

Contested Flesh



Paulina

**Land rights and body rights
clash in this striking docudrama
about a woman wronged**

BY GARY MORRIS

Sixty-year-old housekeeper Paulina Cruz Suarez grew up in the Mexican village of Puntilla, Veracruz. At the age of 8 she had a peculiar accident that would change her life dramatically. While bathing in the woods, she fell and hurt what she calls her "part." Informed of what happened, her mother Placida insists to everyone that she was raped by a powerful local landowner, Mauro Cruz. As Paulina later finds out, this was an intentional strategy born of desperation. Her family was poor, frantic for land rights for farming and thus survival; this was their first attempt to make a claim on him. Five years later, when Paulina is 13, the promise of this event bears fruit: her family trades her to Mauro, who beats and rapes her, in exchange for land rights.



Such grim events are not uncommon in poor rural societies, but that's only part of Paulina's story. Filmmakers Vicky Funari and Jennifer Mayortena-Taylor re-create that history and what followed it in this brilliantly engaging docudrama. **Paulina**, like its subject, is about fragmentation and re-creation, pulling something whole and powerful out of pieces. The film, which took 10 years to make, was shot partly in 16mm and partly on video, and is made up of both interviews — with the real Paulina, her family, friends, and enemies — and dramatic reenactments of key events in her life. Before we know who she is or precisely what she's endured, we see her as a feisty teenager fending off a lecherous middle-aged man on a bus. Her method is simple, swift, and direct: she sinks her teeth — "a weapon from God," she calls them — into the hand trying to crawl between her legs. The film moves seamlessly from such scenes to earlier and later times, always dominated by the forceful presence of the present-day Paulina, whose stories told to the filmmakers form the basis of the movie and whose rich voice we often hear in overdub even when she's not on camera.

Paulina plays a **Rashomon** game with the viewer. When she tells an anecdote, a relative in Mexico is shown contradicting it. Even the marital status of Mauro's many women, a thing that could perhaps be checked, is in question as one of his common-law wives insists she was legally married to him, while another denies it. Most telling is that most of her relatives continue to insist, decades after the fact, that Paulina was a willing participant in what happened with Mauro Cruz. This constant opposition of attitudes gives a multifaceted effect to a splintered life, and pulls the audience deep into the story by keeping a constant mental dialogue going. What doesn't seem doubtful is that Paulina, after being abandoned by her family to Mauro and denounced as a whore by the rest of the village, escaped to Mexico City to become a maid and housekeeper. The film presents these scenes in an almost mocking melodramatic style that emphasizes Paulina's tragedy but also the strength and humor that allowed her to survive it.



Some of the film's dramatic reenactments reach poetic heights. In one scene we see Paulina as a young girl looking at her reflection in a puddle; as it shimmers, her image wavers, as if she were falling into another world, a perhaps not unexpected reaction to her life to this point. But the image is also deceptive; Paulina is far from withdrawn. In some ways the experience of being brutalized makes her stronger, as a scene of her as a young teenager doing something unimaginable shows: forcing a terrified Mauro to degrade himself by kissing her feet. Even if the reality of this event is in question, interviews with the real Paulina offer little doubt that she was capable of such an act. But she retained a sense of humor too that the filmmakers capture with verve. After a tearful good-bye scene with her grown daughter, no doubt aware of Funari and Taylor's desire that she be as "real" as possible in her "scenes," she turns to the camera and says with mocking wit, "We did it all very naturally, right Vicky?"

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ACCESS: *Paulina* should be available in video soon, though it's not as of this writing (4/99). Check the film's [website](#) for more information.

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