that the story would be in Spanish.

Columbia is the second largest producer of roses in the world, second only to Holland. The rose industry is a very significant product of Columbia, and many people come to Columbia to get employment in the rose industry.

0:07:24 Two problems they had filming in the rose plantation 1) the roses wilting purchased 18,000 roses, 2) the rain on the roof.

The scenes in the rose plantation were filmed early on in the process and there was 114 employees working at the same time that they were filming. They had to buy all of the roses used in the film, so they purchased 18,000 roses. Roses don't last very long when they are not refrigerated and it is a warm environment. Thus shooting this scene was a nightmare, cause every time you turned around the roses were wilting. And then it rained and the roof was made of tin, so it was too noisy to film. So there was this loud drizzling sound, on the second day of the shoot.

Working in these conditions is very harsh to the employees, besides working on your feet all day, the workers are exposed to the pesticides and chemicals used to sustain the roses. It irritates their

skin and their eyes, many things that people don't think about when they buy roses for Valentine's Day or Mother's day.

At the same time plantations have gotten a lot better and are a steady source of employment. Maria is also the source of some of her own problems by virtue of her rebellious nature.

Catalina Sandino Moreno prepared for her role by working in a Colombian flower plantation for two weeks cutting roses. She did not meet with real drug mules because she wanted to appear to be as clueless to the process and the consequences as Maria was.

They spent three months looking at 800 girls in Columbia and Ecuador. They also looked in the Columbian neighborhoods in America, New York, New Jersey and Miami. In the South American countries they went through villages with a megaphone broadcasting auditions, and papered the towns with flyers looking for actors.

Catalina auditioned by tape, and she is from Columbia, they thought they would have to postpone the movie as they didn't have the lead actress, and then at the last minute her tape arrived. They knew from the first glance that she was Maria.

Catalina Sandino Moreno ...if you do theater in Colombia you'll die from hunger. Now I'm living in New York City. It's changed my whole point of view on everything. Being independent, having a little apartment, cooking. In Colombia you live with your parents until you're twenty-five and get a job and then get married.

#### Chapter 4 (0:13:25) A New Mule

Yenny Paola Vega (born 1982) was found in a small Bogotá town in a high school audition. She had never acted before or even been cast in a high school play. She was in a Physics class when she heard about the auditions and all of her friends had to convenience her.

The Fiesta scene was shot in Ecuador, because of the political situation in Columbia was right before their elections and it was too dangerous to shoot there. This was a real celebration for the cast and crew. This small town was decorated to look like Columbia. Now even though these two countries border each other, they look very different, you would be amazed.



Columbia has all of these different colors; they paint their houses with all of these different shades of pastels. Ecuador hasn't really caught on to that so it is very grey cinder block construction, as compared to the colors of Columbia. The approached the people of this piazza and paid them to paint their homes the correct colors to represent Columbia. The people were scratching their heads wondering why would anyone want to paint their homes these colors, after the shoot they went back to return the homes to their original color and the people refused as

they had grown accustomed to the color and actually liked it. Only one person wanted their house painted back to its original grey scale.

The Ecuadorian crew did a great job lighting this scene, by hanging lights on poles and in the windows of the upper floors of the houses. Because all of the lights were not visible they were able to shoot 360 degrees, which is very liberating for a cinematographer. The people in the background are the residents of this town; they all showed up on a Friday night for the filming. By 2 a.m. the extras had all gone home so they saved the close-ups for last and arranged the remaining extras behind them to imply that the piazza was full of partiers.

It was great to film on location as the film brought in a lot of money to the local economy. Josh stated that townspeople would recognize them as they walked the streets and come and ask to be an extra in the film. Amaguaña, Ecuador

0:15:15 Using the handheld camera he follows the actors across the street as they buy an erupa. This was the first four days of filming, they thought the look was great and thought about doing the whole film with handheld shots, until they viewed the dailies, and it almost made you seasick to watch it.

0:15:20 You get the news report on the radio at the bike shop that eludes to the paramilitary activities happening in the region. They wanted to the audience to know that this was a time of unrest in Columbia.



Through improvisation with these Colombian actors he was able to use the cultural references and the colloquialisms of the people.

John Alex Toro, playing the role of Franklin on the motorcycle, John is the most experienced actor in the movie, as he is a regular on a Colombian television show.

Biography for John Alex Toro

Actor - filmography

1. Buscando a Miguel (2006) Ernesto
2. Historia del baúl rosado, La (2005) Journalist
3. Maria Full of Grace (2004) Franklin
4. "Noches de Luciana, Las" (2004) TV Iván M.
5. Malamor (2003)
6. Primera noche, La (2003) Toño
7. Tres hombres tres mujeres (2003) Iván
8. "Francisco el matemático" (1999-04) TV Jhon
9. Bogotá 2016 (2001) Juan Perez
10. Pena máxima, La (2001)
11. "Marido y mujer" (1999) TV Series Oscar Ibáñez
12. "Elegida, La" (1997) TV Series

0:21:05 The two towns mentioned here are known for drug mulling, Santa Rosa de Cabal and Pereira. The reason why there are so much drugs coming out of Columbia is the Civil war that is going on. Both sides of the civil war rely on the drug trade to buy their guns and ammunition. The United States Government is essentially helping by passing legislation that sends military aid to Columbia; this would be under both the Clinton and the Bush administration, 1.2 billion dollars over the course of three years making Columbia the largest recipient of military aid from

the United States. Over 90% of the money is being spent on hardware, helicopters, which profits American companies making them. Thus large American corporations are in favor of the aid as it allows them to sell expensive helicopters to Columbia. Legislators' like it, as they are seeing money coming back to their own states where the helicopters are being made. Everyone sort of has this great interest, except in the real people of Columbia. One of the goals of this film is to have the audience ask who is a drug mule, what compels a person to make this incredible risky decision.

0:25:00 If you tell the story by the person on the bottom you begin to humanize the story and understand that the problem is economical and social. Thus the solutions are economic and social not military and criminal. The goal is to convey that the drug war is not working and that we need to analysis the way that we are fighting the drug problem.

The POV shots were some of the footage they were able to shoot in Columbia.

Catalina Sandino Moreno, "I love theater. Theater is the most amazing thing ever. I want to keep learning and I think that by doing as much theater as I can, it will make me a better actress for film."

#### Chapter 5 (0:29:14) Nervous Determination

The stereotype of what a drug lord is in Miami Vice or cop stores is broken down here, to what they are really like. Hollywood has given this person a type cast which is truly unbelievable. The drug mules that were interviewed said that the person who set them up was this nice kind, well-dressed paternalistic figure. He seemed to be a man who was there for them, even showing an interest in their problems and was willing to offer a helping hand. The film will attempt to show you the realistic side of drug mules.



The drug trafficker is played by Jaime Osorio Gomez, one of the co-producers on the film.

You get people making these choices based on an economic need and desperation, there is no gun pointed to their head. In Film School you learn that characters are determined by the actions and the decisions that they take. If you watch carefully here, there are other options available for Maria; she does not have to become a drug mule. She could have gone to Bogotá and become a maid, but this is her real decision, which will shape her character.

Forty percent of Columbians live on a dollar a day. There is a lot of poverty, fifteen percent are unemployed in Columbia, but you don't have all those people signing up to be drug mules. So the question is why they do it. The drug dealers are not recruiting people out of the gutters; they are looking for people that have a motivation.

They are middle class people who have slipped a little or someone who has a dream of owning their own house. For Maria, it is getting out.

Guilied Lopez is an amazing actress playing the role of Lucy, with truly riveting eyes.

Catalina Sandino Moreno, "I was coming from Spain and I was going through customs and gave them my passport to stamp. These two guys were like: "You're the girl from 'Maria!' Can I take my picture with you?" I was like: "Yeah! Of course! But can I take a picture with you?" It was awesome. A year before, the customs were the ones stopping me and causing me a headache. So I took a picture of him with me because I know that Josh Marston wouldn't believe me."

Chapter 6 (0:35:11) Preparing

Filming Locations; Bogotá, Colombia and Mariscal Airport, Sucre, Ecuador

The swallowing grapes was a routine common in Columbia, as it is the way in which people practice, but in the states this was a surprising scene.

Lucy's character lets the audience know that everything is not what it seems. She has her own place, but there is no family around, and you see her questioning in her eyes and wonder if she is happy with the decision that she has made.

As she practices with the grapes, this is the last day of filming in Ecuador and she displays the fear and dread worried that she has committed herself to something that she is unable to do.

Most drug mules are ashamed of what they are doing so they will not even tell their close friends or family members, as it is considered a dishonor to the family name. So husbands will lie to their wives about what they are doing.

Nice music by the Mexican composers.

Catalina Sandino Moreno, "In Colombia, in all of the soap operas, there's a beauty queen, a model and the guy lead is from Ecuador or Peru or Venezuela, but not from Colombia. People like to see on the screen tall, skinny, beautiful models with blond or black hair who dress sexy. The way I dress and the way maybe I am, they didn't like me."

Chapter 7 (0:39:04) 62 Pellets

This is a cheat here in the backroom of the pharmacy. Normally the pellets are already made, but they had heard so much about the process, they wanted to show the audience how they are made.

The gentleman doing the pellets here was a former pellet maker that agreed to be in the film. As they were making these pellets a maid came in to clean their hotel room and became very nervous when she saw all of the flour pellets in the room. They had to explain to her what they were doing and that it was really not drugs in the pellets that they had created.

