

FILM

Globalized Road Trip

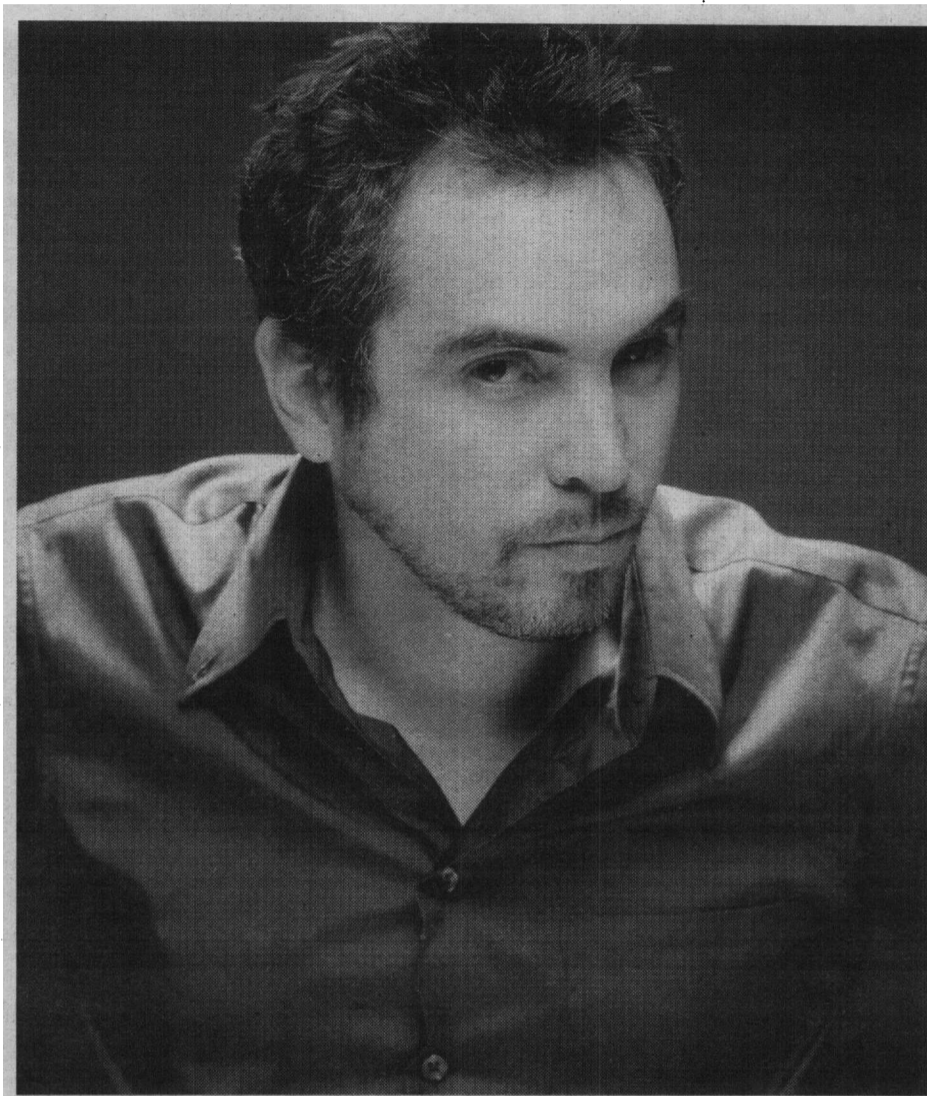
ALFONSO CUARÓN'S MEXICAN PIE

BY ED MORALES

A couple of years ago, director Alfonso Cuarón and his brother, the writer Carlos Cuarón, sat in Alfonso's Greenwich Village backyard kicking around ideas for a screenplay (while Frank Zappa's "Watermelon in Easter Hay" played in an endless loop). "We were trying to make a film about the search for identity," says Alfonso. "We wanted to use three different voices: Two kids searching for their identity as adults, and a woman searching for her true nature. We wanted to put the story into a context, Mexico, which in our opinion is a teenager trying to become an adult."

