

Capturing the Revolution on Film

Venezuela's State Studio Taking On 'Imperialism' of Hollywood

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GUARENAS, [Venezuela](#) -- Intent on a cultural revolution, [Venezuela's](#) fiercely nationalistic government has required radio stations to play more Venezuelan music, promoted art infused with revolutionary zeal and published books extolling the country's transformation under President Hugo Chávez.

Now, countering what Chávez calls American "cultural imperialism" and the [Hollywood](#) movies that pervade here, the populist government is delving headfirst into the movie business. The Bolivarian government, named after its 19th-century namesake, is running a new state-of-the-art film studio here, developing scripts venerating the country's history and funding films designed to jump-start Venezuela's moribund filmmaking.

"For many years, we had low or no production, one or two films a year, at most," said Lorena Almarza, director of the state studios, Villa del Cine. "Then the Bolivarian government came in, and culture became a constitutional right, which didn't exist before."

Chávez loves a good film yarn, particularly if the theme is political or carries a larger social message. He's expressed his admiration, for instance, for [Clint Eastwood's](#) "Mystic River," and he's become fast friends with "Lethal Weapon" star [Danny Glover](#). Indeed, [Venezuela's National Assembly](#) approved \$17.8 million to bankroll Glover's film about the life of the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.

Oscar winners [Sean Penn](#), who starred in "Mystic River," and [Kevin Spacey](#) have also met with Chávez in [Caracas](#). In a visit earlier this week, Spacey said the government-funded studios offered Venezuelan filmmakers the opportunity to "make films about their own country and their own culture."

"I think every country should have this," Spacey said on state television.

Many of the projects at Villa del Cine, or Cinema City, are decidedly political and in tune with the Chavista image of Venezuela as a cutting-edge democracy fighting U.S. imperialism. That has led to documentaries about foreign exploitation of the oil industry and state repression in the 1970s, when successive Venezuelan governments had good relations with Washington.

But Cinema City, which opened a year ago in this town east of the capital, is determined to be best known for its feature-length films, many blending politics and art.

One is about a cold and calculating Cuban exile who assassinates Venezuelan leftists and bombs a Venezuelan airliner -- a movie based on the life of a [CIA](#) operative, [Luis Posada Carriles](#), who is wanted here on terrorism charges. Posada Carriles, who lives in [Miami](#), has declared himself innocent and a U.S. court has declined to extradite him.

Much of the new fare is along the lines of Cinema City's first film, "Miranda Returns," which opens Oct. 12. Perhaps the studio's most ambitious project, it is about General Francisco de Miranda, who fought in the American, French and Venezuelan revolutions and dreamed of establishing a Latin American republic.

The director, Luis Alberto Lamata, used 120 actors and 1,200 extras and took his cameras as far away as [Russia](#).

Almarza said the idea is to "rescue" Venezuela's rich history, past and present. "The president of the republic insists," she said, "and it's part of our policy of development, the historic debt that we have in this country."

Some observers say that's exactly the problem with Cinema City -- the heavy hand of the president and his advisers, namely Culture Minister Francisco Sesto, who gives the green light to the studio's projects.

Jonathan Jakubowicz, a Venezuelan filmmaker, said Cinema City will permit young directors to make movies but only within tight parameters.

Two years ago, Jakubowicz's raw and harrowing film about street kidnappings in Venezuela, "Secuestro Express," broke box office records for a homegrown production. It also prompted a virulent reaction from the government.

Jakubowicz, who raised the money for his film without government aid, said such a movie would never be made at Cinema City.

"They either want movies that portray the revolution as the solution of all the problems of the nation or they want movies that tell the stories of independence leaders, always with a version that favors values that can be used to celebrate the Bolivarian Revolution," he said. "I don't think there's any chance to make movies that are not in tune with the revolution."

Aureliano Alfonso, art director at City Cinema, agreed that it would be hard to make films that cast a negative light on Venezuelan society. There would likely be no Venezuelan version of the Brazilian masterpiece "City of God," a violent film about drug gangs in [Rio de Janeiro](#).

Alfonso, who nevertheless sees great potential in City Cinema, said he worries that the studio might focus too much on political films, as has been the case in the past in [Latin America](#).

"I think Cinema City needs to open itself much more, open up its criteria over its themes, over the way to make movies," he said. "It cannot stay stuck on the movies of the past, like in the '70s, when we had a great boom in national movies, and all the themes were political."

Efterpi Charalambidis is among the young directors who have benefited from Cinema City.

Her film, now being shot in Caracas neighborhoods, certainly has a touch of politics. Her protagonist, Libertador Morales, is a straight arrow who drives a motorcycle taxi and reveres the real Liberator, Simón Bolívar, the independence-era hero idolized by Venezuela's government.

But the \$1 million film, a mix of comedy and drama, delves into the urban calamity of Caracas, from the horrendous traffic to the rampant crime. Libertador Morales becomes something of a vigilante in the film -- though Charalambidis said he's no Charles Bronson.

"I said to myself, 'What if it's about a guy who has a keen sense of righteousness and justice,'" she said, explaining how she developed her idea.

She wrote the film over three years during a sojourn in [New York](#) in which she completed graduate school in filmmaking at [Columbia University](#). Back in Venezuela, she presented the idea to City Cinema. "They liked the script very much and then they proposed to produce it at Villa del Cine," she said.

On a recent night, filming took place on a highway that skirts the mountain on Caracas's northern fringe.

The first romantic scene was to be filmed, and Charalambidis rushed to make sure that the lights were just right, that the sappy song by Pedro Infante was loud enough and that the cameraman captured her star's best angle.

That star, Rafael Gil, 39, had a neat, pencil-thin mustache, his thick, black hair combed back and held in place with excess hairspray. Gil is a tad plump and is no classical Casanova, nothing like the pretty faces familiar to those who watch Venezuelan soap operas.

Of course, that's exactly the point.

Gil had never played a big role in a feature-length film, and part of what Cinema City hopes to do is expand opportunities. His work had, until now, been limited to the stage.

"They're calling on many stage actors for the films being made by Cinema City," he said, taking a break from the shoot. "This is good for Venezuelan movies because you're seeing new faces."