



Maria (Catalina Sandino Moreno) and Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega) leave home.

Naturalism's Grace

Desperation of a drug mule

MARIA FULL OF GRACE: Written and directed by Joshua Marston. Produced by Paul S. Mezey. Cinematography, Jim Denault. Editors, Anne McCabe, Lee Percy. Production design, Debbie De Villa, Monica Marulanda. Costumes, Lauren Press, Sarah Beers. Original music, Leonardo Heiblum, Jacobo Lieberman. Visual effects, Adam Hawkey. Starring Catalina Sandino Moreno, with Yenny Paola Vega, Guilied Lopez. Also, Jhon Alex Toro, Patricia Rae, Wilson Guerrero, Jaime Osorio Gomez, Orlando Tobon, HBO Films. Fine Line Features, 2004. R. 101 minutes. **2004 Sundance Film Festival Dramatic Audience Award. Best First Film at Berlin International Film Festival; Catalina Sandino Moreno - Silver Bear for best actress.**

Marston's surprisingly expert direction and Jim Denault's revelatory cinematography coupled with Sandino's powerful hold on Maria's dignity keeps the audience for this gripping film from feeling hopeless or depressed. Maria is a compelling character; she learns quickly that her fate is in her own hands. Without mawkishness, Sandino shows Maria's deter-

mination and inner strength. The last "unknown" actress who made this strong an impression on me in her film debut was Emily Watson in Lars Von Trier's 1996 melodrama, *Breaking the Waves*. While Watson kept me enthralled with her childlike, innocent trust, Sandino captures my interest through her calm but thoughtful presence.

Maria encounters a number of residents of the Lower East Side's Colombian community, including Lucy's sister, Carla (Patricia Rae), who wants to be helpful but is wary; and Don Fernando (Orlando Tobon), who does help the girl call home and figure out what she has to do to survive. Don Fernando's a great character, played by a non-actor in a memorable first performance. Tobon actually works on behalf of drug mules and their families. Working with medical workers, families and the police, Tobon has helped to ship more than 400 bodies home to their families.

For the 2000 Race, Class and Criminal Justice Film Festival sponsored by the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics, Eugene Weekly brought two films produced by Paul S. Mezey, the producer of *Maria Full of Grace*. David Riker's 1998 black-and-white cinema verité, *La Ciudad (The City)*, captures the gritty essence of the new immigrant's experience of New York, while Jim McKay's 2000 *Our Song* used non-professional actors to tell their personal stories. If you liked these films, you will love *Maria Full of Grace*, which is also wholly original. It opens at the Bijou Oct. 8, with my very highest recommendations. **EW**

The first feature film written and directed by Joshua Marston, *Maria Full of Grace* is an accomplished, searing portrait of the human cost of international drug smuggling. Women as young as 16 and men act as human mules to move the product — usually heroin or cocaine — to the U.S. consumer market. As icily exact and calculating as indentured servitude was in earlier centuries and apparently is again, this Colombian drug practice preys on young people with aspirations for a better life.

Maria (Catalina Sandino Moreno) is such a woman, although she's only 17. Around the time she quits a demeaning job de-thorning roses at an industrial plantation near her village, Maria discovers she's pregnant by her deadbeat boyfriend Juan (Wilson Guerrero). Then she meets Franklin (Jhon Alex Toro) at a dance club, and they hit it off.

Franklin takes Maria to Bogota the next day. She sits behind him on his motorcycle, holding onto his black leather jacket. As Franklin learns of Maria's predicament, he offers to take her to meet his boss, Javier (Jaime Osorio Gomez), who sometimes hires people to travel for him. Later, on the bus home, Maria spots a woman she saw earlier in Javier's club and strikes up a conversation. Lucy (Guilied Lopez) is from Maria's village and teaches the younger woman what she needs to know to swallow sizable, latex-wrapped drug pellets. Javier hires Maria to transport a big shipment, paying her \$5,000 — a minute portion of the drugs' street value — for risking her life.

