

HONDURAN CINEMA COMES OF AGE

A review of *Anita la cazadora de insectos* (Anita the Insect Hunter)

A film by Hispano Durón

Based on a short story by Humberto Castillo

Duration: 90 minutes

U.S. Premiere at the Latin America Film Festival 2001

By Walter L. Krochmal

On April 8th, 2000, actor Mario Jaén, my mother, director Hispano Durón and I sat in a small office in Tegucigalpa, capital of Honduras, for a screening of *Anita la cazadora de insectos* (Anita the Insect Hunter). News of this 100% Honduran film had reached me through artist friends as I wrapped up an investigation of the calamities befallen Honduras in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. Encouraged, I tracked Hispano down. He'd just returned from the film's world premiere at the 12th Festival of Latin American Cinema - Toulouse (France), which screened it in a non-competitive category because he hadn't completed production. He invited us to serve as the first audience on Honduran soil for the film, which even lead actor Jaén hadn't seen.

A year and some months later, this past September 22nd, 2001, *Anita la cazadora de insectos* made its historic debut in the Latin American Film

Festival 2001, at the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C., and a new era began for the seventh art in this Central American country.

Not that Durón considers *Anita la cazadora de insectos* the first Honduran feature film. That honor, he stresses, goes to Sami Kafati for *Mi amigo Ángel* back in 1962. Alas, the story of Sami, filmmaker and painter, embodies the anonymity of Honduran artists: he died without securing post-production financing, despite the good will of his family, who also played his supporting cast. Sami's widow, Norma de Kafati, finally saw the film through to completion, and Durón finally launched it in Honduras in September 2002. The director cites a series of other previous projects, including *El reyecito o el mero, mero* by Fosi Bendeck, *Alto riesgo* by René Pauck, *Voz de ángel* by Francisco Andino and *El cuerpo extraño* by José A. Olay.

So, while *Anita la cazadora de insectos* doesn't qualify as the first Honduran feature film, it does represent a decisive step toward breaking this country's corrosive isolation.

Durón calls his approach -- shooting in video, then transferring to 35 mm format -- "artisan filmmaking." At its worst, this term in Latin America serves as a euphemism for dilettantism and amateurishness. At its best, it refers to the ingenious use of resources in the absence of large budgets, with storytelling, human and artistic values prevailing over artifice.

Durón fits the second bill. This graduate of the Moscow Film Academy, University of Southern California, and Cuba's world-renowned San Antonio

de los Baños film schools also produced a series of educational documentaries through his production company, Praxis. These credentials would make him a prime candidate for Artistic Director of a national film school, proposal which gained momentum after Edward James Olmos's 2000 tour to Honduras as UNICEF Good Will Ambassador.

A project of this tenor would fill the vacuum in Honduras left by the absence of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to salve Cold War wounds. It would, of course, have to be run as an independent artistic entity, free of censorship so it could explore historic and cultural topics -- from Honduras's most luminous chapters in history to its most egregious -- and follow the guidelines Durón has already laid down. It would provide economic benefits by training specialized creative, technical and administrative personnel, and the rational use of the country's many beautiful locales; promote the search for national identity in a country where people see now, through this example, the possibility of doing much with little; and offer for the global community the unique pluralist culture of Honduras, unrivaled in the Central American region. As we see, Hispano Durón and his film open up an infinity of doors.

The original story upon which he bases Anita the Insect Hunter -- required reading for Honduran high school students -- starts with a seemingly "normal" Honduran middle class family. It slowly unmask deep-rooted codes of false honor and the obsession with appearances, then delivers a stinging indictment of paternalism and *machismo* with the father violating the sanctity of his own blood ties. We live that process through the eyes of Anita, the adolescent daughter.

The film opens by leading us to believe it's a piece of fluff. Durón uses obsessive, static, drably framed long shots. Voice-overs set up the plot and central character of Anita, the popular, intelligent model student and daughter. Her mother cooks, cleans and entertains. Her father brings home the bacon and tries, with difficulty, to be loving and solicitous, her brother is a typical teenage boy. One day Anita tells Dad about the lavish lifestyle of her classmates, "las turquitas," or "the little Turks." (Arabs, in fact, but as Honduran historian Dr. Darío Euraque indicates, the first Lebanese and Palestinian emigrants to Honduras arrived in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire with Turkish passports, so they call them Turks). Dad scoffs outwardly, but his ego devours the bait whole. He pays for trips to Miami, remodels the house to impress "las turquitas" at Anita's fifteenth birthday party. Mom embarks on a spending spree that the family can't afford, stoking tensions with Dad. The long-awaited birthday party arrives, "las turquitas" stand Anita up, and the plot takes its first dizzying turn.

Dad, stressed and in hock up to his ears, has an affair, which Anita accidentally discovers through a keyhole. The trauma leads her to start hunting insects. Durón uses a stunning aural-visual bridge to capture her downward spiral, signal the gear shift in pacing and plot, and establish a counterpoint to the drab opening setup. Dad grows agitated at the thought of people finding out he harbors a madwoman in his home, so he throws his daughter out onto the street. Mom consoles Anita's brother with a lame "I hope God takes care of her." The machismo has cowed even her maternal instincts. The message comes by way of machismo as caustic as potash.

El Guacha, the dope pusher (Mario Jaén in a scorching performance) stalks Anita, then picks her up one afternoon as she wanders the streets of a poor neighborhood. El Guacha strikes fear in Honduran audiences, who've witnessed dramatic increases in gang violence the last few years. My mother, who suffered herself at the hand of gangs and who treats both television and theater as reality, yelled frantically at Anita to get away from him during that first screening in 2000.

Yet just as Anita's father comes in the guise of a respectable man run by an inner troglodyte, El Guacha turns out to be a redeemer disguised as a bad guy: he takes Anita to his shack, washes her feet, and they become lovers. He makes a critical mistake, however, by spurning his long-time girlfriend, who vows revenge. One day three stonefaced men (the chill presences of Edgardo Florián, Miguel Ángel Martínez and Renieri Andino) show up to buy dope at El Guacha's. As he fetches the weed, one of the thugs flashes a pocket knife. These goons look strung out, and we've already seen El Guacha's gun. All odds favor El Guacha, who hands them the dope. An awkward silence...clumsy, balking gestures...and suddenly, El Guacha crumples over with the little knife stuck in his body. Nothing has prepared us for the outcome of the scene, which delivers a shock to the solar plexus.

Anita comes back home, where Dad finds out she's pregnant. He comes close, signaling he may relent and give her a hug. Durón, however, keeps a tight rein on the dynamic of counterpoint and paradox, and the Father beats Anita senseless. One of the final images shows the family walking down a

hospital corridor, broken, bandaged, but still holding steadfast to appearances and covering up their terrible drama.

Anita la cazadora de insectos, director Durón and his cast of veterans and novices have crafted a hard-hitting vehicle that explores the Honduran national conscience through an intimate metaphor, and which will, no doubt, open the doors for those who came before, who want to come out now, and who will come later. For that, they deserve the highest acclaim, rich box office, and broad international audiences.