

Emilio

By [TODD MCCARTHY](#)

A Landmark Films production. Produced by Julie Bostridge. Directed, written by Kim Jorgensen.

With: Walter Perez, Danny Martinez, Alejandro Patino, Wendell Wright, Ryan McTavish, Meztli Adamina, Donald Roman Lopez, Kai Schmoll, Toussaint Waterman. (Spanish, English dialogue)



Despite a couple far-fetched dramatic developments, “Emilio” delivers an engrossing and sometimes vibrant portrait of a naive Mexican kid’s sink-or-swim encounter with the urban beast that is contempo Los

Angeles. Verite-style first narrative feature by vet exhibition exec and “Out of Africa” exec producer Kim Jorgensen convincingly presents the city from the rural newcomer’s p.o.v. and happily sidesteps immigrant-story cliches and platitudes. Too small-scaled for significant theatrical action in traditional arthouse venues, the pic might instead be worth a gamble by resourceful marketers with the wherewithal to connect directly to the Latino market in well-chosen situations.

Performed in a steady mix of Spanish and English, “Emilio” centers on the sort of story Hollywood has often inflated into cloying triumph-of-the-little-man melodramas. While some key coincidences in Jorgensen’s script momentarily seem too much to swallow, they are invariably undercut by tough realities that keep the film’s feet on real ground.

The in-your-face grunginess of the settings and punishingly impersonal environment easily trump the occasional narrative missteps, leaving behind a document that evokes memories of the Ben Maddow-Sidney Meyers-Joseph Strick 1959 semidocu feature “The Savage Eye” -- a particularly brutal (and far more contrived) look at L.A. through a newcomer’s eyes -- just as it does more contemporary indie efforts.

After 14-year-old Maria disappears from her rural Mexican town, her somewhat older brother Emilio (Walter Perez) decides it’s up to him to go looking for her. His hysterical mother figures Maria is already dead, while the police suspect she may have been kidnapped by an unsavory character named Manuel Ortega who supposedly owns a restaurant in L.A.

With nothing more to go on than this, Emilio embarks for California, or at least tries to. So ill prepared that he’s turned away at Guadalajara Airport for not having a passport, he instead slips through the Tijuana border crossing unnoticed aboard a Greyhound bus.

The earthy colors of the early Mexican scenes contrast vividly with the lifeless hard surfaces and harshly lit nocturnal streets of downtown L.A., where Emilio spends his first night on a bench. Armed only with a photo of Ortega, the reserved but determined kid wanders around, has his stuff stolen and

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falls in with another young Mexican (Danny Martinez), a brash type who thinks he has the secret of success figured out.

Crammed with his new buddy and several others into a small apartment, Emilio keeps his eyes open, scanning restaurants, hopelessly trying to get through to live people on government phone lines, getting ripped off by a day-labor employer and encountering interesting street folk, including a subway scam artist and a self-styled poet who reads de Sade and Celine.

Emilio’s sometimes incredible naivete reaches its peak when he’s picked up by Porsche-driving party boy Zack (Ryan McTavish), who’s obviously just looking for a trick. At the West Hollywood gay club Rage, the wide-eyed newcomer, asked what he thinks of the place, earnestly replies, “There’s not a lot of girls.” Talk about a conversation-stopper.

The gay interlude seems a bit of a detour, but it spurs events that soon lead to unexpected paydirt in a dramatic climax, the drastic improbability of which is quickly leavened by bitter ironies and an emotionally complex acceptance of life as it must be faced. Final scene is exceptionally well handled.

Emilio is inscrutable, even infuriating at times in his dogged and, it would seem, futile search for his little sister, and there are scenes in which one wishes Perez would provide more of a window into the character. But by the end, it’s possible to see the boy receding and the young man emerging, a tribute to both actor and director. Supporting parts are performed in uniformly lively fashion.

Clearly shot on a tight budget, the pic boasts production values that well serve their purposes. A bit too free and loose at the outset, Denis Maloney’s handheld high-def lensing settles in to incisively depict a very familiar city in a fresh way. Diverse locations are well chosen, including those upscale ones that provide Emilio with occasional peeks at the elusive “other side.”

Least convincing scene, where Emilio insults a hood’s g.f. in a fancy restaurant, could be dropped to the pic’s benefit. Soundtrack largely eschews Mexican and contempo cliches in favor of pensive, compelling counterpoint from composer Tree Adams as well as Schubert’s String Quartet No. 14.

Camera (color, HD), Denis Maloney; editors, Chris Cooley, Ryan McTear, Yvan Gauthier; music, Tree Adams; art directors, Jaime Beebe, Monica Kubiak, Hector Munoz (Baja), Alejandra Velazco (Mexico City); set decorator, Roni Oberst; costume designers, Melissa Tackett, Erica Fossey; sound, Cory Barnt, Jay Golden, Al Brocca; supervising sound editor, Walter New; line producer, Devan Gaudry; associate producers, Mark Loge, Juan Feldman; assistant director, Alexander Soto; additional camera, Trevor Nystrom, Gonzalo Cordova, Dario Palombo; casting, Steven Helgoth. Reviewed at the Lot, Los Angeles, Aug. 8, 2008. (In Downtown Film Festival, Los Angeles.) Running time: 100 MIN.