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CANDID ABOUT CINEMA: GREGORY NAVA

By Manuel F. Medrano¹

It is no secret that in today's American film industry, like in previous years, Mexican American film producers, directors and actors face substantial challenges. Although not as acute as they were two decades ago, nonetheless, challenges exist. Inadequate funding, ethnic stereotyping and a tradition of exclusion are only three of the factors that discourage film makers and actors from continuing in the profession. Degreed assistant producers are, at times, instructed to bring lunch and coffee to the film staff. Degreed actors, some with credentials from the most prestigious acting schools in the world, are often cast as drug dealers, butlers, maids and harlots. Those that do succeed, however, have done so despite the system. Gregory Nava, arguably one of America's premier Latino film makers, has remained connected to his roots despite operating in an industry that minimizes the Mexicano and Latino experience. Having overcome some systematic obstacles in the arena of American cinema, Nava understands that much still needs to be done.

Gregory Nava was born in San Diego, California in 1949. In 1975, he graduated with an MFA degree from UCLA.² One year later, he received the Best First Feature Award at the prestigious Chicago International Film Festival with *The Confessions of Amans*.³ He married film maker Anna Thomas, and they collaborated on film projects for over thirty years. In 1983, they gained national acclaim with the release of *El Norte*, a film about a Guatemalan brother and sister who leave their violence-ravaged country to pursue the American dream. The film won an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay. Other collaborations included *A Time of Destiny* (1988), *My Family* (1995), *Selena* (1997), *Frida* (2002), and *Bordertown* (2006). Additionally, his films have won awards at film festivals in Canada and the United States.⁴

On March 22, 1996, Nava screened his film, *My Family* and spoke to students and faculty of the University of Texas at Brownsville at the local theatre and during a much more private session at the university. The latter meeting began shortly after midnight and ended at about 3:00 am. Throughout the evening, Nava was accessible, knowledgeable and candid. When I commented about his courtesy and patience, he replied, I think...anyone who's trying to make it deserves to be dealt

with in a kind manner...I do try to help people when I can, but I also try to be honest.”²⁵ The aspiring film makers and actors in attendance were appreciative and inquisitive.

Before the screening, Nava spoke about the rewards and difficulties Latinos face in the film industry. One reward is the ability to articulate “our strength of community and our sense of community... to become people with hearts and souls in this nation, not to be shadows anymore.”⁴ The shadows are what historians once called “the invisible minority.”

Challenges, however, are numerous. Nava laments that not only are there not enough Latinos actors, directors and producers, there is also a shortage of agents and executives. About screenwriters he says, “only Latino writers are going to be able to tell our stories or tell stories where we become wonderful characters in them... It is a *lucha* (struggle) and I’m always reminded of that. I was watching the film and the coming attractions came on...all these movies with cool guys, of course, Tom Cruise...and I was wondering if there would be a Latino in there; so finally, there is; you know, this guy is talking like ‘thees.’ It’s the servant. It’s the only guy when they had like five movies [...] That’s bad [...] It’s a tragedy, really. I happen to know that actor [Miguel Sandoval]. He’s a Shakespearian actor and speaks better English than Tom Cruise...but he’s not allowed a be a true character in the movie.”⁶

In a more intimate setting at the university faculty study, film majors and professors asked him about financing for his films. Nava replied, “you have to hear ‘no’ a hundred times...and then you lose count of how many times you hear ‘no,’ but you just keep trying to keep opening doors and to be clever and find out new ways to put it together...Then I thought ‘god,’ there’s just got to be some way. A part of it when you’re making a movie is just your ability to dance, keep dancing and don’t stop dancing... That’s what you have to do when you’re an independent film maker. So, I’m sitting there, and nobody wants to make this movie [*My Family*]. I’ve been turned down by every single studio...Some of them will do it if I use certain non-Latino actors, but I won’t do that, and so casting is a tremendous problem... but they want a name...I’m not going to cast Robert de Niro as being the father, but how about casting Francis Ford Coppola as the executive director?”⁷ Coppola spoke to Bob Shay from New Line Cinema, who finally agreed to fund the movie. The process took five years.

Nava then spoke to me about the importance of Latinos in film making and his own career. He emphasized that increased participation in film making allows Latinos to include their cultural point of view as part of the process. He warned, “... images that are created in Hollywood are not just for the United States. They go all over the world...Africa, China, Singapore. So, the images of Latinos in American movies are the images of Latinos in the entire world. It’s a scary thing when you think about it because the images of Latinos in American movies are pretty bad, for

the most part, and I think that the situation can only be changed by us... We have to fight the hard fight... get in there; make the movies; let our voices be known; tell our stories. Only we can do it. It's a very, very tough thing because there is a lot of prejudice and discrimination in Hollywood. It's very hard to break in, so we have to be doubly tough and really believe in what we're doing in order to make that happen."⁸

When the film maker was asked about his reputation as an uncompromising director, Nava responded by saying he is a great collaborator. He does not, however, compromise on telling Latino stories, their themes and casting. He remembers, "so somewhere along the line, you have to draw the line in the sand as I had to do in both *El Norte* and *Mi Familia*. I had the opportunity to make both films if I had just used non-Latinos in the leads, and I refused to do that. As it turned out, in both cases I found another way to do it, and I'm really happy about that."⁹

When Nava was questioned about the importance of culture, he said pensively, "I believe very strongly in *cultura*. To me a taco and a tuna sandwich are equally ethnic; they both have their cultural underpinnings. I think people need to start understanding and seeing things that way... It contributes to our humanity ... If you're a Chicano, to be proud of those cultural roots is an extremely important thing because it goes back to one's sense of self. So, *cultura* is important to me; it makes me who I am."¹⁰

When asked what the twenty-first century might hold for Latino film makers and actors, Nava said that people must fill entry-level positions now to become decision makers in a decade. He commented, "...clearly the United States is becoming more Latino by the year. The industry needs to start reflecting the needs of this new audience that's very, very large and obviously wants to have films and television shows that they can relate to and that they like. So right now, we're at a real critical juncture in the history of American cinema, especially with respect to the Latino audience."¹¹

The comments Gregory Nava made nearly thirty years ago were almost prophetic and have endeared him with a pioneer-like status. Latino numbers are increasing in the industry. Individuals such as Guillermo del Toro (Best Director for *The Shape of Water*) are even being recognized with Academy Awards. Others, like Gina Rodriguez, have garnered television Emmys for Best Actress (*Jane the Virgin*). More actors are being cast in leading non-stereotypical roles. Some inroads are also being made in producing Latino-themed motion pictures and television series. As Nava predicted, Latino movie-going audiences continue to increase. Generally, Latinos in the film making industry have more role models, opportunities and marketability. These gains, however, are relative. Concerns continue with ethnic typecasting, salary discrepancies and underrepresentation in mainstream films. Additionally, few Latinos are part of the final decision-making process. The "lucha" that Nava so passionately spoke about has been passed to a new generation.

Endnotes

1 Manuel F. Medrano is Emeritus Professor of History at UTRGV. He is producer/director of the Los del Valle oral history documentaries and author/co-author of six books and over twenty-five articles and essays about people, history and culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

2 https://www.allmovie.com/artist/gregorynava_p104121/

3 Sandra Brennan, https://www.allmovie.com/artist/gregorynava_p104121/

4 Gregory Nava interview, March 23, 1996.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.