The pellet maker Victor Macias told them all of these stories about what he had witnessed while on the job. He stated that no one had ever died from his pellets and that he had a perfect record, but you wonder if that was something he had just told himself to make himself feel better.



This is done in one shot, with Maria swallowing. They worked with a culinary institute to make an edible pellet that she was able to swallow on camera in one shot. They attempted to FedEx the unused pellets back to the United States but FedEx refused to mail them, so they had to remake them in the states.

The pellets are really that big. This is all based on the drug mules that they interviewed for this movie. The drug mules also reported this horrid

taste of latex in their system.

Catalina Sandino Moreno did not practice swallowing pellets during rehearsals. Since the character of Maria did not know how to swallow them, Moreno and Joshua Marston agreed that it would be more realistic for her to try swallowing them for the first time on-camera. The pellets were made of easily digestible substances but neither Moreno nor Marston will reveal what exactly they were made of.

Catalina Sandino Moreno, "It is amazing. None of us ever expected ['Maria Full of Grace'] to be so big. It was a film that was made with all the love in the world and it is being so well received. We would have never expected it."

Chapter 8 (0:45:50) Stay Calm

You get this girl going through all of these new experiences, her first flight, and her first time to America, everything is new to her.



Shot gunning. Now we come back to the original idea of the movie, four drug mules on a plane, and one of them will go down and who will that be. That idea got reduced for the human drama that you see in the final product of this movie. But because the airplane was going to be such a crucial part of the story, they knew it had to be a real airplane, you need the audience to experience that aspect of the story.

Not easy filming in a real plane, just so tight with the camera crew and eighty passengers. This was done at the end of the shoot; as a result everyone knew each other and was working as a cohesive group.

This is also from stories by real drug mules about losing some of their product and then having to re-swallow it on the plane. You get a little sleight of hand here, the real pellet in the sink, and then the edible pellet being slipped into her mouth.

They cut out the scene of the meal service. There is a common belief that the stewardess work for the DEA, thus they watch for people that don't eat their food and report it as suspicious activity. The general assumption is that you should not eat, as it will cause your stomach juices to start working and processing.

Some drug mules stated that they would practice with pellets filled with flour to see how their body would handle it, if the bags would come out safely or not.

One drug mule talked about how he would order drinks, but not consume them. He would go to the lavatory and spit them out. Thus he would have alcohol on his breath, but would not have consumed the alcohol. The only problem with that scenario is that stewardesses also look for how many trips to the lavatory a customer makes on the flight.

#### Chapter 9 (0:52:49) The Interrogation

With the debarking we are now in America shooting, this is JFK airport, the British Airways terminal. They had a very short time to shoot in this space, approximately six hours.



The US Customs were pivotal in assisting them in getting into this space. The customs inspectors explained the process, as to what they would do, and the questions they would ask. One huge issue with customs officials is profiling. They have been sued for racial profiling.

0:54:40 There are several levels of questioning for these individuals. After they take an x-ray and determine that there are drugs in their system, the individual is taken to a hospital bed at the airport, it is actually a trailer at JFK, where they are shackled to the bed and observed. When they have to go to the bathroom they are taken to a toilet and observed as they go to the bathroom. The toilet is a specially constructed contraption that has water jets in it, that immediately washes the drugs off as they are deposited in the toilet, then drops them down a chute into an evidence bag.

A pretty humiliating circumstance for the drug mule, the customs inspectors say that that is the worst job for them to do; they are equally humiliated by the task and defiantly didn't sign up to be an inspector to witness that process.

0:57:35 The x-ray on the wall is actually an x-ray that the customs officials allowed them to use; it is an example of what is called a triple packer. Besides swallowing them, they also insert them anally and in their vagina.

Here you see the problem that the custom agents have. They could detain her, but they can not detain every pregnant woman that comes through, or you have a huge public relations problem on your hands.

The sound of those doors is instrumental as you can feel a sense of relief in the room as she exits customs.

They use the tub as they don't want to lose any pellets and after all it is second nature to flush.

#### Chapter 10 (0:59:37) Wake Up

Columbia is the capital of kidnappings; in 2004 there were 3,000 kidnappings a year, currently down to 2,200 a year.



Filming location, Jersey City, New Jersey, USA  
(Pulaski Skyway and Route 1 & 9)

New Jersey police have reported on a regular basis bodies found near the airport that are disemboweled. When things go wrong this is what happens. The mule dies and then they do whatever they have to do to get the drugs.

1:06:00 Now they will show you this other aspect of America. This is filmed in Queens in the

Columbian neighborhoods, Jackson Heights, the Columbian neighborhood.

1:07:39 As a screenwriter, this would be the end of Act Two, as Blanca walks away on her own and we see Maria in the hall crying. The script has a three act structure.

Act One: Maria's situation (exposition)

Act Two: Trip to America

Act Three: America.

#### Chapter 11 (1:07:38) Only for a Few Days

Listen to the sound design here in the hall as it reveals lives going on behind these doors. This is one thing you never want to do in a story, and that is introducing a whole new set of characters deep into the story.

Omitted prior to the phone call scene was a nightmare that Maria has about being nine months pregnant and still in possession of the drugs. She wakes up by the drug lords bursting into her room and then gruesomely slicing open her stomach and the drugs cascading out. Each pellet has a fetus in it, clearly a good choice to omit.

Catalina Sandino Moreno, "I think you use method when you're in trouble with a character. Not being prepared in New York for what would happen to our characters in *'Maria Full of Grace'* made us imagine and discover."

Chapter 12 (1:15:49) Faith in Fernando  
Here is Orlando Tobon, playing the role of Don Fernando, known as "The Mayor of Little Colombia" in the neighborhood of Jackson Heights, Queens, New York.

He is the real life person that American Columbians count on for help with everything from legal matters to family matters.

You can buy these Colombian wafers with a Carmel filling in this neighborhood in New York.



This scene shows Maria smiling for the first time, it gives the audience some relief, but there is also some tension as the audience expects to see a drug pellet.

Chapter 13 (1:22:54) Lucy Is Found

Orlando told a story about getting a call from a family in Columbia that said that their son had been missing and they thought that he had gone to New York. Orlando made some phone calls and investigated and found the boy's body in the city morgue, he called the family and delivered the bad news about their son and then raised the money to send the body back to Columbia for a proper burial. In the past twenty years he has assisted with expatriating the bodies of some 400 hundred drug mules that have died on their way to the United States. If he hadn't helped out these people would have been buried in unmarked graves and forgotten.

Thus one of the many wonderful things that this guy does is making up for the drug problem by repatriating the bodies.

Chapter 14 (1:29:36) Mourning the Loss

One of the things that the drug mules express is that once you get back you are not left alone; the drug lords want you to do it again and again. Several real drug mules said that their cell phone never stopped ringing, once they returned.

Continuity: After Maria gives Don Fernando the money for Lucy's family, she takes her wallet out twice.

Chapter 15 (1:34:45) Full of Grace

All of the airport footage was shot at the same time in the same six hours.

This final shot, low light and handheld was difficult to shoot; this was the fifth take of this shot.

Catalina Sandino Moreno became the first actress ever to be nominated to Best Actress at the Oscars for a role that it is spoken entirely in Spanish. The film originally had been selected by Colombia to be its official choice for the 77th Academy Awards. It was rejected because it was

considered to be not Colombian enough and the film "El Rey" by the Dorado Brothers was submitted instead.

The film premiered at Sundance Film Festival, won the audience award, then on to Berlin Film Festival where it got best actress. The film premiered in Columbia prior to America. This film is also being used by the United Nations as an educational film. A seventeen year old male contacted Josh and told him that he backed out of being a drug mule, days before departure because he saw this film.

There are huge repercussions to doing this job; there is a price to pay.

Chapter 16 (1:37:04) End Credits

Following is from the official website.

### Inspiration

Joshua Marston's feature debut *Maria Full of Grace* introduces us to an extraordinary heroine, a spirited young woman whose desire for a brighter future leads her into a world of unimaginable dangers. As it follows Maria Alvarez from a Colombian flower plantation to the streets of New York, *Maria Full of Grace* vividly conveys the texture and detail of this young woman's life, from the most ordinary moments to the most harrowing. It takes us inside an experience most of us know very little about, yet its focus remains always on Maria, a complex young woman in complex circumstances. Like Maria, we have no idea where events will lead; because of Maria, we care very much. In her award-winning film debut, Catalina Sandino Moreno gives a vibrant performance that captures Maria in all her strengths, flaws and contradictions.

Filmmaker Joshua Marston brought several longtime interests to bear in making his feature film debut, including an interest in other cultures and in the immigrant experience in the United States, Marston's Brooklyn neighborhood is home to many émigrés from Columbia, and he has followed the country's politics and internal affairs, including the long running civil war. "As a filmmaker, my approach is to reach outward and find compelling people, places and stories, and then, to listen," Marston says. "That sort of anthropological focus is how I came to filmmaking and why I want to tell stories."

Marson heard from Colombians about the lives they had left behind and the lives they lived now. One day, he spoke to a woman who had swallowed heroin capsules and transported them to the U.S., only to be arrested and imprisoned. The subject of drug trafficking had been raised before, but this was a first-hand account from a hidden world. Says Marston, "It was a story that I hadn't ever seen, and I'd certainly never seen it told from the point of view of someone who's actually done it. That was one of the original inspirations for the film: to look at what it is to be a drug mule and try to imagine it from that person's perspective. To begin to understand what would propel somebody to do this."

