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Film about Puerto Rican nationalists aims to fan sparks of independence

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NEW YORK (AP) _ Filmmaker Michael Narvaez began writing the story of a family caught up in a struggle for Puerto Rican independence more than 10 years ago, as he was grieving the loss of a brother who belonged to a clandestine nationalist group.

As he now finishes editing "I Believe in America," Narvaez hopes the film that began as a form of therapy can revive a peaceful movement for the independence of Puerto Rico, an island that he says has lived through purgatory during its century as a U.S. territory.

The cause does not have broad support _ despite sensitivity about the U.S. relationship _ and backing for the film did not come easily. Produced independently for a budget of less than \$700,000 (euro587,250), the film is still without a distributor. Narvaez, 50, expects to complete the project by mid-April and release it onto the summer festival circuit.

The film based on Narvaez's off-Broadway play, "A Doctor's Call," follows three generations of a Puerto Rican family who, unknown to one another, are all involved in the pro-independence Macheteros, or "Cane Cutters." Their secrecy stems from the "real and present danger" of retaliation by the FBI, the director says.

Recent headlines from the island have underscored for Narvaez the urgency of his message.

In September, FBI agents shot and killed Filiberto Ojeda Rios, a 72-year-old leader of the Macheteros who was wanted for a 1983 robbery in Connecticut, after he allegedly opened fire when they raided his hideout. In early February, agents searched five homes to thwart what the FBI said was a "domestic terrorist attack" planned by pro-independence militants.

Narvaez says such actions heighten post-Sept. 11 sensitivities, intimidating supporters of a cause once linked to terrorism. The Macheteros gained notoriety through a series of bombings and attacks in the 1970s and '80s.

"What you find when you do the research is that as far as families, Puerto Rican families, you're afraid to say you're for independence," he said. "You were afraid before 9/11. After 9/11, now you're really spooked."

The film's title, "I Believe in America," plays on the teachings of Pedro Albizu Campos, who led opposition to the U.S. occupation during the 1940s. Considered a terrorist by some, Narvaez argues Albizu Campos was a hero who ultimately wanted a peaceful relationship with the U.S.

"He was basically a father of a country that was never allowed to exist and all he wanted was a free independent republic of Puerto Rico, friends and allies with the United States of America," Narvaez said. "So he believed in America."

Watching developments on the island, Narvaez sees parallels to his own family's experience. His late grandfather belonged to the Macheteros, as did an older brother, a U.S. Navy member who died in 1992 under what Narvaez described as murky circumstances.

"I wrote this play because I was personally impacted and I'm paying homage to all those unknown soldiers that have either lost their life or sacrificed their life for the independence movement unbeknownst to anyone, never mind history," said Narvaez, who declined to discuss his brother's death further.

An FBI spokesman, Bill Carter, said that aside from the Ojeda Rios shooting, "I am unaware of any other incidents where there were fatalities."

"The independence movement has every right to exist, to espouse whatever cause they have within Puerto Rico," Carter said. "It's only those individuals that are part of groups who utilize violence where the FBI would have any involvement."

Narvaez says true Macheteros have sworn off violence, remaining underground to avoid persecution.

The film's protagonist, a former insurgent, uses nonviolent methods to avenge his son's death. Another character who is prone to violence represents the bad seeds within the Macheteros whom Narvaez sees as renegades.

"Don't throw all the Macheteros into the garbage can because of that bad little group," he said.

The director, a Bronx native who recently moved to Puerto Rico, wanted to film some scenes on the island, but said he did not have support from the Puerto Rican Film Commission. The film, which stars Jamie Harris, Melissa Leo and Coati Mundi, was shot in New York City and New Jersey.

"I couldn't get financing in my beloved Puerto Rico. Why? I am hitting the nerve, I am getting right to the bone marrow of the issue and what I'm writing about is so painful," he said.

Polls show the vast majority of islanders favor either becoming the 51st U.S. state or the status quo with Puerto Rico as a U.S. commonwealth. But anti-FBI protests that have flared across the island affirm Narvaez in his belief that many have some hope for independence.

"This movie will, God willing, contribute" to the cause, Narvaez said. "It's not a call to arms. It's intelligence, it's reason. It's 'don't be scared.'"