

# The girls of the war

A CONVERSATION WITH PAULA ANDREA ARIAS GÓMEZ\*

**What is the idea behind the series? Can you tell us more about the origins of the war situation that you mention and the role of the children in it?**

**Gómez:** To understand the Colombian conflict we must situate ourselves in an unfinished national stage scenario, where there has been an effort to homogenise diverse ethnicities, politics, and religions in a mind-set that dominated the 19th and 20th centuries. Tensions increased in the 20th century with extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, and mass displacements, the indelible marks of a society that has been polarised throughout its national history. Children play a strategic role for armed groups, since on the battlefield they can have such numerous uses; for one thing they can be warriors that are capable of anything; living on the front lines from a very young age, they are trained and schooled in obedience. Also, due to their young age, they do not raise the suspicions of authorities or other armed groups, and thus they are used for intelligence or as human couriers.

**How did you perform the interviews with the girls of the war?**

**Gómez:** Actually we weren't aiming to shoot direct interviews, and the process took place in a different way. We feel it's not right, really, to extract information without giving anything in return, so we developed a workshop for audio-visual and physical expression for the children. When inviting these minors to the workshops, we told them we were making a feature film for the cinema and that they could tell us their stories whenever they felt comfortable doing so.

After 6 months of working with them, some began to tell us about certain moments of their lives, and so we collected their stories; a few girls told us their full narratives, and one of them did so during a walk through the botanical garden of the university, which brought back memories of her childhood in the jungle, while another young girl told her story over lunch, but did not want to face the camera; and then yet another told us hers over the course of a day at our house,

while rehearsing for a dance; only one of the girls wanted to go through a traditional interview; the others were spontaneous.

***“The big challenge was to obtain authentic testimonies”***

**What were the biggest challenges?**

**Gómez:** The big challenge was to obtain authentic and sincere testimonies. The children, in their reinsertion process, are subjected to numerous interrogations, from the army to the police (they demobilise them quickly) passing through institutions that try to establish exactly what has happened. This causes them to develop prefabricated stories – to quickly say what the interviewer wants to hear – to avoid the pain of retelling their truly tragic stories. For this, it was very important to earn their trust and to establish a warm and respectful relationship which allows them to feel at ease while retelling their life stories.

The other challenge has been to accompany them through this process without being paternalistic, teaching them while giving them the space to decide for themselves where their path will lead next; and you must understand that this means not every path ends in success, and in many cases talented girls boycotted themselves, if you will, and struggled to leave everything forgotten.

#### *Where did you go from there?*

**Gómez:** After getting the stories, the process was still very long: Initially we thought of making an animated feature film, and we thought a short teaser could be used to promote the broader project and seek funding for its production. Carlos Smith saw this short feature (he is with Hierro Animación) and he suggested we do a TV mini-series to reach a larger audience. In fact, with this idea of a change to a different format, we got state financing to make 5 chapters of 7 minutes, and then, with these episodes ready, we obtained support to complete a first series of 12 chapters.

We had to decide what story to tell in the first chapter, which was difficult because all the stories were important, but at that time, all we could manage was 7 minutes. The testimony we selected was that of *Berenice*, which brought together situations that most (I dare say all) had lived through, with added details and other evidence to show the complexity of the stories we had gathered; it took us almost 6 months, recounting the stories again and again, until we had to make a decision, because we had just enough time for the call and needed to spend time rotoscoping.

After choosing that story we asked ourselves, how can we tell such a painful story using poetry? The barbarity our subject had lived through was so great that we had to search for metaphors that would allow the audience to understand what had happened without generating a reaction of disgust or re-

vulsion. This was the longest and most complex process in the production.

#### *How did you film the scenes with actresses?*

**Gómez:** We did the staging with child actresses to protect the identity of the protagonists and to achieve the look of “children playing” which we wanted for the film. We decided to work with various girls during the production for two reasons: the first is that *Berenice*, the subject of the first chapter, is not one girl, but all girls, so we changed the face, age, and size all the time. The second reason to shoot with different girls was that it went more smoothly when shooting and was more efficient from our point of view.

Since the child actresses were only 4 or 5 years old, we had them working with Yoleiza Toro, the scene director, for more than 2 years, as they were her ballet pupils this whole time, which facilitated the process and allowed the girls to work comfortably.

#### *And what were the reactions of viewers to the series?*

**Gómez:** People who have seen the films go through a form of catharsis, saying they connected with the stories and are able to understand what happened to these Colombian peasant children, and many show a need to try and help change the situation. We have shared the film with a young audience, and the kids are able to comprehend what happened without negative side-effects. We interviewed a group of adolescents before showing the film, and we asked them what would happen on your side, at school, if a kid was reinserted? Some of the responses were: “I’d be scared”, “I’d get away, they might have a hidden weapon ... that could kill me”, or “My family was displaced by an armed group ... they would be my enemy”. After viewing the film, the kid whose family was displaced answered: “Now that I know what the girl went through, I might not be her friend but I would tolerate her.”

In other cases, the kids say they would not be afraid of them, they have gone through so much, and they could be their friends.

#### *Have the girls themselves seen the films, and how are they seeing their own story in a series?*

**Gómez:** Many of the girls have declined invitations to see the series, offering different excuses; and those who saw it did not say much, although some made jokes and were happy to see their pictures in it. But looking at their faces, you could see changes with each scene that passed. In fact at the end of each chapter the girls’ faces were quiet, partly because of the hopeful ending we chose, so that they themselves are seen reflected in their dreams and could now see the possibility of a different life.

#### *What did you learn from this experience – and what is the special quality of this project and the series?*

**Gómez:** The most important lesson from the project is that these children are neither just victims nor just victimisers; they are also just kids trying to find a place in the world and to be happy. They have recovered the ability to dream, and for this reason they felt they could tell their stories.

The main virtue of the project is that it is the result of a respectful and honest process in the workshops, where the kids acquire life skills and have the chance to share their stories with the society they hope to rejoin, thereby facilitating that very process. ■

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