As he wrote, Marston continued the research that would bring texture and authenticity to Maria's Story. He spoke with imprisoned drug mules and met with customs officials at Kennedy airport where he watched them interrogate passengers arriving from Colombia. He learned that the

drugs are packed into pellets, and depending on a person's size, a mule might carry about one kilo of cocaine or heroin in their system. He interviewed a surgeon who described in detail his experiences of being called on repeatedly to save drug swallows by surgically removing drug pellets.

However, the drug research was simple in comparison to the character research. The story was not about a drug mule, but about a young woman –Maria. Recalls Marston, “I began to really think about Maria, and the decision she makes. There are over a billion people on the planet that are living on a dollar a day or less; they're not all drug mules. So the question poses itself: what does cause a person who is in desperate straits to become a drug mule? Well, there are as many answers as there are people who did it.”

Marston's research led him to Orlando Tobon, a respected leader in New York's Colombian community who has worked on behalf of drug mules and their families since the 1980's. Tobon has arranged to ship home the bodies of well over 400 people who would otherwise have been buried in New York's potter's field. Families, medical workers, even the police call on Tobon for help when a drug mule dies. He has seen mules as young as 17 and as old as 82. Tobon became an early supporter of the film and ultimately worked on it as an associate producer. “I thought it was a beautiful idea for people to see an authentic depiction of a drug mule's situation – to see the human story,” he notes.

Marston saw how Tobon's altruism and advocacy has daily, practical applications throughout New York's Columbian community. His travel agency on Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens sees a constant flow of people; if someone needs help – be it a job, a place to live, assistance with immigration forms – they turn to Tobon. Marston began to see Tobon as a vital part of the story he wanted to tell, and developed the character of “Don Fernando,” portrayed by Tobon himself.

The most difficult research involved the particulars of a young woman's life in Columbia. Marston talked to Colombians who had lived in small towns, and learned about family structures and social activities, and about the difficult labor of the flower plantations. The filmmaker was also able to draw from some of his own recollections; in particular, he had traveled in Ecuador, where he had visited the flower plantations that are very similar to those of neighboring Columbia.

Drawing upon his research, Marston developed a script that focused less on the drug scenario than the human story. Maria began to emerge as a bright, strong-willed 17-year-old facing adulthood and an unknown future. Says Marston, “I think there are probably certain universals of a 17-year-old's life that cut across culture and economics. That was one of the aspects that made the film personal for me, because it is about someone trying to figure out who she is and her place in the world. It's about Maria not being satisfied with where she is; she's looking and yearning for something else, even if she can't define or articulate it. So we developed a script that was less and less about a drug mule, and more and more about a young woman trying to break out and kick against a world that seemed to be pressing in on her, in order to achieve something more.”

### Preproduction

Marston sent the screenplay to producer Paul Mezey, whose work on the acclaimed realist dramas *La Ciudad* and *Our Song* embodied the approach Marston envisioned for *Maria Full of Grace*. Both films had explored ordinary lives in immigrant and working class communities, and had been filmed in those same communities, primarily with non-professional actors.

Mezey read the script in one quick sitting. “The story grabs you from the moment you encounter this character,” the producer remarks. “You didn’t quite know what you were getting into, in the same way that Maria herself doesn’t know. You just get drawn in. At the same time, the script was very subtle. It gracefully dealt with the inherent drama, but never allowed the plot points to overtake the core story about this young woman.”

Marston heard from Mezey a week after sending him the script. “We had a 45-minute conversation about the story and the characters,” Marston says. “From that moment, I knew he understood the story that I wanted to tell and it became our story.”

As a Spanish-language film to be shot in a politically volatile country with a cast that included non-professionals, Mezey knew that *Maria Full of Grace* would not be easy to make. But, like Marston, the producer had a strong personal attachment to Columbia: his father had grown up there. As it happened, he was about to make his first trip to Columbia, accompanying his father to a conference. “I was on the ground, reading the script and driving out in the country with my father,” Mezey recalls. “I could see the story coming to life in that landscape, and it was visually amazing. That’s when I jumped from the hypothetical to the real.”

Mezey soon returned to Columbia with Marston to flesh out the details of the story and scout potential locations. Marston was able to observe for himself what it was like to live in Columbia, and he spent several weeks there. He lived in small towns and visited numerous plantations, where he talked to both management and workers. At a center for pregnant teenagers, he heard from young women about their personal circumstances and pregnancies. He traveled to prisons to speak with mules, and he met a man who had worked for years preparing the drugs for swallows. The man demonstrated how the fingers of rubber gloves are cut, the drugs weighed and then mechanically pressed into little nuggets before being sealed in up to six layers of latex and tied with dental floss.

When he began working on the project, Mezey had been referred to Jaime Osorio Gomez, a leading figure in the Colombian film community. Gomez had mounted film and television productions throughout South America and had recently produced Barbet Schroeder’s *Our Lady of the Assassins*. Gomez was struck by the authenticity of Marston’s screenplay. “It read like it had been written by a Colombian. It captured the details of Maria’s life – her work, her home, her family, the financial troubles that they have to deal with on a day-by-day basis,” he comments. In exploring the how’s and why’s of Maria’s decision to smuggle drugs, the story restored a human specificity to a familiar topic. Explains Gomez, “Every day, you see the news about the drug mules who get caught on planes in Colombia or in the States, or who die in their attempts to bring drugs into the U.S. or Europe or Asia. You hear the stories of the friends or neighbors, or some stranger who got caught. You see ads on Colombian TV, sponsored by the government, against drug trafficking. Being inside the forest, it’s hard to see the trees.”

## Casting

Gomez came on board as co-producer and quickly became involved in the formidable task of casting the film. He set up two casting teams in Colombia. One team brought in professional actors; the other, a collective of young filmmakers known as “El Barco,” focused on searching out non-professional talent. El Barco’s four-person team distributed flyers outside rose plantations, drove through small towns with a megaphone on the roof of their car and spoke on local radio stations to promote open casting calls. At the same time, the New York casting directors, Ellyn Marshall and Maria Nelson, ran open calls in Queens, New Jersey, Long Island, Miami – everywhere that was known to have strong Colombian community in the country’s capitol, Quito.

Whether professional or non-professional, the actress playing Maria not only had to be able to carry the film; she had to be able to understand and embody the contradictions that help make Maria so believable. “Maria has conflicting character traits,” notes Mezey. “She’s often impulsive, and she doesn’t always make the right decision. It’s a complex character, which makes it a real challenge for any actor, experienced or non-professional.”

Several months passed as over 800 young women auditioned for the part, to no avail. The decision had just been made to postpone the start of production when a dispirited Marston received a videotape from Colombia. “I was barely looking at the TV as I hit ‘play’ on the VCR,” he recalls. “Catalina was the first person on the tape, and literally within 30 seconds, I knew. She was captivating. And she was Maria: she looked like the character I had written, she acted like her, and she had this amazing freshness to everything she did. Every time she did an improvisation, it was interesting; and every time, it was different.”

University student Catalina Sandino Moreno had heard about the audition from a friend. Moreno had studied theatre and had auditioned for commercials, but had never been hired. She recalls that she hesitated to take on her first film audition. “I said, ‘Well, if they haven’t picked me for anything else, why are they going to pick me for movie?’ And my friend went, ‘Just try it.’ Then my mother said, ‘Yeah, you have to go, you have to go.’”

The El Barco casting team meanwhile paid a visit to a high school in southern Bogota. School had just let out and kids were leaving, but they persuaded 35 students to remain just a little longer. One by one, the students stood in front of the camera, gave their names and said something about themselves. The El Barco team immediately tagged Yenny Paola Vega as Blanca. “This was a girl who had never acted in her life, had never even thought of trying out for a school play, and never in a million years would have bothered to take a bus to north Bogota for some audition,” says Marston. Vega came in and did a number of improvs that impressed the director. “Yenny had this remarkable natural ability to improvise and to put herself into a set of circumstances and to adopt the character,” comments Marston.

Moreno began to prepare for her role. She got a job at a flower plantation, living there along with the other workers. No one knew that she was doing research for a film. “I lived there for about five days until they discovered me,” the actress remembers. “And I learned a lot. I learned to cut the flowers and measure them, and that was the only thing I did there. But I heard the stories of

all the people, how hard the work is, and the health complications that come with it; for example, their joints hurt very much. It's very hard work, from Sam until the last flower is measured and in the box."

### Locale

By the fall of 2001, political instability and violence in Colombia were coming to a particularly turbulent head. The filmmakers were increasingly fearful that shooting there would be untenable. They began to consider alternatives, including Ecuador, which borders Colombia and has a similar topography. The proximity meant that a Colombian crew could be brought to Ecuador. Another benefit was Ecuador's numerous flower plantations, some of which are owned by expatriate Colombians.

In shifting the production locale from Colombia to Ecuador, the filmmakers faced tremendous hurdles. The overriding concern was maintaining the visual integrity of the film's Colombian setting – an issue that pertained not only to locations, but actors and extras, too. To ensure the exterior and interior locations were accurate down to the smallest detail, Gomez helped hire key crew in Colombia, including production designer Monica Marulanda, who had designed *Our Lady of the Assassins*. Gomez also sought out the experienced Colombian personnel he knew in Ecuador's film and television business. Joining the production team was Altercine, a production services company based in Quito, and headed by producer Gigia Jaramillo and documentary filmmaker Pocho Alvarez.

Locations were scouted and Amaguana, a small town south of Quito, was supposed to double for Maria's Colombian home. The crew got to work painting the residences and public buildings in vibrant colors that dominate the Colombian landscape, but which were absent in Amaguana. The production team also brought in furnishings from Colombia and had street signs made in lettering and style that was typically Colombian.

