

## CINEMA VERDAD

FINALLY FREE TO  
TELL THEIR  
'OFFICIAL' STORY,  
LATIN WOMEN  
FILMMAKERS END  
50 YEARS  
OF SILENCE.

# FIESTA



knowing her humor as well as her virtuosity. She'll work in Spanish, but the piece, with its sweet howling restraint, has as much to do with dance as with words. And Aleandro is talking about trying it next year in English.

If schedules hold, by that time her colleagues, the writer-director team whose *Official Story* quietly captured the awards of three continents, including Argentina's first Oscar, will be ready to present two new projects. One will star Jane Fonda in an adaptation of Carlos Fuentes' best-seller *The Old Gringo*; the second, for David Weisman, producer of *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, will take on Argentina's Vietnam, the Falklands War.

This collaboration, and *The Official Story* itself, began as a wild dream. Luis Puenzo, a young filmmaker with only commercials to his credit,

brought an idea to a family friend a generation his senior—Aida Bortnik is among the most respected of Argentine playwrights, screenwriters, and journalists. Friends tried to steer her away from his inexperience, but Bortnik chose to gamble. "*The Official Story* was an exorcism for me," she says. "It was my crucible. Many of those closest to me had been disappeared, but I knew if I was going to do this project I had to find something beyond my anger. There's been such polarization, such hate in my country. I wanted to tell a story where hate became useless." So despite death threats during the filming in Buenos Aires, work went on. For Aleandro, too, "it was using every memory, wrestling with an angel of anguish."

"Finally we were blessed," Bortnik continues. "And now for the first time since the bloodletting began, I can think of other things—even love stories. Argentine love stories—old dynamics now forever changed. It is no accident that *The Official Story's* hero is a heroine. During the repression and afterwards, it was the soul-searching of women that resurrected this country. I'm thinking especially of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They became its conscience, continuing what Evita began. Their mark is on all of us, even those who despise what they have accomplished."

These issues, the making or unmaking of women, and likewise of society, few filmmakers have examined as closely as Maria Luisa Bemberg, Argentina's first important female director and until very recently, the only

# ARGENTINA



Latin America's leading ladies: above, Maria Luisa Bemberg, director; left, Norma Aleandro, actress.

For the first time in our lives we are learning what it is to be free," says screenwriter Aida Bortnik, author of *The Official Story*. This after some 50 years of periodic terror, ending in nearly a decade of military dictatorship cruel enough to give its people a new household word—*los desaparecidos*, the disappeared. But the generals are finally back in their barracks.

"And now we're finding our voices," Bortnik continues. "It's stunning and very moving, considering the weight of those years, how quickly this is happening."

All the arts are flowering in Argentina, but film, censored longest and hardest, has sprung back with a special kind of fervor. A tiny community is producing works which not only probe relationships, as do most things Latin, but also this land's recurring violence and what can, at times, feel almost like a lust for repression. Norma Aleandro, star of *The Official Story*, calls the best of these films "collective meditations." And, in pushing at their own culture's biases, several of these artists, several women in particular, have broken through our own. Why such success? Director Maria Luisa Bemberg quotes Tolstoy, "Speak truthfully about your village, you'll

speak about the universe." Not yet four years of freedom, and already Argentine cinema has Hollywood's attention, its prizes, its proposals. It's just the beginning.

Norma Aleandro's probably got the world's spunkiest laugh. She also has a new film to be released here later this fall. *Gaby*, a Mexican-American coproduction, stars Liv Ullmann and Robert Loggia. "*Gaby's* a study in intimacy," Aleandro says. The film, a true story, chronicles the life of Gaby Brimmer, a latter-day Helen Keller born with severe cerebral palsy, who grew up to become an important Mexican poet. Norma Aleandro plays an Indian peasant, her Annie Sullivan. Argentina's first lady of theater and film tackled this in her very new English. "A terror-ific adventure," she calls it.

It's good to hear her laugh about such "terrors." Not 10 years ago her films were banned, her performances teargassed. Five years of exile followed. "I try to live as a humanist," she says, "to speak out as one. Those values don't easily fall into any neat categories. So they become intolerable to fascism."

And now, what's next? *The Lady of Tacna*, Aleandro's signature theater piece, recently opened in New York and will travel to several other cities as part of Joseph Papp's *Festival Latino*. The show is about a nonagenarian who recounts the stories of her youth to her grandnephew, and his retelling of the tales. Mario Vargas Llosa wrote *The Lady of Tacna* for his friend,

BY ELIZABETH HANLY