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What’s Going On with Dominican Cinema?

by Crosby Girón

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Fifteen films were produced in the Dominican Republic in 2012, a sizeable figure considering that, from 1923, when the first Dominican film was produced, to 2010, 57 local films and 72 foreign films were produced on Dominican soil. Among the foreign films that have been produced in the Dominican Republic are the Spanish film Fiesta del Chivo and the US film The Godfather Part II.

The films produced in the Dominican Republic in 2013 span a number of genres including drama, comedy, and historical fiction. The country has also served as a backdrop for a number of international commercial productions, soap operas, and reality shows, a popular format nowadays. As a result, the Dominican Republic now has an increasingly number of skilled technical and artistic staff to meet the requirements of foreign production companies.

Nevertheless, film critic Félix Manuel Lora says a number of aspects need to be improved to meet the current demand for cinema-related products and services and give rise to a national film industry in the Dominican Republic. One of the greatest challenges, says Lora, is sourcing professional actors. "The country doesn't have many actors," he writes, which means that producers often end up choosing the same set of actors that the audience is already familiar with.

Actors such as Raymond Pozo, Miguel Céspedes, and Fausto Mata are among the well-known faces in Dominican cinema and are those who attract the largest audiences, meaning that they are often sought after by film producers. This has led critics to point out the lack of fresh talent, even though an increasing number of young actors are seeking to make a name for themselves in the Dominican Republic.

Other aspects that need improvement include costume design, makeup art, and lighting, among others, says Lora. In his view, the current supply of technicians in these areas can meet the existing demand but in a few years it will be insufficient as the new Cinema Bill has led to "a frenzy of activity" in this industry.

However, the Dominican Republic already has a generation of well-known producers, such as Francisco Disla, who produced El Hoyo del Diablo, a horror movie that opened to critical acclaim in 2012. Bladimir Abud, who produced La Lucha de Ana, which was also released in 2012, also won several prizes and the film has been shown at several festivals.

At what stage of its development is the Dominican Republic’s film industry? Lora compares the Dominican Republic to Mexico in 1936, a period when the country began to generate its own national audience. Lora says the Dominican Republic is precisely at that stage, the same stage that Mexico experienced more than 70 years ago. "We’re in the process of creating a Dominican cinema for Dominican audiences," he says.

The Cinema Bill

The approval of the Cinema Bill (bill number 108-10) in 2010 is one of the factors that has led to the "frenzy of activity" in the Dominican Republic’s national film industry. The bill creates a legal and institutional framework for local and foreign directors and producers.
Since July 29, 2010, the film industry has been regulated by the Ley para el Fomento de la Actividad Cinematográfica en la República Dominicana (Law for the Promotion of Film Production in the Dominican Republic). This legal instrument was modified by Bill No. 257-10, approved by Congress Nov. 18, 2010. For the bill to be enforced, a special ruling or Reglamento de APLICACIÓN was approved June 13, 2011.

This legal framework applies to all individuals, companies, and organizations involved in the creation, production, distribution, and exhibition of movies and audiovisual productions in the Dominican Republic as well as related technical industries.

With the recent fiscal reform, Article 34 of Bill 253-12 (Ley para el Fortalecimiento de la Capacidad Recaudatoria del Estado para la Sostenibilidad Fiscal y el Desarrollo Sostenible) introduced an amendment to the transferable fiscal credit.

This bill provides an institutional framework that enables the development of the Dominican Republic’s film industry. The Cinema Bill creates the Consejo Intersectorial para la Promoción de la Actividad Cinematográfica en la República Dominicana (CIPAC), a multisectoral council with 12 members including private-sector representatives.

CIPAC is in charge of approving projects and programs submitted by the Dirección General de Cine (DGCINE) and approving funding requests for Dominican film productions through the Fondo de Promoción Cinematográfica (FONPROCINE). CIPAC also has an advisory body, the Comisión Consultiva Cinematográfica (CCCINE).

The DGCINE is important because it is a decentralized organ of the Ministerio de Cultura and it replaces the Dirección Nacional de Cine (DINAC). Its duties include: assessing audiovisual and infrastructure projects that wish to apply for the incentives offered by Bill 108-10; approving filming permits; handing out Certificates of Dominican Nationality for audiovisual productions; channeling environmental permits, permits for the use of hazardous materials, and permits for the closure of roads during filming; and managing the Sistema de Información y Registro Cinematográfico Dominicano (SIRECINE).

First steps taken
Most movies produced in the Dominican Republic are comedies that have not been critically acclaimed but are popular with the audience, says Lora. The quality of local productions depends largely on the budget and on the availability of quality artistic and technical staff. Also, the development of a film industry requires infrastructure including cinemas, recording studios, and co-production agreements. All of this is included in the Cinema Bill, which is an advantage.

British company Pinewood Shepperton PLC, which produced the latest movie in the Harry Potter saga, and Dominican sugar company Vicini recently invested US$50 million to build the Dominican Republic’s first film studios.

The film and TV studio, in a tourist resort in San Pedro de Macorís, 55 km east of Santo Domingo, were inaugurated in 2012, according to Vicini. The project includes Pinewood Studios and film distributor Indomina Group, part of the Vicini consortium, which has investments in the sugar, tourism, food, and energy sectors.
The alliance between Vicini and Pinewood Studios "entails the development of an entertainment industry, which, linked to the tourism industry, is destined to transform the Dominican Republic’s image abroad," former President Leonel Fernández (1996-2000, 2004-2012) told the press when the construction of the studios began.

Lora said 300,000 Dominicans (of a population of 10 million) are habitual moviegoers, not a considerable number. This is mostly because only eight of the country’s 32 provinces have cinemas.

This highlights some of the obstacles facing the Dominican Republic’s nascent film industry. Another problem is piracy, which has had a negative impact on the cinema industry’s revenues but has also allowed independent producers to lower the price of their movies so that a wider audience can enjoy them.

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