By the time the actors arrived in Amaguana, the town had been transformed. Says Moreno, "The church, the hospital, the pharmacy and the bar – those four places were exactly as they were in the Colombian village. The colors were the same. Maria's house was a Colombian house. I felt like I was in my country."

### Rehearsals

Marston spent three weeks rehearsing with the actors who would perform in the Colombian portion of the story, using a specific process. Once they were cast, the actors received a Spanish version of the script's first half (ending when Maria boards the plane), which they had to return after one day. When the actors arrived in Ecuador several weeks later, they did improvisations focusing on character and back-story. Eventually, they began improvising specific scenes based on their rough memory of the script; after several run-throughs, Marston and the actors would read the scene as originally written and rewrite according to the improves. As a result, Marston explains, "Each actor fell into the way they felt their character would speak. The actors came to have a real sense of ownership over the story and the scenes, over their characters and, in particular, over their dialogue."

The rehearsals helped the actors to develop the rapport and familiarity necessary to create vivid onscreen relationships. Nowhere was this more important than in the case of Moreno and Vega, who spend most of the film together as Maria and Blanca. Recalls Moreno, “Right away, there was a connection between Yenny and me. We started talking about our personal lives, outside of rehearsals. We talked about how our characters were going to be, and what we thought we wanted in the scene. I really love how Maria and Blanca have to be together throughout this journey. At the end, they have been through a lot and they realize that they can stand on their own. It’s about friendship and independence.”

### Shooting

A sense of spontaneity and naturalism drove the film’s visual scheme. Marston and director of photography Jim Denault decided that a hand-held approach was the surest way to achieve the intimacy and focus that Maria’s story demanded. Comments Marston, “To the extent that Maria is the driving force of the film, she is also the driving force of what we see. So if she’s moving, when we’re moving in order to stay with her. Jim Denault was key in helping to really define a look and feel cinematically that fitted Maria and her story.”

It was immediately evident that in Moreno, Marston had an actress who could hold the camera with ease. Says the filmmaker, “Not only did Catalina bring all the freshness and creativity I’d seen in the audition to the rehearsal process; once we began filming, she instinctively knew how to work for the camera.”

The actress praises Marston for helping her hone her character and setting her at ease. “Josh was so supportive, and gave me much strength, throughout the whole movie.” Naturally, Moreno was apprehensive about making her debut in a film in which she acted in every scene. “But working with Josh and Paul, I knew that every day was going to be okay.”

As filming began, it was critical for the filmmakers to work in close cooperation with the local communities in which they were working. In Ecuador, where the entire cast and most of the crew was Colombian, the set was run in Spanish. Good relations were established from the outset, and the filmmakers tried to put as much production money as possible into the local economy, whether it was hiring a neighborhood restaurant in to do catering or renting props from Amaguana residents. When the time came to film the party scene in the town plaza, everyone was invited. In New York, the same ethos prevailed, and the presence of associate producer Orlando Tobon assured goodwill throughout the Colombian community. The people in Jackson Heights welcomed the film to their neighborhood. Says Tobon, “It’s the first time that something like this has happened here. Nobody had ever done a film about the Colombian experience in the Colombian community in Queens.”

Tobon also made his acting debut in the film as “Don Fernando,” who immediately intuits Maria’s plight and goes on to make funeral arrangements for her fellow mule, Lucy. “When I was working on the movie, it sometimes felt like a real situation – because this sort of story has happened with me a number of times,” Tobon remarks. “When I saw Catalina as Maria, I’d start to remember other people with the same problems. This film is very, very authentic.”

### The Immigrant Experience

The Colombian immigrant experience is brought to life through the story of Lucy's sister, Carla (played by Patricia Rae), who opens her apartment to Maria. As Carla describes it to Maria, the promise of a new life in the United States is not a simple one, and not without sacrifices. It was a theme that often came up in Marston's conversations with immigrants, regardless of their country of origin. "Everywhere you turn, there are people who come here from another place, trying to find something else, some new horizon," the filmmaker reflects. "One of the things that was important to me with this film was to tell the story of what it's like to be an immigrant and arrive in this country: to leave home and make the choice to live in another place, yet always feeling this push-and-pull between the two places."

In the end, Maria chooses to become a part of the immigrant story. It is a decision that reflects Maria's coming-of-age, and a deeper understanding of what her life can be. "She's very strong girl," notes Moreno. "I love the way she fights for her baby. She doesn't love her boyfriend, but she love she loves the baby that she has inside. And she doesn't want her baby to go through everything that she's been through."

Maria has learned to shape her life in a different way. "One of the things that happens over the course of the film is that Maria goes from making truly negative decisions to finally, in the end, making a positive decision. It's not just about what she doesn't want, but what she does want," Marston reflects. That quest is mirrored in the film's title. "Maria does have her own grace, and that is a potential for something beyond what she's able to realize in the circumstances where she starts."

Maria Full of Grace was also the start of a journey for Catalina Sendino Moreno, who relocated to New York City after the end of production. The young actress enrolled in the Lee Strasberg Institute and in 2003 made her New York stage debut in Shakespeare's "King John." In February 2004, Catalina traveled to the Berlin Film Festival, where she was honored with the Silver Bear for Best Actress for her performance in Maria Full of Grace.

Catalina Sandino Moreno (Maria) Born in Bogota, Colombia in 1981, Catalina Sandino Moreno became interested in theatre and stage at an early age. IN 1997, while still in high school, she enrolled in the Ruben Di Pietro theatre academy in Bogota. During her four years at the academy, she acted in such productions as "Acuerdo para Cambiar de Casa" by Griselda Gambaro, "The Dark Room" by Tennessee Williams, and "Laughing Wild" by Christopher Durang. After making her film debut in Maria Full of Grace, Moreno relocated to New York City, where she attended the Lee Strasberg Institute. She recently made her New York stage debut in the Frog and Peach Theatre Company's production of Shakespeare's "King John."

Yenny Paola Vega (Blanca) Yenny Paola Vega was born in Bogota, Colombia, in 1982. She was attending Rodrigo Lara Bonilla High School when she was cast in Maria Full of Grace, and subsequently graduated. Vega plans to become a kindergarten teacher.

Guilied Lopez (Lucy) Guilied Lopez has an extensive acting background that she developed while participating in numerous acting/voice workshops, some of which have lasted for over two years. Her stage credits in her native Colombia include several acclaimed productions, including "Yerma" by Federico Garcia Lorca and "The Trojans" by Jean Paul Sartre. Lopez has been cast

in nine dramatic television series between 1997 and 2003 in Colombia. Her most recent feature film credit is *Emerald Cowboy*, directed by Eishy Hayata and Andrew Molina.

Jhon Alex Toro (Franklin) Born in Pereira, Colombia in 1970, Jhon Alex Toro studied acting at the National School of Dramatic Arts. Toro recently won the Catagena International Film Festival's India Catalina Award for Best Actor for his performance in Luis Alberto Restrepo's acclaimed drama *The First Night*. Other feature film credits include *Mal de amor* (1998) directed by Jorge Echeverry, and *El gato escaldado le teme a la piel fria* (1999), directed by Christina Lopez. Toro has acted in numerous stage productions, including "Ensename a vivir," "La Mandragora," "Frankenstein," "Una Noche en Venecia," "Edipo Rew, Demonios," "La Vie Parisiene," and "Las Convulsiones." His television work in Colombia includes series and soaps, among them "Cartas a Harrison," "Cazados," "Francisco El Matematico," "Amores como el nuestro," and "Marido y Mujer."

Patricia Rae (Carla) Actress Patricia Rae is active in film, television and theatre. Her recent film credits include Chris Fisher's horror film *Nightstalker*, which appeared at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. Other credits include *Swimfan* and *D.O.T.* Rae has acted in several television dramas and comedies, including "Malcolm in the Middle," "Resurrection Blvd.," "Law & Order CI," "Law & Order SVU," and "Third Watch." She also had a recurring role on the CBS comedy "New York News." Rae's most recent stage credits include the one-woman show "Under Construction, the Making of Patricia Rae" which made its world premiere at the Stella Adler Conservatory in New York, directed by Robert Covarrubias. Other New York stage credits include "Zoraida," "Mickey & Roger," "Late One Sunday Night," "Latin Lives," "Façade," "Does a Tiger Wear a Necktie," and "The Seagull." She was a writer and performer in the SalSoul Comedy Troupe, and took part in Comic Relief VIII. Rae studied at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute and Chicago City Limits, both in New York City.

Orlando Tobon (Don Fernando) Often referred to as the "Mayor of Little Colombia," Orlando Tobon emigrated from Colombia in 1968 and now resides in Jackson Heights, Queens, where he operates a small travel agency. Tobon has become a leader within the Colombian community, often organizing help and financial assistance for local immigrants in need of a place to turn. Among many other achievements, over the past twenty years he has repatriated the bodies of some 400 Colombian drug mules who died in their journeys to the U.S. Additionally, he has served as the Director of Services for the Disabled of the Queens branch of Lions Club International for the past seven years; was appointed as a voting member of his Community Board in 1998; and is an active member of the Colombian Anti-defamation League.

