

FILM BY
NATALIA ALMADA

EL GENERAL

A FILM BY NATALIA ALMADA

2009 - 83 MINUTES - COLOR / B&W - SPANISH WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES - MEXICO / USA

The past and the present collide as filmmaker Natalia Almada brings to life audio recordings she inherited about her great-grandfather Plutarco Elias Calles, a revolutionary general who became president in 1924. In his time, Calles was called “El Bolshevique” and “El Jefe Maximo” (the foremost chief). Today, he is remembered as “el Quema-Curas” (priest –burner) and as a dictator who ruled through puppet presidents until he was exiled in 1936. Through his daughter’s recordings, **EL GENERAL** moves between the memories of a daughter grappling with history’s portrait of her father and the weight of his legacy on the country today. Time is blurred in this complex and visually arresting portrait of a family and country living under the shadows of the past.

DIRECTED, WRITTEN AND EDITED BY

NATALIA ALMADA

PRODUCED BY

**DANIELA ALATORRE and
NATALIA ALMADA**

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

CHUY CHAVEZ

ORIGINAL MUSIC

**JOHN ZORN, MARC RIBOT
and SHAZAHD ISMAILI**

SOUND DESIGN AND MUSIC EDITING

ALEJANDRO DE ICAZA

ADDITIONAL EDITING

SHANNON KENNEDY

Broadcast Premiere Upcoming on P.O.V. 2010

EL GENERAL

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

EL GENERAL is inspired by six hours of audiocassette recordings that my grandmother, Alicia Calles, made about her life and her father, Plutarco Elias Calles, a general in the Mexican Revolution and president of Mexico from 1924 to 1928. She wanted to write her father's biography, but all that remains of that intention are the audio recordings that were handed down to me - presumably to complete the biography that she never finished. The film examines my grandmother's conflict in reconciling her memories of her father with history's portrait of "**EL GENERAL**" while exploring how this past shapes Mexico today.

As we approach 2010, historians like to point to two crucial dates of Mexico's history: 1810, when Mexico waged its war of Independence from Spain, and 1910, when the Mexican Revolution erupted, leading to the overthrow of a thirty-year dictatorship. As if frozen in time, we hear the same political cry from nearly a century ago, "Sufragio Efectivo", not only the right to vote, but for that vote to count. In 1910, the Revolutionaries sought to redistribute land and wealth, yet today the minimum wage is approximately 4.50 USD per day, while, according to Forbes Magazine, Mexico has the honor of sporting some of the world's wealthiest people. Nevertheless, we prefer to sing glorious corridos about Pancho Villa and Zapata, rather than question the failures of the Revolution to establish the democracy, justice and equality it had in sight. As Mexicans, we remain silent behind our festive masks. We laugh at our irreconcilable contradictions and accept our condition as "fate" or "bad luck", afraid to examine our history too closely.

My great-grandfather is buried next to Pancho Villa and three other Mexican Revolutionary heroes in the massive Monument of the Revolution that casts a heavy shadow over downtown Mexico City. A primary school teacher in rural Mexico, he joined the revolutionaries to fight against thirty years of dictatorship and then rose to the presidency in 1924. In his time they called him "El Bolshevique" and "El Jefe Maximo" (the foremost chief). Today, if he is remembered, it is as the founder of the PRI, the political party that ruled for seven decades, "el Quema-Curas" (priest -burner) who closed the Church and committed violent crimes against the clergy, and a dictator who ruled through puppet presidents until he was exiled in 1936. **EL GENERAL** moves between my grandmother's fractured memories of her father and my meanderings through Mexico City. The line between what is past, passing and to come is blurred as I look at the past to understand the present and at the present to understand the past.

In the film a woman buying orange cempazuchil flowers to celebrate the Day of the Dead says, "we love the dead, but they are too expensive." **EL GENERAL** considers the price we pay for our memories and our history; the wounds we close and the ones we ignore. As such, the film is both a family memoir and a portrait of Mexico then and now.

- Natalia Almada

EL GENERAL

FILMMAKER STATEMENT

I wake up at 5 AM. It is Election Day in Mexico. I drive from Los Angeles to Tijuana. The sun is rising over the 405 South. At 8:00AM I arrive in San Ysidro, park and walk across the bridge to the other side. It smells different. It is hotter. I am always amazed how the arbitrary wall has become part of nature's subconscious.

