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Vince Caperelli Jr.
capfam3@hotmail.com

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Maria Full of Grace

Abstract

This is a review of *Maria Full of Grace* (2004).

Writer/director Joshua Marston's feature length debut, *Maria Full of Grace*, is a captivating tale of a young woman's journey of self-discovery, layered with socio-political commentary on international drug trafficking and on immigrant life in the United States. While ultimately introducing the world to actress Catalina Sandino Moreno and garnering rave reviews and awards at top festivals, Marston combines his journalistic sensibilities with mostly handheld camera work to achieve a documentary style through which to tell this personal and intriguing story.

Maria Alvarez (Moreno) lives a common life in rural Colombia. She rises early to labor at a rose plantation to help support her family and hangs out at fiestas with friends. Left unfulfilled, however, Maria is searching for more out of life than her mundane job, stale relationships and generally uneventful existence. A connection to the world of international drug trafficking introduces Maria to a way out - money, travel and the United States. But once committed to being a drug mule, Maria begins to realize the precarious position she is now in, a position that worsens upon landing in New York where she will expel her illegal cargo. Once in New York, Maria is forced to decide between all that she knows in life and all that she hopes for, both for herself and her unborn child. Ultimately, Maria begins to live into the grace that has perhaps been given her or perhaps been there all along, as she chooses a more hopeful - though still relatively unknown - future.

In the film's second scene, Maria mechanically responds to boyfriend Juan's affection until her disinterested gaze meets the heavens above. It is here that Maria's longing for something more - something profoundly Other - is introduced. Her initial response is to scale the wall of an old building. But as Juan walks away, there exists the painful reminder of Maria's isolation and her unmet longings. Marston supports this main theme by frequently shooting Maria in ante frame, repeatedly highlighting the existing tension and unrest within Maria. The provocative yet graceful acoustic guitar score also supports the longing and pursuit of something Other.

Later, after Maria reveals her pregnancy, Juan attempts to honor the situation by offering to marry her. Maria laughs at his offer and asks, "Juan, do you love me?" When it is clear that Juan cannot honestly answer her, Maria asks, "What kind of a person are you? You're gonna marry someone you don't even love? Someone who doesn't love you?" This thoughtful exposition takes us deeper into Maria's desire. She wants love, both to give and to receive. And Juan's loveless act cannot satisfy her. Perhaps like her sister - and quite possibly her mother and grandmother - Maria would rather raise a child on her own than enter into a loveless marriage.

Following many films before it, *Maria Full of Grace* sets a succinct tone with its title. Throughout the film, various acts of grace surround Maria: helping to

support her family, surviving the Customs interrogation, setting Lucy at ease while on the plane, receiving housing from Carla, listening to Carla's own immigration story, her baby being unaffected by the ingested drug pellets, paying for Lucy's body to return to Colombia, and deciding to offer her baby a better life. These plot points strongly support the theme presented by the title.

"It's what's inside that counts." This statement - contextually an ad slogan - drapes the background in the final scene as Maria both literally and metaphorically turns a corner and walks hopefully toward her future. It is in these final moments that the weight of the film is lifted and we, the viewer, sigh and feel hope both for and with Maria as she gracefully displays her beauty and confidence, despite an uncertain future.

It is when we read this advertisement, also, that we are reminded of the depth and complexity of this film. What does Maria want? What is she after? This is the power of the story. Regardless of setting and context, Marston quickly shows us ourselves in Maria and leaves us needing to know how the story will unfold. Is it longing, desire, grace, love, or Maria's unborn baby that matters most? I offer that these aren't mutually exclusive categories, nor do they need to be. For what matters most is not necessarily how Maria came to be filled with grace or whether she somehow became filled by grace, but, rather, that she will now live as Maria, Full of Grace.

Editor's Note: *Maria Full of Grace* was also reviewed by Dr. William L. Blizek in the Sundance 2004 Report.