Joshua Marston (Writer/Director) Joshua Marston was born and raised in southern California and did his undergraduate work in Social Sciences at U.C. Berkeley. After teaching English for a year at a public high school in Prague, Czech Republic he then received an MA in Political Science from the University of Chicago and an MFA in filmmaking from New York University. He has directed a number of award-winning short films, including *Bus to Queens*, *Voice of an Angel* and *Trifecta*. Marston has been a recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and residencies at the MacDowell and Millay artist colonies. *Maria Full of Grace* is his first feature-length film.

**Paul Mezey (Producer)** Paul Mezey is a New York based independent producer. His most recent credits include *Maria Full of Grace*, winner of the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004, and Jim McKay's *Everyday People* which premiered in *American Spectrum* at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004. Other feature credits include the acclaimed *The City (La Ciudad)* and directed by David Riker, *Our Song* directed by Jim McKay, *Spring Forward* directed by Tom Gilroy and *The Ballad of Ramblin' Jack* directed by Ayiana Elliott, winner of the Special Jury Prize for Artistic Achievement at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival. Paul Mezey supervised the postproduction of Chris Smith's award-winning documentary *American Movie*. Mezey received the IFP/West Motorola Producer's Award at the Independent Spirit Awards in 2001 and has been selected by *Variety* as one of the "Ten Producers to Watch" in 2004.

**Jaime Osorio Gomez (Co-Producer)** Jaime Osorio Gomez was born in Viterbo, Colombia in 1947. He studied law at the Universidad Autonoma de Colombia. He began his film career in the early 1970's, producing commercials and political documentaries, of which the most important is *Chile No Se Rinde Carajo*. In the mid 1980's, Gomez produced *Nieve Tropical*, *Los Embera* and *Mi Macondo*. He worked as Assistant Director on the feature film *Visa USA* and *Milagro en Roma*. He has been a professor of film production at several institutions, including the School of San Antonio de los Banos in Cuba. He directed and produced the award winning film *Confessing to Laura* in 1991. That same year, he was Production Director of "Nazca," a Spanish television series filmed in 21 Latin American countries. In 1999, Gomez produced *Our Lady of the Assassins*, directed by Barbet Shroeder. Gomez is currently working on the post production for *The Wandering Shadow* directed by Ciro Guerra; the commercial release of *Sin Amparo*, which he wrote, produced and directed; and in pre-production for *Juego de Ninos*, directed by Carlos Cesar Arbelaez.

**Rodrigo Guerrero (Associate Producer)** Rodrigo Guerrero is from Cali, Colombia. He graduated in Film Production from New York University, Tisch School of the Arts in the top 5% of his class. As a Director of Photography he has shot a number of independent features, documentaries and music videos; his credits include the documentary *Reunion*, directed by Bob Giraldi, and Brandon Cole's narrative feature *King Midas*. He produced, directed and edited for Heavy Inc. a score of network commercials, promos, videos and television shows. He is a co-founder with Andres Baiz and Jaime Osorio Gomez of Proyecto Tucan, a Hispanic oriented production and Distribution Company located in Bogota, Colombia and affiliated in New York through Centro Films.

**Becky Glupczynski (Line Producer)** Becky Glupczynski is a graduate of Columbia University. She started working in educational television with Family Communications on the acclaimed program, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." After returning to New York in 1996, she found her niche in New York's independent film community, working on such films as *Requim for a Dream*, *Restaurant*, *The Opportunists*, and *Brooklyn Babylon*. She currently works as a freelance line producer. Other feature credits include the film *Frida*, directed by Julie Taymor; *World Traveler* directed by Bart Freundlich, which premiered at 2002 Sundance Film Festival; and *The American Astronaut*, directed by Cory McAbee, which premiered at 2001 Sundance Film Festival.

Altercine (Production Support) Formed in 1970, Altercine is a group of independent filmmakers based in Quito, Ecuador. The filmmakers of Altercine have directed, written, photographed and edited numerous nonfiction and feature films, videos and commercials. Altercine's filmmakers have worked as directors, cinematographers and editors for local and foreign production companies, and also provides production management and coordination services. Altercine's documentary credits include Quito, a series of six short history films commissioned by Quito's Mayoralty; Mekong the Mother, the first of Altercine's three documentaries about the Mekong River; Ana, a look young people living in Medellin, Colombia; Memories de Compana, a film about high school and university students that won the Coral Prize at the Latin American Film and Video Festival; and Luar Trocas, about the master Ecuadoran artist Oswaldo Guayasamin. Altercine has also directed, photographed and edited two documentaries for the United Nations, Voluntarios de Naciones Unidas, un camino de solidaridad and Colacion para un manna. Feature film credits include En Un Rincon del Alma, an Ecuadorian production directed, written and edited by Altercine. Altercine was production manager to John Malkovich's directorial debut The Dancer Upstairs, and has worked in a similar capacity on German productions Inca Connection and La Nieve de los Andes, among others. Editing credits include the prize-winning independent film La Tigra.

Jim Denault (Director of Photography) Jim Denault has earned acclaim as a cinematographer on many notable independent films, including Patricia Cardoso's Real Women Have Curves; Henry Bean's The Believer; Kimberly Peirce's Boys Don't Cry; Jim McKay's Our Song; Lisanne Skyler's Getting to Know You; Jill Sprecher's The Clockwatchers; Hal Hartley's The Book of Life; and Katherine Dieckmann's A Good Baby. Denault's cinematography for Michael Almereyda's Nadja was nominated for an IFP Independent Spirit Award in 1996. Recent projects include working in Cambodia for Matt Dillon on City of Ghosts, and shooting the television pilots "Push, Nevada" and "Expert Witness," both directed by John McNaughton. He has also shot numerous short films, among them Michael Almereyda's Another Girl Another Planet, Su Friedrich's Hide and Seek, Adrienne Shelley's Lois Lives a Little, and Amy Talkington's The New Arrival.

Denault and his wife, Cate Wilson, and their daughter Claire split their time between New York and Los Angeles.

Monica Marulanda (Production Designer) Monica Marulanda began her career as a production designer in 1987 and has worked to date on over 11 dramatic television series in Colombia. She received three national awards and one nomination for her work in these series. Her feature film credits include Mediométrajes directed by Luis Alberto Restrepo; Edipo Alcalde directed by Jorge Ali Triana; Soplo de Vida directed by Luis Ospina; and Our Lady of the Assassins, directed by Barbet Schroeder.

Debbie De Villa (Production Designer) Debbie De Villa began her career in production design after receiving a BFA in set design from SUNY Purchase. As a production designer, De Villa's feature credits include Peter Sehr's award-winning Love the Hard Way, starring Academy Award winner Adrien Brody; Skins, director Chris Eyre's follow up film to Smoke Signals; Myles Connell's feature debut The Opportunists, starring Christopher Walken; and Katherine Dieckmann's feature debut A Good Baby, starring David Strathairn. As an art director, her credits include Victor Nunez's award-winning drama Ulee's Gold, starring Peter Fonda, and the

PBS American Playhouse production “Shimmer.” De Villa’s design work for commercials includes spots for such major clients as Coke and Lexus.

Anne McCabe (Editor) Anne McCabe began a successful editing career in New York, apprenticing on Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and Brian de Palma’s *The Daytrippers* (1996 Cannes Film Festival, Grand Prize and Audience Award at Deauville and Grand Jury Prize at Slamdance festivals) brought collaboration with director Greg Mottola. Her editing credits also include Kenneth Lonergan’s *You Can Count On Me*, which was nominated for two Academy Awards. McCabe has also written several feature screenplays, including *And Why Not*, to be produced by Nancy Tenenbaum.

Lee Percy, A.C.E. (Editor) Lee Percy originally trained as an actor at the Juilliard School under John Houseman, and made the move into editing after receiving a degree in film from the University of California. His theatrical background has shaped his creative approach as an editor, and he has worked on projects featuring some of film’s finest actors. Percy’s credits include three films which won top acting Oscars: Hector Babenco’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* with William Hurt; Barbet Schroeder’s *Reversal of Fortune* with Jeremy Irons; and Kimberly Peirce’s most recent credits include the upcoming drama *A Home at the End of the World*, based on the Michael Cunningham novel and starring Colin Farrell and Sissy Spacek. He recently began work on *A Love Song for Bobby Long*, starring John Travolta and Scarlet Johansson. Percy has worked with Swiss director Barbet Schroeder for over a decade, on such films as *Before and After* with Meryl Streep and Liam Neeson, *Kiss of Death* with Nicolas Cage and Samuel L. Jackson, and *Single White Female* with Bridget Fonda and Jennifer Jason Leigh, in addition to *Reversal of Fortune* with Jeremy Irons and Glenn Close. His other credits include *Henry Bean*’s *The Believer*, winner of the 2001 Sundance Grand Jury Prize; Wayne Wang’s *Center of the World* and *Slamdance*; Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel* with Jamie Lee Curtis; and *Corrina, Corrina* with Whoopi Goldberg and Ray Liotta. Percy was recognized by his peers when he received an American Cinema Editors Eddie Award for his work on HBO’s *Against the Wall*, one of two projects he did with the late John Frankenheimer.

Lauren Press (Costume Designer) Lauren Press has costumed the feature films *Uninvited* and *Ritual*. She worked as an assistant costume designer on “*The Sopranos*,” and received two Emmy Award nominations as part of the series’ wardrobe team. Press also was assistant costume designer on the feature films *The Imposters*, *Lawn Dogs* and *Donnie Brasco*.

