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FILM REVIEW

Uncovering The Secrets Of a Cruel Childhood

By ANITA GATES

Dominique Swain did a glorious job as the title character of Adrian Lyne's "Lolita" last year, capturing the attitudes and behaviors of a barely adolescent girl. But when Erika Isabel de la Cruz Ramírez plays the title character of "Paulina" at age 13, huddling in a graveyard, hiding from the man who keeps her as a sexual prisoner, she is what a real Lolita might have looked like: amazingly young.

"Paulina" is a remarkable documentary about a Mexican maid and the childhood tragedy that shaped her life. The filmmaker, Vicky Funari, and her parents lived in Mexico for a while, and Paulina Cruz Suárez was their maid. When Ms. Funari visited Mexico City a few years ago, she looked up Ms. Suárez and began asking about her life. The story she heard was simultaneously devastating and inspiring.

One day, when Paulina was 8, she walked to a well in her village to get bathwater. She slipped and fell, cutting her vagina on the metal edge of a trough. When her mother found the little girl bleeding, she concluded that she had been raped. Since Paulina had never heard the word "rape," she assumed that it meant falling and cutting yourself.

Rather than receiving sympathy, Paulina is ostracized and taunted by the townspeople and her own family. Their methods include disdainfully calling the little girl "señora" and taking her out of school. The only recourse is to give her to the cacique, or local boss, Don Mauro. "Let her grow awhile and I'll take her," he tells her parents, promising them certain land rights in return and vowing to marry Paulina when she is old enough. Instead he rapes and beats her regularly. She repeatedly resists and often hides from him. When she is 15, she runs away on a bus and makes a new life, cooking and cleaning for wealthy families in Mexico City.

Ms. Suárez herself tells much of her story, sometimes on camera and sometimes in voice-over as re-enactments appear on screen. These are not the ludicrous shadowy re-enactments of cheap news-magazine programs. They are, like the rest of the documentary, assured, intelligent filmmaking, but with minimal dialogue.

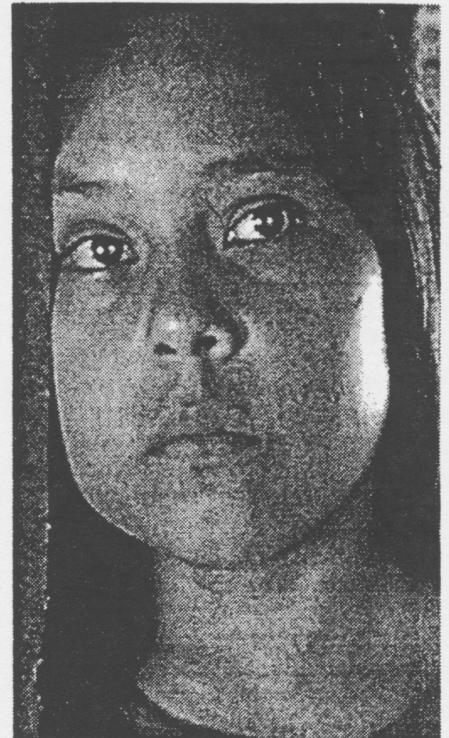
The filmmaker also revisits Paulina's village and interviews people, including Paulina's parents, who knew her and Mauro. The most chilling encounters are with Paulina's mother, who contends at first that she doesn't remember the incident, then remembers it wrong. When the mother is asked about Mauro, she tells the interviewer that Paulina went with him at age 13 because she was in love with him. Neighbors and Mauro's other women know better and say so.

Ms. Suárez, who has a grown daughter of her own now, is the picture of dignity and good humor — and a testament (trite but true) to what the human spirit can endure and rise above.

PAULINA

Directed by Vicky Funari; written (in Spanish, with English subtitles) by Ms. Funari, Paulina Cruz Suárez and Jennifer Maytorena Taylor; director of photography, Marie-Christine Camus; music by Pauline Oliveros; produced by Ms. Taylor and Ms. Funari; released by Turbulent Arts. Running time: 88 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Paulina Cruz Suárez (herself), Mariám Manzano Durán (Paulina at age 8), Erika Isabel de la Cruz Ramírez (Paulina at 13) and Mathyselene Heredia Castillo (Paulina at 18).



Turbulent Arts

Traumatized: Erika Isabel de la Cruz Ramírez in "Paulina."

Paulina

A non-fiction feature film from CineMamás Productions

