



Call her Crazy

Allison Anders brings up on convention

RANTZ HOSELEY, ASSISTANT EDITOR

"I don't care. I want to ride first class," Allison Anders haggles on the phone. This from a person who bases her screenplays on people who don't have choices. The working-class storyteller's latest film is *West Side Story* meets *Boyz 'n the Hood*. Well, not really — drop the song-and-dance numbers, take the guns and drugs out of the men's hands and turn the cameras on the women. *Mi Vida Loca* is about girl gangs — Latina "homegirls" — in Los Angeles' Echo Park. Not a typical "youth" movie, but Anders is not a typical writer/director.

By Aimee Rinchart, Assistant Editor

Like her writing and directing, Anders, 38, is candid with no frills. Her first film, *Gas, Food, Lodging*, won the 1992 New York Film Critics Circle Best New Director Award. Now, with the release of *Mi Vida Loca* and the upcoming Universal Studios' *Grace of My Heart* — executive produced by Martin Scorsese — her success is mounting. Her unwillingness to compromise herself and her work has brought real life to the screen.

"I am particularly interested in people not having power and not having a lot of choices," Anders says. "In a movie like *Reality Bites*, the big dilemma is 'I've got this guy and that guy, or maybe I could be a filmmaker or maybe work at another job.' I'm not interested in people with an abundance or sense of entitle-

ment. It just bores the shit out of me."

Anders didn't have this sense of entitlement growing up. She knew that being a single welfare mother and living in Los Angeles' Echo Park wasn't background enough for her to write a realistic story about the homegirls. It took two months of getting stood up at gas stations before she received necessary input on the script from Echo Park's real gangbangers. Weeks after the L.A. riots, Anders began filming *Mi Vida Loca*, using professional actors and professional gang members.

"The actors were scared at first. But after the initial meeting, they bonded pretty quickly," Anders says. "It got tearful at the end because everyone got so close."

Even though Anders was on familiar turf, she still considered herself an outsider. "I have the advantage that they don't have within this culture. There's no denying that race is still a barrier."

Anders may see a distance between herself and her characters but closes the gap on the set, says Daniel Hassid, a producer on both films. "Allison has this connection with the actors. You see other directors sitting behind the monitors, but she's right next to the camera. She wants it unfiltered, without technology — her work is more organic."

Anders says she relies on locals to tell her what their life is like so that the characters are as unfiltered as the film. "But I didn't need to talk to anybody to find out what it is like to live in a trailer park, because I've lived in a trailer park. Just like I didn't need these girls to tell me what it is like to be a welfare mom."

"Coming from the outside, I didn't have to do the unrealistic moral tag that I might have felt pressured to do if I were Latino. I might have felt the urge to do the 'stay in school' speech. But you can't write a speech like that in this movie and have it carry any kind of weight, because what schools are we talking about? Their high schools are shit. My great hope for the message in this film is to put the responsibility back [on the people]."

Anders' scripts are deceptively simple. What's the big deal about a woman raising two kids in a trailer park in New Mexico? What's the big deal about girl gangs? The big deal is they exist, and she captures that reality. Anders says feminists have criticized her writing as portraying females as dependent on men.

"Usually my women are pretty vulnerable. They want relationships. They want intimacy. A lot of feminists have a problem with that. They feel like the women are obsessed with having a guy. Well, that's probably because I am," she laughs. "That doesn't mean I have one. I have never been taken care of by a man in my life."

Anders has a traumatic history with men that is reflected in her work. Her father left when she was 5. She was gang raped at 12. Institutionalized at 15. By 21, she had two daughters from different fathers — neither relationship turned into marriage.

"In the last couple of entanglements — dare to call them relationships — I was interested in seeing what men go through. I have this tremendous empathy for their problems," she says. "Maybe I don't feel so victimized. Anymore, I don't feel like it's my fault if things don't work out." Her scripts have men in them, but unlike most films, they aren't the source of the action. Anders sees her next phase of writing featuring a male as the lead or second lead character.

A glitzy filmmaker she is not. But after the success of *Gas, Food, Lodging*, the release of *Mi Vida Loca* and her first big studio project, her working-class status could be in jeopardy.

"I don't think you ever get over being working class. Even if you fly first class," she says. "I wouldn't even have to be having this argument about the plane ticket if I had been raised with a sense of entitlement. As a woman you're even less entitled."

"You could have all of the money in the world, and you'll still feel like you've got some survival test coming at you. I think I'll never get in a prosperous mode."

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Mousie (Seidy Lopez), Giggles (Marlo Marron) and Sad Girl (Angel Aviles) in *Mi Vida Loca*.