

# FRIDA: SENSUALITY IN FILM, SENSUALITY THROUGH FILM

**For the first time in years, a Mexican film is a smashing, critical success.**

*For a long time, the Mexican film industry had been submerged in an extremely difficult situation. The old glory days of the 1940s and the early 70s were long gone and forgotten; only film buffs remembered them with nostalgia. At last, a film finally emerges that stirs the viewers' imagination and, despite its artistic complexity, becomes a box-office success; as well. Painter Frida Kahlo, whose life is portrayed in the film, was a leading figure among the Surrealist school. Her unconventional relationship with Diego Rivera has become the stuff of myth and legend. VOICES OF MEXICO decided to give the outstanding film and this outstanding woman its first space in the "Faces" section. Film-maker and critic, Manuel Sorto, provides us with some of his views:*

**Frida, the Lively Spirit**, a film by Mexican director Paul Leduc, opened recently in Mexico City. For months we had been reading about and hearing of the praise the film was receiving abroad. Coverage in the Mexican press was notable because of the critic's opposing points of view.

Reviews were even more contradictory after **Frida** was nominated for nine Arieles, the Mexican equivalent of the Hollywood Oscars. Some considered the film to be one of the most beautiful and important in the history of Mexican cinema, while others argued that it's "a lot of fireworks" and the 'pièce de resistance of the crisis'. Since very few in Mexico had actually seen the film, others began referring to it as "mythical". All in all, **Frida** won 8 Arieles.

Very few films have had the aureola that surrounded **Frida** before its debut. Few have received such contrary reviews. I believe a lot of this has to do with the fact that the film deals with characters whose politics and artistic work are still pertinent in Mexico today: Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros. The controversy also has to do with Leduc's atypical direction and structuring of the film in a style unprecedented in the Mexican cinema.

**Frida** is not the conventional type of film biography. There is no portrayal of glorious deeds and unwavering virtuous personal conduct. Nor does the film follow the official history on its subject. Incidents of Frida's political involvement are treated on equal footing with everyday moments; some critics refer to this as "major trivia".

The artist in her wheelchair taking part in a left demonstration is as significant as watching her listen to a record. In one scene she attends the funeral of slain Zapatista peasants and in another she smokes while her husband Diego Rivera sits in the bathtub. Frida distributes leaflets calling on the Mexican people to support Sandino's struggle in Nicaragua and is convulsed in laughter as she imitates an opera singer that Rivera listens to as he paints one of his famous murals.

Therein lies much of what Leduc is proposing in this film: treating historical monsters as if they were everyday people. The character's importance stems not from their spectacular

## WHO IS FRIDA KALHO?

Generally considered to be Latin America's best surrealist painter, Frida Kahlo was born in Mexico City in 1910. She was the daughter of a German immigrant and fashionable model photographer, Wilhelm Kahlo, who changed his name to Guillermo after he moved to Mexico. Frida (originally Frieda, she dropped the "e" from her name in 1933 to make it more hispanic and to emphasize her rejection of all things German with the rise of the Nazis there) received a privileged education, first in the Coyoacan neighborhood where she grew up and later at the National Preparatory School, at that time considered to be the country's finest high school. It was also there that she first met Diego Rivera, when he began to paint his murals at the school in 1923. Nonetheless, she didn't start her tempestuous relationship with the famous painter until much later, in 1929.

At the age of 16, riding home from school one day, Frida was in a bus that was hit by a trolley. A piece of iron punctured her abdomen, broke her pelvis and damaged her spinal column. She survived miraculously, but the after-effects of the accident stayed with her throughout her life. At a very young age, she was confined to a wheelchair, and in her thirties, she had a leg amputated below the knee.

The 1920s in Mexico were years of particular political frenzy and feverish creativity. The country was being rebuilt after a decade of revolution that left great destruction in its wake. Social issues were very much in fashion and the possibility of bettering the lot of

mankind was very much on the horizon. Frida embraced these noble causes at an early age. It was, in fact, through her political activities and not through her painting that she met Diego Rivera again. Once together, they would never be separated again until her death, although theirs was not a traditional relationship in any way. Two free spirits with strong personalities and a strong dose of individualism, Frida and Diego shared a tumultuous love life, in which other lovers came and went, and in which separations and reconciliations were the norm; one year—1940—they even married, divorced and married again.