I wait in a winding line for three hours to cast my vote, then start the trip back across the border - another eternal line in the hot sun. A man offers me a ride for \$5.00. I can't resist. I climb into a bus only a few meters from the checkpoint. It is hot as hell. It smells. Children are screaming. The bus doesn't move and I wish I were still standing in line. The bearded man next to me turns to me and says, "You are not Mexican." "Of course I am," I reply. He insists that I am not. With pride I show him the brown ink stain on my thumb - proof that I have just voted. It has no effect. I can't change his mind about my nationality and I have the familiar sensation that I do not belong to any place. I remember a passage from Isabel Allende's book, *My Invented Country*: "I have been a pilgrim along more roads than I care to remember. From saying good-bye so often my roots have dried up, and I have had to grow others, which, lacking a geography to sink into, have taken hold in my memory." And I realize that film is the memory I am wrapping my roots around.

The title of my first film, *All Water has a Perfect Memory*, was inspired by a passage in a Toni Morrison essay in which she writes, "The Mississippi River is not flooding, it is remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and if forever trying to get back to where it was." The film is about my sister who drowned when she was two years old and I was an infant. Through film, I created a visual memory of my sister of whom I had no real memories and explored how my Mexican father and American Mother faced the death of their child. Through my family's recollections, I was interested in examining how the memories we fabricate are unique to our individual experience and perspective, making it nearly impossible to have a truly collective memory, especially within a bi-cultural family.

My second film, *Al Otro Lado (The Other Side)*, looks at immigration and drug trafficking through the two hundred year-old tradition of corrido music. On my family's cattle ranch in Sinaloa, I grew up listening to the cowboys and local fishermen talk about opium fields in the Sierra and their adventures across the border to work in the pisca. The films that I saw in the United States about immigration and drug trafficking were always from an outsider's perspective and approached the issues as moral dilemmas rather than economic realities. I felt a need to tell the story of how Mexican individuals, confronted with the reality of an economic crisis are compelled to risk their lives in the hope for a better life. The film ultimately indicts the injustice of an economic system that allows people to die crossing the border, whilst simultaneously shedding light on the power of the human spirit to confront hardship and tragedy with humor, cultural heritage and grace. By putting a human face to these issues and using music to bridge the cultural divide, my hope is that my film gives a voice to the people most affected and least heard in this socio-political dilemma.

My most recent film, **EL GENERAL**, is inspired by six hours of audiocassette recordings that my grandmother made about her life as daughter of Plutarco Elias Calles, a general in the Mexican Revolution and president of Mexico from 1924 to 1928. She wanted to write her father's biography, but all that remains of that intention are the audio recordings that were handed to me, presumably so that I might finish what she left incomplete. The film moves between my grandmother's fractured memories of her father, a contentious figure in Mexico's history, and my present-day wanderings through Mexico City. The film is both a family memoir and a portrait of Mexico then and now. A woman in the film buying orange cempazuchil flowers for the Day of the Dead. She said, "We love the dead, but they are too expensive." I have come to understand how she speaks for me and for Mexico.

To me, film is a tithe for memory, a cost I gratefully pay in order to actively make sense of the world. It is a way to find a language to express what I see and think. It is a way to question: How do we reconcile the contradictions between our personal family memories and our country's collective memory? How is this memory and history fabricated? How do I reconcile my reality with my family history? How do I, a Mexican, understand Mexico today through a historical lens?

In the opening of the film *Sans Soleil*, the narrator says, "I do not know how those who do not film remember." For me, making films is a way of remembering and creating a memory where one is absent or where one is needed for tomorrow. So while the three films which I've embarked on in the past eight years are all very different in content, form and structure, they are inspired by my curiosity to explore how the past defines who we are today and to create a visual memory that reflects my view of the world.

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PERSONNEL

NATALIA ALMADA

DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / EDITOR / ADDITIONAL CAMERA

Natalia Almada's directing credits include *All Water Has a Perfect Memory*, an experimental short film that received international recognition; *Al Otro Lado*, her award winning debut feature documentary about immigration, drug trafficking and corrido music; and her most recent film, **EL GENERAL** is a family memoir and portrait of Mexico past and present. Almada's work has screened at The Sundance Film Festival, The Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Biennial, INPUT, and at The Flaherty Seminar, as well as at several film festivals around the world, universities, conferences and as television broadcasts including PBS, ARTE, and VPRO. She has received support for her work from numerous foundations including The Creative Capital Foundation, The Tribeca Film Institute, The Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program, PBS and others. Almada is a MacDowell Colony Fellow and a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow. She graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design and shares her time between Mexico City and Brooklyn, New York.