Sarah Beers (Costume Designer) Costume designer Sarah Beers has worked extensively in film and theatre. Her recent feature credits include Michael Kang’s *The Motel*, which was produced by Michael Arteta and which won Sundance/NHK International Filmmakers Award at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival; Jim Simpson’s *The Guys*, starring Sigourney Weaver and Anthony LaPaglia; Austin Chick’s *XX/XY*, starring Mark Ruffalo, which screened at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival; and Rodney Evan’s *Brother to Brother*, which is planned to screen at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. Beers’ theatrical credits include *Naked Angels*’ production of “*Tape*” in New York City and London. She recently designed costumes for Julia Jordan’s “*St. Scarlet*,” and is an associate artist with the New York theatre company *The Civilians*. She designed costumes for the Williamstown Theater Festival’s second stage for two seasons and also worked for two seasons in the costume department at the Santa Fe Opera. Beers has worked on mask design and

construction on the Bluelight Theatre Company's production of "Princess Turandot"; the Sachiyo Ito Dance Company production of "The Dojoji"; and the Williamstown Theatre Festival's production of "Skin of Our Teeth." As a recipient of a Watson Fellowship grant, Beers studied costumes at the Royal Opera in London and marionettes in Geneva. She was recently nominated "upcoming costume designer of 2003" by Entertainment Design magazine.

**Jacobo Lieberman & Leonardo Heiblum (Composers)** Since 1993, Jacobo Lieberman and Leonardo Heiblum have composed, recorded and produced music for a host of different projects, encompassing feature films, documentaries, advertising, dance and theatre. As composers, their feature credits include Salma Hayek's *The Maldonado Miracle*, Eva Lopez's *De que lado estas?*, and Benjamin Cann's *Cronica de un desayuno*. They have composed scores for several short films, including Rodrigo Pla's award-winning *El Ojo en la nuca*, starring Gael Garcia Bernal. Lieberman and Heiblum were also music supervisors and producers for Julie Taymor's *Frida*. Their theatre credits include original scores for "El Juego de la Oca" and two acclaimed musical adaptations of Shakspeare, "Titus" and "Twelfth Night." The latter work earned the AMCT (Asociacion Mexicana de Criticos de Teatro) Award for Best Music. Lieberman and Heiblum co-own Adioflot, a state-of-the-art recording studio in Mexico City. They are also part of a new quartet, comprised of Lieberman (banjo), Heiblum (tabla), Alexis Ruiz (vibraphone), and Andres Sanchez (bass). Individually, Jacobo Lieberman has been a composer in several original music groups and has played all kinds of instruments. Besides playing cello in the baroque music ensemble Galileo, he has played guitar, keyboards, percussion and drums in several rock bands, including Santa Sabina, one of Mexico's most prominent rock bands. Leonardo Heiblum studied music and composition in Mexico and went on to study recording engineering at Full Sail in Orlando, Florida. He worked with Philip Glass as an engineer and as the assistant to music director Michael Riesman for a period of five years.

**Lynn Fainchtein (Music Supervisor)** Lynn Fainchtein has brought her music expertise to a range of media, including film, television, radio and journalism as well as recording. She has worked as music supervisor and soundtrack producer on a number of films, including John Sayles' most recent film, *Casa de los Babys*. She has worked extensively with acclaimed Mexican filmmaker Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu on films including *21 Grams*; *Perros*; *The Hire: Powder Keg* for BMW Films; and *Edwin*, with Brad Pitt. Other film credits include Bruno De Almeida's *22 Days in Acapulco*, Carlos Salces' *La Mano del Zurdo*, and Maria Novaro's *Sin dejar Huella* and *Danzon*. Fainchtein was music supervisor for Altavista Films' soundtracks, and also served as the company's director of A&R for Altavista Films. She is currently a writer with *Rolling Stone* magazine, reporting from Mexico. Fainchtein's television credits include a recent stint as music section anchor on the Televisa series "Circulo Rojo." She had previously been at MTV Latinoamerica, where she worked as Director of Music Programming, a producer/writer/interviewer for MTV News and regional office manager. In radio, she has worked as a host, DJ, producer, programmer and director at a number of different Mexican stations, including Rock 101, Dimension 10.30 am, Espacio 59 and Imagen 90.5 m.

**El Barco Producciones (Casting)** El Barco Producciones is a collective of five filmmakers that have been working as a team in the Colombian film and television industries for the past seven years. The company has made a name for itself by using teenagers from marginalized sectors who don't have access to a formal education as natural actors and crew members in their

productions, therefore offering them the chance to be a part of the creative and production process. El Barco is currently in post-production on four short films co-produced with Germany and shot in Colombia and Germany.

**Jorge Valencia (Casting)** Since 1991, Jorge Valencia has directed and photographed numerous dramatic television series, documentaries and music videos in Colombia, including the award-winning documentary El Pueblo Tikuna. His feature film credits as Assistant Director include Manuel Jose Alvarez's La Deuda; Luis Ospina's Soplo de Vida; Sergio Carbrera's Golpe de Estadio; Pacho Bottia's Juana Tenia el Pelo de Oro; Barbet Schroeder's Out Lady of the Assassins; and most recently Antonio Dorado's El Rey. Valencia was also Second Unit Director of Sergio Cabrera's documentary Citizen Escobar.

**Maria Eugenia Salazar (Casting)** Maria Eugenia Salazar has worked in the television and film industry in Colombia for over ten years. She has been involved in many different aspects of production in documentaries, commercials, industrials, and nine dramatic television series. Her feature film production experience includes Manuel Jose Alvarez's La Dueda, Jorge Valencia's Leida, and Barbet Schroeder's Our Lady of the Assassins.

Filming Locations for *Maria Full of Grace*, 2004

1. Amaguaña, Ecuador
2. Bogotá, Colombia
3. Jackson Heights, Queens, New York City, New York, USA
4. Jersey City, New Jersey, USA (Pulaski Skyway and Route 1 & 9)
5. Lincoln Tunnel, New York City, New York, USA
6. Mariscal Airport, Sucre, Ecuador

Filming Dates 4 August 2003 - 8 September 2003

Copyright Holder © 2003 Home Box Office, Inc.

## Catalina Sandino Moreno

*The first-time film actress, born in Colombia and now living in New York, talks about her powerful, Oscar-nominated debut in "Maria Full of Grace."*

By JOSHUA TANZER  
Offoffoff.com

Making a striking debut at only 20 in "Maria Full of Grace," Colombian-born Catalina Sandino Moreno seems poised to attract considerable attention as a young actress to watch. If there's only one similarity between her and the character she plays, it's that both find themselves unexpectedly transplanted from Colombia to New York, pondering their next move. Maria is a drug "mule" who transports heroin to America in her stomach and is on the run from angry mobsters; Sandino Moreno is an actress who after her first role has landed here with a sheaf of rave reviews and a best-actress award from the prestigious Berlin Film Festival. (She has to share

it with Charlize Theron, but still.)

Talking with Offoffoff before the U.S. release of "Maria," the unassuming newcomer acknowledges that the film's subjects were at once familiar and distant. The country's notorious drug culture, decades-long civil war and rural poverty were in some ways as remote from her as a middle-class youngster in the city as they are from an American teenager.

The following is an edited transcript of our interview, which was conducted in English.

Q: *You grew up in Bogotá?*

CATALINA SANDINO MORENO: I grew up in Bogotá.

Q: *And the character that you play, is that very similar to your life or very different from your life?*

CSM: No, it's very different. Maria lives in a little town outside Bogotá. She doesn't have an education. She has to work in a flower plantation with her mother because that's the only work she can find. She is stuck in a little town. And I was in a college, I lived all my life in Bogotá, and I never needed to work for money. I worked — because I wanted to work, because I thought it was cool to work. But I never worked for money, so that's a little bit different.

Q: *Was this a familiar kind of story to you?*

CSM: It was familiar, but superficially. Like, I know that in Colombia there's mules — and not just in Colombia, but in South America, you know, the world. There are mules, and there are people that swallow pellets. But I didn't know why did they do it. You know, you always see in the newspapers: Yeah, we caught five mules in El Dorado and they're in jail. You say: Oh, that's good, they're bad people. And then when I was doing the movie I realized that people have to have another reason to risk their lives, so I understood that and I don't judge people who do that anymore. It's so sad.

Q: *How did you come to America?*

CSM: With the movie. After the movie, I was here, the movie was finished, I had the money [from] "Maria." I'm like, "You know what? I'm not going to go back. I'm going to study here what I really love." So I invest in my study. I think it's a good decision.

Q: *Once you came to the U.S., when you tell people you're from Colombia, do they immediately think, "Oh, she's from that country with the war and the drugs"?*

CSM: The weird thing is that I tell people I'm from Colombia and they never react like that. Never! Well, just one — the guy from the corner on my house. He's like, "Hey, Colombiana!" And he's like doing — *puff* [makes smoking motion]. I really don't care. I am very proud to be Colombian, and I love my country, and I'm never going to say I'm not from Colombia. That's horrible. Because I love my country and I've lived there, and I've never been involved in

anything, and the violence is far away from me and it never touched me. So I know there's violence and I know there's a lot of people that have been touched with violence, but I can't say that I've been treated bad in my country. I've been treated real good.

*Q: So how did you get cast in the movie?*

CSM: I was studying theater through my whole high school and my whole college, in a little independent theater with an Argentinean director, and somebody knew that I was studying theater in college and called my house. And I don't know, I feel like curiosity to see who this American was. He's making a movie about Colombia? And he's looking for a 17-year-old Colombian girl? What's wrong? So I went there and had the audition and I went home. I'm like, okay, whatever, I'm going home. And two weeks later they called me.

*Q: So you were surprised to get the role.*

CSM: Of course.