Frida and Diego were very much at the center of all things artistic and political throughout their entire lives. They not only met and befriended many leading figures of the first half of the century, but also became emotionally involved with some of them. Such was the case with Frida and Bolchevik leader-in-exile, Leon Trotsky.

Art critic Raquel Tibol has said of Frida's works, that they represent the only case in which "subjectivity is objectified." Tibol continues, "With a lucid and receptive mind, she established a commitment to herself and became her own active subject, one which she had to penetrate from all angles in order to capture it for ever in her paintings."

In Mexico, today, Frida is popularly seen as a symbol of liberation, as well as an example of how someone with talent and perseverance can overcome even the greatest of obstacles.

actions but rather from the combination of apparently unimportant everyday events with the moments that eventually do go down in history.

Trotsky is shown at the Rivera's dinner table playing the trick of making a glass disappear from under a napkin. The scene takes place before another great Mexican muralist, Siqueiros, following Stalin's orders, makes an attempt on Trotsky's life. Frida strokes the pistol she hides under her skirt with the same ease as she sings with her washing lady as they hang up the clothes to dry. Just as Frida is straightforward in observing herself in the mirror or sustaining a lesbian encounter with a friend, Diego Rivera playfully asks Trotsky why he and Stalin didn't settle their differences by going out whoring together. Contrary to what some would have liked or expected, Leduc's film is no eulogy to Frida or Diego Rivera, nor is it a painful

and heroic account of their struggles. Rather, Leduc demystifies historic characters so that they become the everyday people we can relate to, anonymous human beings caught up in daily life.

The director does not attempt to enter the world of their painting and of artistic creation. Nonetheless, each scene is a homage to the character's artistic work because of the lighting, warmth, movement and composition of the film.

From one scene to another the movie glides slowly through different moments in Frida's life, from childhood to death. Instead of telling a lineal story, Leduc uses flashbacks in what some consider a total "false disorder".

The camera's movements are gentle and steady, giving each sequence a silky smoothness. Each scene is beautifully rendered through the use of lighting, form and composition. The effect is one of maximum pleasure, though we are often shaken out of our complacency aesthetically, morally and politically speaking.

Leduc has reduced dialog to a minimum, and what there is of it is simple and direct. The words are mostly the simple, common speech of everyday Mexico.

From the point of view of how action unfolds in most commercial films, *Frida's* pace is slow. But the internal rhythm in each scene is overwhelming, as baroque as Latin American literature. There are so many details and nuances that we barely have time to take them in.

In the usual Mexican and Latin American film-making tradition, the slow pacing of each scene, the scarcity of dialog and action, the absence of jazzy commercial setting and killings or shootings every thirty seconds can seem senseless, even foolish. But the beauty of the images and the simplicity of events are fascinating. "Film as a cascade of images," wrote Leduc in 1982.

Some of the scenes seem to be excessively synthetic, such as the killing of the Zapatista peasants. Others, such as when Frida as a child has a pillow fight with her father and sister, we could do without. But none of these take away from the overall effect.

If one word were to define *Frida* it would be sensuous. Colors and forms are sensuous, as are the characters and their speech, the photography and composition.

*Frida* reveals the heights of film as an art form: photography, acting, sound, atmosphere, editing, production and direction come together in such a way that none of the parts imposes itself on the whole. Ofelia Medina plays Frida brilliantly; acting like hers had not been seen in Mexican film in a long time. Valentina Leduc, Paul's daughter, is excellent in her role as the child Frida. Juan Jose Gurrola as Diego Rivera, Max Kerlow as Trotsky, and Claudio Brook as Frida's father are all up to par.



Transfiguration. Photo by Rogelio Cuellar.



Ofelia Medina plays Frida. Photo by Rogelio Cuellar.

