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A+ TRENDSETTERS

THE REEL STORY



Michael Narvaez brings his independent film to life

What if everything you knew about your family was a lie? For Puerto Rican writer/director Michael Narvaez, a family secret served as the basis for his screenplay, *I Believe in America*. After his brother was murdered, Narvaez discovered that he led a triple life. His hermano was involved with the Puerto Rican independence movement. Narvaez also learned that his grandfather and uncle were embroiled in the movement as well. It took Narvaez eight years to get a green light for the film. As he was about to wrap up the last week of shooting, *iCaramba U.* was there to capture a behind-the-scenes look at *I Believe in America*.

Upon arriving to Fort Totten in Queens, New York, one would never guess the location to be the set of a film. Weeping willow trees and vacant buildings dot the deserted military base and once Civil War-era fortress. "Back in 14," yells a booming voice, signaling that 14 minutes remain before shooting another scene. Actors, production assistants and other film crew sit on the front steps of a Victorian mansion taking in a late lunch. Between bites of cold lunch and swigs of coke, Narvaez finds time to sit down and talk about his two passions: writing and filmmaking.



Q: *I Believe in America* came about after you realized your brother was involved with the Puerto Rican independence movement. What other topics does the film discuss?

A: It's about how three generations of a loving family could all be involved with the movement – albeit on different sides of the issue – and not know it. I have a lot of non-Puerto Ricans in this cast. I'm letting people know that Puerto Rico is a nationality. The bottom line is that we don't want to see the drug dealer or bodega owner or prostitute. That's what Hollywood is doing making money. That's not us.

Q: So what's been the most difficult scene to shoot so far?

A: I included my wife's wedding vows in one scene. The actor couldn't remember the lines. She just wasn't prepared. It drove me crazy.

Q: Are there any films or plays out there that inspired you to pursue this kind of a project?

A: There are no films or projects based on this project. This is the first. My inspiration came from my life experiences. I've basically been a writer all my life. After my brother died 13 years ago, my wife discovered some plays and essays I had been writing. In doing more research about my family, I decided to do this for my brother and pay homage to him.

“ WHETHER YOU’RE FROM HONDURAS OR VENEZUELA OR COLOMBIA OR PUERTO RICO, KNOW ABOUT THAT COUNTRY; KNOW ABOUT YOUR HISTORY AND CULTURE ”



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The Producers

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring Latino actors?

A: If you want to be an actor, then you should audition for community theater. There are community theaters all over the country. That is how I started out. I played a shiner in *Light up the Sky* in Chester, New Jersey. If you want to write screenplays, this is going to sound totally crazy, but I would say avoid any school of writing. The best writers are ones who have an original voice.

Q: What's next for you?

A: *I Believe in America* is a trilogy. The film we're shooting now is the middle movie. I hope to have all three movies out in the next three to four years. I want to spend the rest of my life telling these beautiful Puerto Rican stories – more love stories about truth, family and honor. Every person should know about their particular country. Whether you're from Honduras or Venezuela or Colombia or Puerto Rico, know about that country; know about your history and culture. Understand it, love it, cherish it and pass that on.

By Jennifer Rodriguez