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AT MIDNIGHT AND A HALF

(A LA MEDIA NOCHE Y MEDIA)

(VENEZUELA-PERU)

A Sudaka Films (Caracas) production, in association with Futuro Films (Lima). Produced by Mariana Rondon, Marite Ugas.

Directed, written by Marite Ugas, Mariana Rondon. Camera (color), Micaela Cajahuaranga; editor, Alberto Gomez; music, Trina Medina, Ignacio Barreto, Los Rodriguez; production designer, Erasmo Colon; art director, Emilio Borges; sound (Dolby), Aurora Ojeda; assistant director, Carlos Villegas. Reviewed at the Seattle Film Festival, June 5, 2000. Running time: 90 MIN.

With: Salvador Del Solar, Maria Fernanda Ferro, Constanza Morales.

By KEN EISNER

Provocatively stylish effort uses an apocalyptic setup in order to explore some basic male-female issues. Title "At Midnight and a Half" conveys mystery of a millennial nature while actually asking pic's real question: What are lovers left with when the big drama has

come and gone? Sexy performers, a sure helming hand and infectious music could allow this magically realistic Latin creation to head north, with vid interest assured at the very least.

Like Canada's much busier "Last Night," this ingeniously spare three-hander examines some very different reactions to the end of the world — in this case, an impending tidal wave that threatens to wipe out the coast of Venezuela. Cars aren't moving on the only highway through terrain cut into the bottom of giant cliffs, much to the exasperation of Sebastian (Salvador Del Solar), a rather hot-headed young man who's desperate to reach higher ground. Driving an old American car — with a dubious engine and one *really* terrible rock song in the tape player — he takes a detour through a quaint old town and encounters a little girl (Constanza Morales) who seems to have been abandoned by her parents in the exodus.

The kid is bossy and obnoxious, but Sebastian agrees to give her a ride — *if* he can ever get away, that is. The town is almost deserted, but there is one woman, a lithe artist called Anna (Maria Fernanda Ferro), who keeps distracting him when he seems ready to leave. Mostly she just walks around, taking photos of interesting people and places, and it turns out that she has built a large-scale model of the village in her studio.

Thanks to slick work from co-helmings Marite Ugas and Mariana Rondon, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the pic's action from what's going on in Anna's art project. Her demeanor isn't exactly one of panic, so the viewer starts wondering how much she's calling the shots in a sitch that could all be fantasy or dream. On top of that, neither Sebastian nor the girl ever talk to the woman — although both are disturbed by the artist's smoldering sexuality — and there are plenty of reasons to wonder if these relationships are more symbolic than real.

"Midnight's" musical score, with its tart combination of chamber music and Latin percussion, is anchored by a walking acoustic bass line that comments ironically on the repetitions and hesitations of human behavior — especially where love and survival are concerned.

Story is also clever at mixing ancient myths and Catholic imagery, resulting in many arresting set pieces and motifs, including the inclination "to throw stones in the sea to make it angry." Pic's elliptical, enigmatic style isn't for auds who like their packages to have neat right angles, but the helming, lensing and editing are reassuringly tight, leading to a finish that answers most of the questions raised, while leaving a few bigger ones open.

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