The quality of Angel Goded's photography finally achieves official recognition in Mexico and is proof of how new generations of cameramen are following in the tradition of quality, beauty and effectiveness rendered by Gabriel Figueroa with "Indio" Fernandez. In his time Figueroa was awarded the Cannes Film Festival's Golden Palm award. The settings by Alejandro Luna are also extraordinary.

But this is not a film to attract spectators because of the stars it features nor because of its director's fame or the exquisite quality of the photography. No Mexican movie theater will have a full house because of Angel Goded's photography or Ofelia Medina's acting. At any rate, only a very select audience has had access to Leduc's films simply because he has never made a 35mm. film. Even *Frida* is a blowup from 16mm. This means that Leduc's films have never reached a broad audience, the run of the mill people who simply pay for their ticket and spend their free time at the movies, whatever is playing.

Producer Manuel Barbachano Ponce continues taking risks, as he once did with none other than Buñuel. But the credit for bringing everything together into this jewel of a film goes to Paul Leduc. And he has done it at a time when the Mexican film industry is at an all-time low.

It has been many years since any movie had the type of impact *Frida* is having on our film industry. The prestige of Mexican films has been declining steadily for many years now, both in international film festivals and with the public. These times are a far cry from the glories of Emilio "El Indio" Fernandez or from the hopes for a better future that opened up for the industry during the presidency of Luis Echeverria (1970-76). It's also fair to say that the times are not the same as far as money is concerned.

The movie industry swallows up a lot of money while at the same time, as an art form it requires talent. During the early

70s there was ample funding for a whole new generation of directors, but it is also true that this was an extremely talented generation, more so than any other in the field previously. Working on government funding, this generation of filmmakers helped raise the prestige of Mexico's motion pictures. But six years\* is not enough time, and the policy enacted by the following administrations tended to favor co-productions with foreign directors.

Paul Leduc has a history of his own. In adherence to his principles, he refused to become part of the establishment's industry and stubbornly continued to strive for space as an independent film-maker. This may have affected the continuity of his work, but he has accumulated dignity for Mexican cinema and today he is probably our most prestigious director in international circles.

*Frida* is life, she is part of the social struggles of her time and she is tenacious creativity, despite having suffered from polio and an automobile accident that eventually confined her to a wheelchair. *Frida's* contradictory life was full of the important and the inconsequential that embody life for all of us. Kahlo's example calls for political involvement free of dogmatism and prejudice, freeflowing and without sadness or false moral stances. She was capable of intense joy despite the pain and limitations that her illness imposed on her.

Additionally, the film seems to be achieving one of its main objectives: to get the Mexican public to accept hearing their stories about Mexico told in new ways. *Frida* is living proof that not only conventional box office forms (violence, sex and narrow mindedness) are effective with the broader audience. ★

\* The period of time for which a president is elected to office in Mexico.



Juan José Gurrola as Diego Rivera.

## PAUL LEDUC

Paul Leduc was born in Mexico in 1942. He first studied architecture and then theater, specializing in directing. Later he studied filmmaking at the ISHEC in Paris. His first full-length film was *Reed, Mexico Insurgente* (1971), based on the book of the same name, by U.S. journalist and writer John Reed. In France, the film won the George Sadoul award and was included among the films shown at the Cannes Festival. In Italy, it won the Pesaro Festival, and in Mexico it won the film industry's awards for best director and best film. Some of his most outstanding films are *Mezquital, notas sobre un etnocidio* (1976; "Mezquital, Notes on Ethnocide"), *Estudio para un retrato* (1978; "Study for a Portrait"), *Monjas Coronadas* (1979; "Crowned Nuns"), *Historias prohibidas del Pulgarcito* (1980; "The Forbidden Stories of Tom Thumb"), *La cabeza de la hidra* (1981; "The Head of the Hydra"), *Frida, naturaleza viva* (1984; "Frida, The Lively Spirit") and *Como ves?* (1985; "How Does It Look?"). In addition to numerous awards in Mexico, Leduc has won a wide range of international awards for many of his films.