



The AFI DOCS Interview: CHAVELA Director Daresha Kyi

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

The dramatic, soulful interpretations of Mexican lesbian singer Chavela Vargas paved the way for women seeking equality in a traditionally male world. A renowned nightclub performer reduced to alcoholic impoverishment, Vargas made a triumphant comeback in her 70s that secured her reputation as an artist of uncompromising passion and independence.

The singer's life is examined in the film CHAVELA, co-directed by Catherine Grund and Daresha Kyi (AFI Class of 1991). It [screens at AFI DOCS](#) on Friday, June 16, and Saturday, June 17. AFI spoke with co-director Kyi about the film.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

DK: I am a natural born storyteller who firmly believes that each story dictates the medium through which it should be told. I studied filmmaking at NYU and Directing at the AFI Conservatory, and have worked on both narrative and documentary films. The last film I had directed was a short narrative over 25 years ago.

CHAVELA began when [co-director Catherine Gund] asked me to join her and a group of friends to brainstorm ideas for her new film project after she wrapped on BORN TO FLY. She provided paper and pens and we all met at a drag-show bar, which ultimately proved too distracting for many ideas to get transmitted. But I did jot down a few thoughts that jumpstarted an ongoing conversation between us, culminating in Cat saying the magic words, "We should make a film together."

AFI: How did the story evolve from there?

DK: At first I was producing and Cat was directing a film that would have told Chavela's life through the lens of a contemporary Latina, lesbian singer who had struggled with addiction. However, after shopping the idea around, we realized that people were deeply intrigued by Chavela and were only interested in learning more about her life. So, we dropped the other woman's storyline completely. When I approached her with the idea of co-directing, Cat didn't hesitate to say yes.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this story?

DK: I was moved to share Chavela's story not only by the profound passion and pain in her voice, but by her strength, courage and amazing life journey. To find a character who goes from sleeping on street corners in an alcoholic stupor to being Pedro Almodóvar's muse and selling out Carnegie Hall almost sounds too good to be true, but Chavela accomplished that and much more. I was deeply inspired by her ability to stand in her truth as a lesbian in an extremely macho, patriarchal culture.

AFI: What particular obstacle did we face while making the film?

DK: From the very beginning we wanted to find one of Chavela's former lovers but because she thought it was crude to kiss and tell, it was really difficult to find anyone other than Frida Kahlo and Ava Gardner, both deceased that she claimed to have been with. We did get a lead on one woman in Costa Rica, but she was only willing to let us use her voice and didn't want to be on camera so that was a no-go. We'd pretty much given up on the idea of finding anyone until the day we shot what we thought was our last interview. Marcela Rodriguez, a composer and guitar player who had accompanied Chavela for three years, said she'd be in New York if we wanted to interview her. Marcela talked a while about one of Chavela's lovers and actually mentioned her by name! Although I'd seen the woman's name from the very beginning of our research, no one ever mentioned that she had been Chavela's lover so we hadn't reached out to her.

Funny enough, I missed it during the actual interview and it was actually the woman who transcribed our Spanish-language interviews who brought her to our attention when she wrote to ask if we were interviewing Alicia. After that we tracked Alicia down online and filmed with her on December 5, even though we were supposed to have a complete rough cut by mid-December. Adding her into the film brought an incredible new dimension to the film. Plus, when I walked into her house for the interview Alicia had two albums full of stunningly beautiful photos of her life with Chavela that she allowed us to scan every single one! They added so much beauty to the movie. Some of them are so beautiful we included them in our press kit!

AFI: Why are docs important today?

DK: Stories have the power to move people in unexpected ways. When viewers identify strongly with the characters portrayed in movies, they can be inspired to take similar actions in their own lives, especially when those characters are real people. They think, "If she can do it, I can too!"



(Source: afi.com)

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