Working with a short story Carlos had written, the brothers came up with the script for *Y Tu Mamá También*, ostensibly a *Porky's en español*. But despite its rock-and-roll road-movie trappings, the film's treatment of class antagonism—not to mention its explicit sex scenes—set it apart from Hollywood teen flicks. Like last year's Mexican hit, *Amores Perros*, Cuarón's film reflects the trauma of that society's globalization, albeit with double-edged humor. In one scene, the threesome discuss masturbation as they ride by a squad of military types harassing roadside vendors. But Cuarón wasn't interested in straight polemic. "I find the anti-globalization concept very stupid," says the director, who returned to Mexico for his first Spanish-language film in 10 years, after Hollywood productions like *Great Expectations* and *The Little Princess*. "The discussion shouldn't be about let's not have globalization; it should be about how to democratize globalization—how do you do it without killing cultures and ways of life?"

To convey Mexico's harsh social reality, Cuarón borrowed a device from early Godard: the deadpan, faux-documentary narrator. "He doesn't narrate, he's just giving context," says Cuarón. An even more noticeable Godard trick is the way the soundtrack music stops abruptly when the voice-over commences. "So you're going to reveal where



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I stole the whole thing from. Well thank you very much," Cuarón says with a laugh. "At first I had this smooth thing with the song

playing and I said, no, stop the movie, I'm going to tell you a story. If you don't like it, you can always leave the theater, but I'm sure

that you're kinky enough to see if there will be more sex, so you'll stay."

Cuarón recruited *Amores Perros* hunk Gael García Bernal, along with García's childhood theater-brat friend Diego Luna and the elegantly tarty Spanish actress Maribel Verdú of *Belle Époque* fame. "Maribel added this element of freedom of the body," says García. "The Spanish are very good at that." The film climaxes when a three-way encounter incites the boys to share an awkwardly impassioned kiss. "In Mexico, every time that scene played, there were always people screaming, 'No! No!' But it was completely improvised. Gael and Diego liked it," Cuarón says, smirking.

"Improvised! I hate you, Cuarón!" says Luna, tossing a plastic cup at the director. "It was definitely harder than kissing Maribel," he adds. "But when I read the screenplay, I realized that it had to happen." In Mexico, the scene's impact was somewhat like the surprise genitals in *The Crying Game*. "I can't go out in the streets anymore with Gael, because people bother us," says Luna. "But I think it was the adults that were more obsessed with the kiss than young people, and I'm proud of that because it means the youth is moving in the right direction."

García and Luna, both in their early twenties, seem to be moving toward El Norte. García has played Che Guevara in the Showtime miniseries *Fidel*, and Luna landed a small part in Julie Taymor's upcoming biopic of Frida Kahlo. Luna believes that Latin American and Spanish filmmakers should abandon nationalistic categories and promote films in Spanish to compete internationally with Hollywood. "But I don't want to say I'm not interested in making movies in English," says Luna. "I'd like to work with the Coen brothers."

Mexico's highest grossing film ever, *Y Tu Mamá También* beat out American films that were supposed to dominate in the era of globalization. García and Luna, whose parents were part of the government-supported art theater, feel that despite harsh growing pains, Mexico is growing up with them. "There's a great vibe in the air," says García. "Young people want to exorcise their demons. We're not depending on the government anymore. We want to face our destiny alone." ▀

Press! Press!