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DANIELA ALATORRE

PRODUCER

Daniela Alatorre is the producer of the Morelia International Film Festival, one of Mexico's most important film festivals. Her experience at the Morelia Film Festival, *Ambulante Documentary Tour* and other film festivals for five years has not only given her production experience, but also great exposure to documentary films and invaluable relationships with Mexico's documentary film community. Prior to her work at the festival, Alatorre worked on numerous cultural productions since graduating from the Universidad Iberoamericana with a degree in communications in 2000. She has worked in radio and hosted weekly radio program "El Cine Y..." dedicated to film commentary and criticism for two years.

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CHUY CHAVEZ

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

As son of a cinematographer, Chuy Chavez started his career when he was a child and received the best cinematography award from the Mexican Film Academy for his second feature film *Bienvenido Welcome* in 1993. His credits since then include *In the Mirror of the Sky*, Huesca's Film Festival award winner; *Chuck and Buck*, whose avant-garde digital cinematography made a cover story at the *American Cinematography Magazine*; *Zurdo*, which won the Silver Goddess award winner (Press award) and, *Me and You and Everyone We Know* which won the Cannes' Camera d' Or and was nominated for the Sundance 2005 cinematography award. Aside from his work in fiction, Chavez also filmed Natalia Almada's award-winning documentary *Al Otro Lado* and Nicole Cattell's exquisitely shot documentary *Revolución; Cinco Miradas*.

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PERSONNEL

ALEJANDRO DE ICAZA

SOUND DESIGN AND MUSIC EDITING

As sound designer of some of the most important recent Mexican films including Amat Escalantes' award-winning Los Bastardos which premiered at Cannes Film Festival in 2008, Enrique Rivero's Parque Via, winner of the Gold Leopard Award at Locarno Film Festival, Cochochi directed by Laura Amelia Guzman and Israel Cardenas and Matías Meyer's Wadley. De Icaza is an integral contributor to the wave of New Mexican Cinema. A graduate of McGill University in sound engineering and music production de Icaza trained at Deutsche Grammophon and Sony BMG Recording Studios and now runs his own film sound studio in Mexico City.

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SHANNON KENNEDY

ADDITIONAL EDITING

Award-winning documentary film editor Shannon Kennedy's credits include A Walk in the Sea, which won the Teddy Award at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival and the NY Loves Film Best Documentary Award at the 2007 Tribeca Film Festival; The Trials of Daryl Hunt, an official selection of the 2006 Documentary Competition at The Sundance Film Festival, recipient of the DuPont Award and short listed for an Academy Award. Kennedy brings to her film editing her background as a visual artist, whose work has appeared in several museum exhibitions, including solo exhibitions at the St.Louis Art Museum and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. She lives and works in New York and is currently editing a film about Post-Soviet Russia.

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MUSIC COMPOSERS

Original music for **EL GENERAL** was composed by **JOHN ZORN**, **MARC RIBOT** and **SHAHZAD ISMAILY**. One of the most prolific avant-guard composers, **ZORN** has scored dozens of films along side his invaluable contribution to contemporary music. With beautiful cues like Mala Suerte and Exile **ZORN** uses counterpoint, contrast and rhythmic drive to give the score color and momentum. **MARC RIBOT'S** unmistakable guitar resonates throughout the score along with his mesmerizing original compositions. One of the most influential guitarists alive, **RIBOT'S** music has been described as arresting, unpredictable, radical, brave and beautiful. **SHAHZAD ISMAILY** was a 2007 Sundance Composers Lab fellow whose debut film score Frozen River, premiered at Sundance in 2008. A self-taught and extremely versatile musician, **ISMAILY** brings a unique palate of unexpected, subtle and surprising sounds and moods to his music.

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PRESS MATERIALS

High resolution stills and electronic press kit available for download at
www.altamurafilms.com/elgeneral

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SUPPORT

EL GENERAL is a co-production of **ALTAMURA FILMS** and the **INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE (ITVS)** in association with **LATINO PUBLIC BROADCASTING (LPB)**, with funding provided by the **CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING (CPB)**, and **AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY | P.O.V.** Additional support provided by the **SUNDANCE INSTITUTE DOCUMENTARY FILM PROGRAM**, the **CREATIVE CAPITAL FOUNDATION**, **NYSCA**, the **MEDIA ARTS FELLOWSHIPS: A PROGRAM OF TRIBECA FILM INSTITUTE**, the **JEROME FOUNDATION**, **BECA GUCCI-AMBULANTE**, **NALIP**, the **MACDOWELL COLONY** and **WOMEN MAKE MOVIES**.



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