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Six Countries, Six Visions

VVT 8/13/89

By B. RUBY RICH

Latin American directors are finding co-production the surest route to the screen.

FOR "AMORES DIFIciles," Gabriel García Márquez gathered half a dozen directors from Latin America and Spain, anchoring a quartet of new talent with a pair of blue-chip names, and found the means to get their work produced.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, the Cuban director of "Letters From the Park," says that the series has created a trend, and its name is co-production.

He is not alone. Helga Stephenson, the director of Toronto's Festival of Festivals, which has kindled interest in Latin American cinema, spots the García Márquez series as a smart marketing move: "The package has given a window to a generation of film makers who weren't known to the rest of the world," she says.

With the economic situation so bleak in debt-plagued Latin America, Ms. Stephenson says that co-production may well be manifest destiny: "That's what's going to keep Latin American cinema alive," she says, noting with some amusement the key role of Spanish television, which sponsored the "Amores Difíciles" series. "What's happening now is really the return of the conquistadores — except this time around, by invitation, to build Latin American culture rather than to destroy it."

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Although the six film makers all directed scripts from García Márquez stories, the contexts within which they work are very different.

Jaime Chavarri ("I'm The One You're Looking For") is the token Spaniard in the group, the one who connects the project to its financing base in Spanish TV. Mr. Chavarri has had a career in theater as well as film and television, both documentary and fiction. This is his first movie to reach audiences outside of Spain.

Lisandro Duque ("Miracle in Rome"), the Colombian, came to prominence with his first feature film, "Visa U.S.A.," in the mid-80's. Now Mr. Duque is completing a screenplay for a film based on José Justacio Rivera's "La Voragine," Colombia's most famous novel prior to "One Hundred Years of Solitude." The project has an ironic side: the novel's author died in New York City in 1927 while trying to get his book produced as a film. Mr. Duque has secured financing from a television production company and will be able to make "La Voracena."

The situation for film production in Colombia, however, has been dire since last year's admission of insolvency by its national film production fund. The timing couldn't have been worse: the late 80's have been a time of ascendancy for Colombian film, full of awards, attention at international festivals — even a retrospective planned for the Museum of Modern Art.

In Mexico, meanwhile, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo ("The Summer of Miss Forbes") has been making films for nearly 25 years. His work began to be shown in the United States in the mid-70's, but it was only when his breakthrough film, "Doña Herlinda and Her Son," gained attention upon its debut in the New Directors/New Films festival earlier this decade that he reached an audience in this country.

Mr. Hermosillo is now embarking upon his most ambitious project, "Eterno Esplendor" ("Eternal Splendor"), a film that will mark the return to the screen after 20 years of the Mexican actress Maria Felix. The cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa will shoot the film from Mr. Hermosillo's script. Money is coming from Conacine, Mexico's state production apparatus, but the high budget (including scenes on location in Paris) make a co-production essential, and Mr. Hermosillo is seeking backing outside Mexico.

Olegario Barrera's "Happy Sunday" is the only film in this series with controversy dogging its production: Mr. Barrera was brought in as director after his fellow Venezuelan Fina Torres (whose "Oriena" was shown at the

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New York Film Festival) departed due to differences with Mr. García Márquez over script development.

Mr. Barrera's first feature film, the 1984 "Pequeña Revancha" ("Little Revenge"), marked his international debut and won him a number of awards, including San Sebastian and Berlin festival honors. The financial picture for film making has become grim in his country as well, but co-production money from European countries including France and Italy continue to make film making possible.

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Ruy Guerra ("Fable of the Beautiful Pigeon Fancier") had already worked with Mr. García Márquez on "Erendira," released in New York in the early 80's. Mr. Guerra grew up in Mozambique and studied film in Paris. By the early 70's, he was in Brazil playing a key role in the creation and definition of the *cinema novo* movement that recast neo-realism and mysticism in such films as his own classic "Oz Fuzis." He's worked as an actor, too, notably in Werner Herzog's "Aguirre, the Wrath of God." In the late 70's, during the time of military rule in Brazil, Mr. Guerra returned to Mozambique and helped found the national film institute there.

His film "Kuarup" based on the Antonio Callado novel of the corruption and utopian aspirations of Brazil in the 50's, had its premiere at Cannes this spring. With the Brazilian economy in such crisis that film makers worry how they will be able to make features at all, Mr. Guerra is one of the few who can find backing.

So far, Cuban directors have avoided the economic traps faced by their colleagues. Mr. Alea's career dates back to the pre-revolutionary period. His "Memories of Underdevelopment" defined Cuban cinema for many United States viewers. He has recently been made head of one of the new decentralized production units set up by the Cuban Film Institute.

His next feature, "Weekend in Bahia," is about the visit home of a Cuban woman who'd left the island for the United States 19 years before. Mr. Alea has another project on hold: his adaptation of Alejo Carpentier's novel "Los Pasos Perdidos" ("The Lost Steps") has a script written and United States producers lined up, but it is currently blocked by United States Government restrictions on Cuban investment. □