*Q: Did you feel the role was very meaningful for you? Was this the kind of role you would choose for yourself?*

CSM: It was a challenge. You know? She's not like me. She's so different. That was a challenge for every single actor. And [it was] my first professional work, so of course [it was] even more challenging, and more powerful if I could do a good job.

*Q: How did you approach the role of Maria?*

CSM: I went to a floral plantation for two weeks. I worked there — I didn't de-thorn the roses [Maria's job], I cut them. I could understand how hard the work was, because the fumigants that they put on the roses — they burn their hands, sometimes, and the eyes get itchy and red, and the skin, oh my God, sometimes it peels. It never happened to me because I was just there for two weeks, but the people that have been there their whole lives, they have a problem. And it's very, very hard, because when you're in Bogotá you're just like, "These *beautiful* flowers!" and you put them in your house, but you don't know what happened before that. So I could understand Maria when she was thinking about the decision to go. She was tired of the work. I was tired after two weeks! I'm like, "I want to go home!" And you know, if you're living in a little town and that's the only option of work, that's miserable. That's sad.

*Q: So from the perspective of Bogotá, it's a little bit like here. You just buy the flowers and you don't think about it.*

CSM: Yeah.

*Q: Or you just see the news stories about the drug mules and you don't think that much more about it.*

CSM: I think so.

*Q: I found that the film in general and your performance in particular was not made heavily dramatic. It was just presented as, "This is a story that could happen." How did you try to achieve that?*

CSM: I did not try. That was a good thing. They put the camera in front of me, Josh [Marston] directed me, but I never was trying to do something. It was just coming. And I think it was because I was very lucky to be involved in this project with amazing people. The actors were incredible, were amazing, and he knew if the actors gave me a good performance, I could give them a good performance too. So it was easy, not hard.

*Q: Does it surprise you that the film comes off as quite powerful?*

CSM: Uh, yeah, because when I was doing the film, I never thought that you were not going to do the film in continuity. So when I was doing the movie I was kind of confused sometimes. I'm like, "So what happened?" So I'd have to go to the script and read, and they told me that [*flipping through pages*] they'd jumped from this scene to this one, and there was no motive for it so it was crazy. But when people go out crying — In Berlin we were putting the movie in the theater and a woman fainted. I never thought it was going to be so powerful, but to see the woman faint, it was like, "Oh my God, we're killing people! Aaagh! Horrible!" It's amazing. We never thought that this movie was going to be like that. Well, I never thought it.

*Q: Does this open some doors for you? It brought you to the U.S. ...*

CSM: Yeah. I have an agent now. She is amazingly good. She is making me go and talk to all of the important people. I think that is the first step for people to get to know me, for people to know my work.

*Q: What would you like to do?*

CSM: Good films. I don't have a character in mind. I never thought to play a Colombian that was getting involved with becoming a drug mule — I never thought to play that. So I'm just waiting for a good director and a good script. And I'm not rushing. So I think with those good points, I'm going to be okay.

*Q: It seems like producers and directors in the future could see this film and have a very strong impression of you.*

CSM: I hope so. I really do. That's why all my energy is [*focused*] on the release of this film, because I really hope the movie is doing good in America.

*Q: Do you have an idea what kind of work you would like to do?*

CSM: I don't know. I don't want to just stereotype me like a big-drama Latin woman. I don't want to be this [*exaggerated*] Latin woman — just like that. Because Latins have the horrible stereotype — they're sexy, they're beautiful and we can put her in a bikini. I don't want to do that

thing. I want to be a different Latin. So I don't want to keep stereotyping me — "Oh, I am just going to do drama." If I can do comedy, I welcome [that]. I can do ... whatever, but I have to really like it.

*Q: Press materials for the film mention that you were in [the Frog and Peach company's] "King John." Have you done other theater here?*

CSM: No. It was my first theater in New York. It was Shakespeare. It was scary! [Laughs] I think I did a pretty bad job. The first week they were like, "Oh my God, there's a lot of agents down there so you have to do a really good job." Of course, the first week I was like, forgetting my lines, forgetting where the light is going to come. But, you know, it's practice. I think you have to practice to do a good job. So that was practice for me, and theater — I really respect theater a lot, and I think if I jump again into theater, I have to be prepared. Because audiences are not stupid. They know what they're watching. And I want to be respected.

JULY 16, 2004

OFFOFFOFF.COM • THE GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE NEW YORK

## A Colombia education

*"Maria Full of Grace" paints a passionate but never overdramatized portrait of women who fly to America with drugs in their stomachs.*

By JOSHUA TANZER  
Offoffoff.com

You've heard the news items about "mules" who carry drugs into the U.S. in their stomachs, given them a quick "eeeeewwwgrosssss," dismissed the people involved as crazy, and moved on to the next headline. This is the not-at-all-crazy story of one of those people.

"Maria Full of Grace" starts in a small town outside of Bogotá, Colombia, where there's only one job — one honest one, anyway — and Maria has it. The rose plantation is a thoroughly efficient operation, with dozens of pickers, packers and — Maria's specialty — thorn strippers. Seeds, soil and subsistence labor are converted into bouquets of beauty for your table or your beloved. But all is not going well for Maria in work or in life, and she abruptly quits.

"What are you going to do?" her mother asks with considerable desperation, knowing that Maria's paycheck supports the whole family, including Maria's sister and baby niece.

"I'll find another job," Maria says.

"What other job?" the mother howls. "Around here there's nothing but flowers."

That's where she's wrong. In nearby Bogotá awaits another opportunity and it pays much better than de-thorning. All Maria has to do is get on a plane and carry some "rolls of film" to their

destination in New York (actually New Jersey, a "small town outside New York"), where she'll be paid \$100 a unit. Knowing full well what's meant by a "roll of film," Maria accepts.

Maria's journey is an all-expense-paid tour of the drug underground, where one false move can land the naive teenager in prison or the grave — and one phone call back to Colombia could be a death sentence for her whole family. At least three other mules have been sent on the same plane ("If one gets caught it's easier for the others to get through") and the separate fates of this ferrying foursome show some of the things that can happen — many of them bad.

The danger gives each of their stories a special urgency, as well as a peculiar irony. These are young women, whose lives were of no great value to anyone when they were flower-packers, and they are, if anything, even less valued once they go to work for the traffickers. But the millions of dollars worth of drugs in their bellies make them very valuable shipping containers indeed, as momentarily precious but ultimately disposable as the wrapping paper on a Christmas present. They become important to us as an audience because they're the focus of the film, but to their factory foreman, the drug boss who sends them on their journey, the DEA officers who try to intercept them at the airport, the gangsters who take delivery of them in the states, and presumably the user who shoots up their cargo on the streets, they are pawns in a much bigger game. Whether their reward was a few thousand dollars or complete ruin will not be long remembered.

First-time writer-director Joshua Marston has made a momentous film that is passionate without being overdramatic. Maria's story is told — and impressively acted by Colombian-born, New York-based actress Catalina Sandino Moreno — with directness that keeps the tone tense but realistic. Many small moments are done perfectly — like the little start that the crucifix-clutching Maria gives when the plane, undoubtedly the first she's ever been on, jolts off the runway. Even scenes obviously intended to have symbolic meaning — like an early one in which she looks up at the sky and tells her boyfriend Juan that she wants to go there — never feel contrived. (Wilson Guerrero does terrific work, incidentally, in the secondary role of Juan, as does Orlando Tobòn as a sort of neighborhood fixer in Queens.) Because so much is done right and so little is oversold, we can easily believe in this small story and multiply it in our minds into the thousands of small, human stories it undoubtedly represents.

JULY 3, 2004

OFFOFFOFF.COM • THE GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE NEW YORK

## Joshua Marston

*First-time director Joshua Marston talks about the work and the spirit that went into his award-winning debut "Maria Full of Grace."*

By JOSHUA TANZER  
Offoffoff.com

Joshua Marston admits he's "living the dream." How many other filmmakers can claim to have

walked home with some of the top awards from the Sundance, Berlin and Los Angeles film festivals with their first feature? The California-raised, NYU-educated first-time filmmaker has done just that with "Maria Full of Grace," an unblinking look at women smuggling drugs from Colombia to the United States in their stomachs. The film had its New York premiere last month at the Human Rights Watch film festival and opens Friday (July 16, 2004) at the Lincoln Plaza and Sunshine Cinemas, as well as in Jackson Heights, Queens, where parts of it were shot.

Actress Catalina Sandino Moreno has also won raves for her debut in the film, playing a young Colombian who leaves her job in a flower plantation to carry latex-wrapped drug pellets in her stomach on a tense, potentially deadly flight to New York. And some of the side characters are almost as fascinating as the lead — notably Orlando Tobón, a real-life neighborhood institution in Jackson Heights, who both helped the film get made and got to play a character based on him.

Marston talked with Offoffoff this week from the offices of Fine Line studios in Manhattan. This is an edited transcript of that interview.

*Q: How did you get involved in film?*

JOSHUA MARSTON: Well, I was a photographer since being in high school, and loved taking photographs — particularly abroad, when I traveled — meeting people, using it as a way to sort of be a fly on the wall. But I often felt like the photographs were somehow too thin, that I would always want to tell a five-minute story about what was behind each image, and so I wanted something that was thicker, that was more narrative. But I didn't go right into film. I ended up going into academia and political science [as a graduate student at University of Chicago] and did this whole circuitous route, because I was also interested in public policy and politics, and it was only when I realized that that was way too esoteric — at least academia was too esoteric for me — that I ended up finding film was a way to bring my visual and my political together.