THE ATROCITY EXHIBIT

BY JESSICA WINTER

HARRISON'S FLOWERS

Directed by Elie Chouraqui
Written by Chouraqui, Didier Le Pécheur
& Isabel Ellsen

Universal Focus Opens March 15

YUGOSLAVIA: THE AVOIDABLE WAR

Directed by George Bogdanich
Pioneer Opens March 15

The wars of secession in Yugoslavia initially met with international bemusement not least because media and government agencies alike presented the conflicts as an imponderable "ethnic" quagmire, an ancient, hopeless thicket of tribal vendetta. This was hogwash, of course, but it furnished yet another ravaged backdrop for Hollywoodized war tourism: intro civics lessons cum survival tales, in which guileless Americans abroad

are plunged into swarthy, undifferentiated chaos. After serving as the nominal launching pad for bullying patriotism in December's idiotic *Behind Enemy Lines*, the Balkans provide the obstacle course for the love of a good woman in *Harrison's Flowers*.

Newsweek photojournalist Harrison (David Strathairn) is on the verge of giving up his trade for the wife and the kids and the greenhouse, but he takes one last assignment, covering the outbreak of civil war in Croatia in late 1991. When Harrison goes missing in besieged Vukovar and is presumed dead, it's up to his wife, Sarah (Andie MacDowell), to buck protocol and dive headfirst into the powder keg to rescue him. (Just as *Behind Enemy Lines* recalled the 1995 ordeal of a downed U.S. pilot, *Harrison's Flowers* bears a slight accidental resemblance to the Daniel Pearl tragedy.)

Sarah goes with her gut, unencumbered by any apparent connection to her two small children or, indeed, her immediate surroundings—making a rare exit from the den where she obsessively watches TV news day and night, she's shocked to find family and friends saying kaddish for Harrison. Elie Chouraqui's film is likewise a discombobulating mix of blood-and-grit docu-realism and moony multiplex contrivance. Once Sarah arrives in Croatia and drives her rental car di-

rectly into gunfire, Chouraqui's harrowing images of smoking, corpse-littered streets would seem ripped from CNN were it not for the puzzling sight of journalists jogging through the flying bullets, shouting the gibberish phrase "Press! Press!" at soldiers.

Two of her husband's colleagues, establishment prizewinner Elias Koteas and loose-cannon snapper Adrien Brody, aid Sarah's quest, the latter saddled with delivering the film's political platform: "No one knows what this country is. . . . There are no bad guys, there are no good guys." A sentiment worthy of Warren Christopher, perhaps, but the main clash in question—the three-month assault on Vukovar by combined Yugoslav Peoples' Army forces and Serb paramilitaries—wounded or killed thousands of civilians. The carnage only further sanctifies Sarah, who cradles the dying in her arms or makes remarks like "The children are so beautiful here" when she's not crawling in camouflage through sniper territory. And yet, as she tears through the local hospital screaming her husband's name, does it occur to her that the doomed invalids she brushes past might have lovers and children and orchids too? Did it occur to the director?

▀ Covering the period between the Cold War's end through NATO's air war in Kosovo in 1995,

brisk, narration-heavy minutes, *Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War* claims to sort the bad guys from the good, which is its essential problem. Heedlessly pro-Serbian and anti-interventionist, lovingly fixated on phrases like "Clinton hard-liners" and "ad hoc war-crimes tribunal," it could make puffy fascists from Slobodan Milosevic to Pat Buchanan weep for joy. Indeed, Sloba has used clips from George Bogdanich's video doc as evidence for his defense in the Hague—which might be the movie's chief point of interest.

No side was without sin in the decade-long Balkan catastrophe, but *The Avoidable War* (as in, the West could have avoided it) makes the breathtaking assertion that Serbia was the perpetual hapless victim, flummoxed on all sides by self-bombing upstart nationalists. (Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic is painted as a radical Islamic warrior in bed with Osama bin Laden.) Bogdanich dismisses the atrocities at Srebrenica and Serb-run prison camps as blindered media exaggerations; mass-rape victims are waved aside via one woman's inconsistent testimony. Deceptively rich with news footage and State Department talking heads, the film is akin to an overlong Fox News special—to borrow a *Nation* headline, they distort, they decide. ▀