Maria's childhood friend, Blanca (Yenny Paola Vega), also gets involved, despite Maria's best efforts to talk her immature friend out of taking the job. The three women — Lucy, Blanca and Maria — fly out on the same plane for New York. A fourth woman also carrying doesn't make it past U.S. customs. She may be the lucky one.

Arcane Practices

Delirious, debauched and dirty

A DIRTY SHAME: Written and directed by John Waters. Produced by Ted Hope and Christine Vachon. Executive producers, Merideth Finn, Danny Fisher, Jack Fisher, Mark Kaufman, Mark Ordesky, John Wells. Cinematography, Steve Gainer. Editor, Jeffrey Wolf. Production design, Vincent Peranio. Costumes, Van Smith. Original music, George S. Clinton. Starring Tracey Ullman, with Johnny Knoxville, Selma Blair, Chris Isaak and Susanne Shepherd. Also, Mink Stole, Patricia Hearst, Jackie Hoffman, Wes Johnson. Fine Line Features. New Line Films, 2004. NC-17. 89 minutes.

Sylvia Stickles (Tracey Ullman) is a sight in the early sequences of John Waters' sex-a-thon, *A Dirty Shame*. Sylvia is clearly a harried housewife, cooking breakfast for her over-developed daughter, Caprice (Selma Blair), who's under house arrest for indecent exposure down at the local biker's bar, where she's known as Ursula Udders. Anyway, Sylvia is frying up some scrapple in the skillet when her husband, Vaughn (Chris Isaak) comes sniffing around, hoping to lure her back to bed for a little morning frolic. But Sylvia is having none of it. She's a driven, uptight woman with no yen for sex.

But that very morning Sylvia drives to work at the family convenience store run by her mother, Big Ethel (Suzanne Shepherd), her head reeling from the unrelenting barrage of sexual innuendo bombarding her from every house in the 'hood. Then, Sylvia's car runs out of gas at a busy intersection. When something hanging out of a passing pickup bonks Sylvia on the head, down she goes, flushed by erotic fantasies as she lies on the highway.

Her hallucinations are out of control, and so is she after a charismatic, muscular tow truck driver named Ray-Ray Perkins (Johnny Knoxville) comes to her rescue. The sexual act Ray-Ray performs on her prone body not only returns Sylvia to consciousness but also turns her into a raging sex-addict. Now when she looks around, Sylvia sees fellow addicts everywhere.

Except at work. There Big Ethel and Marge the Neuter (Mink Stole) plot to clean-up the neighborhood by holding a rally to get rid of all the oversexed weirdos who've moved in and made life unpleasant for the straight-arrow, family-values folks living there.

OK, you see where Waters is going with this —

right down to the gutter with potty-mouth miscreants taking every opportunity to discover a NEW sexual perversion or at least practice the ones they've got. Ray-Ray appoints Sylvia an apostle in his church. The other apostles are really kinky, like the guy who licks tires or the burned-out cop who regresses to infancy.

Now, wrapped around and through the rather shabby shreds of plot, Waters works in a number of jokes, some visual, some verbal, some ... well, you gotta see 'em. There's a reunion between Sylvia and Caprice, followed by a scene at the bar where Caprice's suitor, Fat Fuck Frank (Wes Johnson), persuades her to dance for the crowd one more time. There's a Waters' send-up of the 12-step process for sex-addicts, the evangelical overtones of converts to the sex-addict movement, and a whole lotta sexin' goin' on. Even the trees in the neighborhood harbor unusual instincts aroused by the mere presence of Ray-Ray's magical, sex-cure aura.

As my friend Sean Axmaker noted in his review for *the Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, "Title aside, even the smuttiest of sexual perversions come off as harmless fun in the world of Waters, where everything is OK as long as it's safe and consensual."

Great performances by Ullman, Knoxville and Shepherd plus fabulous one-liners make the film a simple delight. Like all of Waters' one-joke movies, it goes on too long — over the top, over the edge and out of sight. Totally forgettable, *A Dirty Shame* opens Oct. 8 at the Bijou. If you suspect you are now or have ever been a sex-addict or a sexual neuter, this is the picture for you. Recommended for its astute satirical voice. **EW**



Sylvia Stickles (Tracey Ullman) searching for sex anywhere, anytime.