*Q: Esoteric in what way?*

JM: *By definition* esoteric! I mean, I think academia is esoteric partly because it's like anything else, you know, when you get to the upper levels of it, it becomes very technical. But the problem is ... there's a certain egotism that comes with the esoteric quality, which is that people stake out their claim on one remote element of their field, and tries to assert their creativity, and then sort of piss around them and make sure that no one takes their territory, and get very competitive about it.

*Q: So you had something else you wanted to do in life.*

JM: Yeah, I wanted to change the world, you know? I wanted to go into politics and do something useful. But at the same time I didn't want to be in a 9-to-5 job that was going to be boring and sit in an office all day.

*Q: So far do you find this is the kind of thing you wanted to do?*

JM: I'm pretty happy. I don't think I'm in a position to complain! [*Laughs*]

*Q: How did you get interested in this subject? You didn't start with this story — you were interested in the big subject.*

JM: I had been interested in the drug war, yeah. I'd written another screenplay about a completely different facet of it, and I shelved the screenplay because it didn't work. And I think that was probably why I was that much more attuned when I came upon a story of someone who had traveled as a drug mule, which was something that I'd only ever considered really from the headlines and never really imagined from the experience, moment to moment.

*Q: What do you mean, when you "came upon" that story?*

JM: Twofold — one was that I met someone who did it, just sort of coincidentally [as] I struck up conversations with people, immigrants. And subsequently reading more about it. I read an article that referred to something called "shot gunning," which is this idea that if you put not just one but a group of people on the same plane, if one of them gets caught it will create enough distraction for the others to get through. So reading that gave me a sort of a way in, narratively, to construct a plot line that allowed me to also think more about the story academically.

*Q: Were you researching for academic purposes or to prepare to write the film?*

JM: I wrote the [first draft of the] script very quickly and then started to do a whole bunch of research, talking to all sorts of people. I talked to people who had done it, people who worked in it. ...

*Q: How different is today's film from what you wrote originally?*

JM: There's not a single sentence that made it from the first draft to the last.

*Q: Why? What did you learn in-between?*

JM: Everything! I mean, I hadn't ever traveled to Colombia when I wrote the first draft of the script. I had only talked to Colombians who lived here. And I had only had that one interaction with someone very briefly who told me in broad strokes what it was like, and then I went and talked to more people both here and in South America who told me in much more detail what it was like. And I went to flower plantations and got to see what flower plantations were like. So it was just a constant evolution.

*Q: About the flower plantations, it's interesting — this is a film that comes from two motivations. One is to show a kind of working world in the Third World, and then the other is the whole process of drug smuggling and the people involved.*

JM: Yeah, the intention is to show one working world and then to show another working world — drugs and flowers.

*Q: Did you observe the flower plantations?*

JM: Yes. I went to both Ecuador and Colombia, and went to the regions where there are flower plantations, and sometimes went in with permission through the front door, and talked to managers and got tours; sometimes smuggled myself on the bus with the workers at five in the morning, talked to the guards who worked at the plantations as well, when I couldn't get in, about what life was like for them. All sorts of aspects, just listening to people's stories, and just being in those towns [to see] when people were getting out of work and going out and hanging out, standing in line to put their paychecks in the bank.

Q: *What struck you or surprised you about what you saw?*

JM: Two things. One is that from a managerial point of view, I was struck by the incredible strides that have been made in improving the quality of work and the care of the workers. And from the point of view of the workers, what struck me was how awful the work is and continues to be, and how poorly the workers continue to be treated. So both things [were] going on — that it is a lot better than it was 15 or 20 years ago, but it still remains not very nice work, and it still remains work that you do on your feet for long periods of time. It's very supervised and controlled, and it's not work that you can have little side conversations as you work, and, you know [*gesturing down office corridor*], can't get up from your cubicle and walk down and kind of hang out for five or ten minutes and take a little break.

And the chemicals, though they have made improvements in regulating so that theoretically people don't get exposed to the fumigants, inevitably they wear off on your hands from processing the flowers, and it begins to irritate your skin and your eyes, and there are still a dramatic number of birth defects associated with plantation workers in Ecuador and Colombia.

Q: *Is there a person you met in this process who stands out in your mind?*

JM: Well, the first person that I met, and then another man that I met in prison in Pennsylvania, who spent several days with me explaining in detail what it was like for him. A woman in an Ecuadorean prison. There are so many stories, just stories that prove that fact is more interesting than fiction. From a screenwriting point of view, it was often frustrating because I would get these incredibly detailed and fascinating stories that I couldn't then work into the script because I had to be true to Maria's point of view and experience. So for example, one guy told me the story of how, after he'd gone through all the travail of swallowing the drugs and bringing them to the United States, he was then presented with such a large wad — a bale — of cash, that he had to swallow the cash in pellets and smuggle the cash back to Colombia. So the stories that you hear are just phenomenal.

Q: *How did you cast Catalina Sandino Moreno as Maria?*

JM: We saw 800 girls over three months in the U.S. and in Colombia. We had two teams in Colombia looking at professionals and non-professionals. The team for non-professionals was going to town around Bogotá — looking in schools, flower plantations, driving around with a megaphone on the car — all in an effort to encourage girls to open calls. After three months of this, without finding the right girl, we had to push the shoot.

The very next morning another tape arrived in New York with another 12 auditions on it and Catalina was the first on the tape. She simply was Maria — the character I had had in my head for three years in the writing. And as an actress she was creative, smart and the camera loved her. Working with her I was constantly amazed by her ability to step up to the plate and deliver. On numerous occasions I turned to the producer, Paul Mezey, and marveled that she wasn't a seasoned professional.

*Q: How did you find Orlando Tobón?*

JM: I met Orlando because someone fairly late in the game who had read the script and I was meeting with for financing said, "Well, have you met the mayor of Little Colombia?" Little Colombia meaning Jackson Heights in Queens. So I found out about the man and I called him up and told him I wanted to come out and meet him. And I went out to his office, which is half the size of this room and it's full of people, and its people who were there to get help with something in one form or another. He's a fixer.

I remember we met for lunch — we walked out of the office, we walked across the street, and in walking the block to the restaurant he was stopped four or five times in the street by people who knew him or recognized him or had something to tell him. He is this community figure, and among the many, many things he's done he has become known for sending the bodies of drug dealers back, who've died. And so he was very, not only open to the project but very passionate about the idea of the project. And so he became very supportive and allowed me to sit in his office and watch the way it worked. And that then became the inspiration for me for rewriting the script and fashioning a character inspired by him.

*Q: He's listed as associate producer.*

JM: Yeah, because he became the person in the community that we would turn to whenever we needed help with something, whether it was how fast did we get in touch with 17-year-old girls in the neighborhood to try and get them to turn out for casting, or we needed a restaurant for lunch for holding while we're shooting, or he would help us get this location, or we needed Colombians to do voiceover for background sound in the crowd scenes. He was our point man in the community.

*Q: He seemed like he could be a whole other story in himself.*

JM: Absolutely.

*Q: I thought, watching the film, that the events in the film are never overhyped, never overdramatized. It's presented in a sort of matter-of-fact way.*

JM: Right.

*Q: Was that something that you tried to achieve?*

JM: Yeah, because to a certain extent it's matter-of-fact in Colombia. I mean, what I was interested in doing was not telling a story that we've seen already from the top down, from the point of the view of the DEA agent or the drug trafficker, but telling it from the bottom up, from the point of view of someone fairly low on the totem pole who is suffering through this experience. And in that way, I wanted to make it not so much "matter-of-fact" but *every day*. To give it a sort of everyday quality, a very mundane sense, in the literal sense of the word "mundane." It was, "What is it like to do this," rather than, "What's the most dramatic, glitzy, hyped-up way that we could do it with the flash of 'Miami Vice.'" So that you're really put into the shoes of the character that's doing it. Yeah, that was the goal.

Q: *Tell me what it took to get the film made.*

JM: Well, HBO is the main thing. There were a lot of people who said no to the script because it was in Spanish, and HBO said yes. So that was a huge crossroads, because they were willing to take that risk and then allowed us to make the film the way we wanted to make it. And then the next huge crossroad was making it in Ecuador because Colombia became too unsafe. And that was just about collaboration, you know, with bringing all the Colombians from Ecuador.

Q: *Tell me what kind of work you're hoping to do in the future.*

JM: I'm writing a new screenplay. It takes place in Tennessee. It's about a family in a small town. I'm interested in [making] films that have a powerful emotional story, really interesting characters, and that take place within a social and political context — they're not told in a vacuum simply for entertainment reasons but they're films that resonate and that stay with you for more than the time that it takes to eat dinner afterwards.

Q: *How has your experience been with festivals and all the response you've gotten so far?*

JM: It's great. I mean, to a certain extent I'm living the dream, you know, so I have no complaints. I think the most satisfying thing is the audience reactions to the film — sitting in the back of the theater and watching people shift in their seats and exhale, and having them come up afterwards to me and to the actresses and say that they've been moved, you know? And as far as the awards go, I think that the audience awards are the most significant, because it's the audience saying this film really moved us. The notion that so many people within a given festival could all vote for this film is like that Sally Field moment — they like me! They really like me! They like the film, you know — it stays with them. It resonates. And that's ultimately what you hope to do most as a filmmaker — to move the audience.

JULY 16, 2004

OFFOFFOFF.COM • THE GUIDE TO ALTERNATIVE NEW YORK