

New vistas for Hollywood

Despite their numbers, Latinos have yet to conquer the big screen

By Josh Chetwynd
USA TODAY

The likes of Ricky Martin and Marc Anthony have Americans dancing to the Latin beat, but their music has yet to get many of the movie industry's top players on their feet.

While the Latino population has skyrocketed 17% in the USA during the past four years, Hollywood's biggest studios have shown limited interest in telling stories about and directly for that audience. *Price of Glory*, a \$10 million-budgeted movie about a Mexican-American boxing family opening today, could change all that.

The drama, starring Jimmy Smits, is the first wide feature film release to focus on the U.S. Latino community since 1997's *Selena*. And if it does well, more movies with Latino themes could get the green light.

Glory director Carlos Avila says he knows of three projects on hold because people are waiting to see how his movie does.

That studios haven't carved out a niche for Latino movies is a bit surprising. After all, studios have aggressively courted black moviegoers. In recent years, for example, 20th Century Fox released *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Paramount distributed *The Wood*, and Universal put out *The Best Man*.

There is reason to believe Latinos could also turn films targeted at them into moneymakers. Hispanics are the fastest growing moviegoing ethnic population, according to the Motion Picture Association of America. They attend 11 films per year and make up 15% of overall movie attendance. An average Latino family spends \$1,137 on entertainment a year, compared with \$872 by black families and \$1,940 by white households, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Most films in the past 15 years centering on Latino characters have been profitable, including *Selena* (\$20 million budget and \$35 million gross) and *La Bamba* (\$7 million cost and \$54 million gross).

"Only a fool would not pay attention to the fact that this market is the only one that is growing" in terms of moviegoing, says Miramax L.A. president Mark Gill.

Some insiders say major studios such as Disney, Paramount and Fox shy away from Latino films because they tend to be modestly budgeted, the kinds of films smaller companies release.

"Mainstream studios are not going to do pioneering work," says Gregory Nava, who directed *Selena* and



DreamWorks

Myth bliss: Tulio and Chel seek adventure in *The Road to El Dorado*.

Continued from 1E

My Family (Mi Familia). "The perception is that the \$10 million budget level is what the (Latino) market can handle," and that's not their area of expertise.

That hasn't scared away smaller and midsize companies who are aggressively wooing Latino moviegoers with projects about their community. Among the upcoming projects:

► Nava signed a deal last year with *Glory* distributor New Line Cinema to do a series of movies focusing on the lives of Latinos, including a comedy called *Taco Truck: The Movie*, a thriller set on the Mexico-U.S. border called *Bordertown* and a drama inspired by true-life guitar makers the Delgado brothers.

► A movie based on the life of artist Frida Kahlo has long been in development at Miramax, with Salma Hayek attached to star. It has a tentative late summer start date, Gill says.

Also from Miramax is an untitled behind-the-scenes look at some popular Latin musicians, including Tito Puente, Paquito D'Rivera, and Chucho and Bebo Valdes.

► *Girlfight*, opening Aug. 11, tells the story of a young Latina who takes up boxing to help her reconcile with her past. The movie, which won the Grand Jury prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival, is from Screen Gems, Sony's specialty film label.

► *Luminarias*, a comedy starring Evelina Fernandez and Scott Bakula, opens May 5 in about 40 theaters. It's the third release from New Latin Pictures, which has four other films in its pipeline.

► Nava's 1983 film *El Norte* will be rereleased in September by Artisan Entertainment. Instead of placing the movie, which has English and Spanish dialogue, just in art-house theaters (the conventional strategy), the company plans a wider release in Latino communities.

Artisan, best known for distributing *The Blair Witch Project*, also has a yet-to-be announced \$20 million production that will have "a strong Latino aspect," says company co-president Amir Mallouk.

Because these distributors lack large marketing budgets, a key for all these movies will be mobilizing the Latino community.

A new grass-roots organization called The Premiere Weekend Club encourages Latinos to attend films that portray their culture positively.

"We are named The Premiere Weekend Club because we know how critical the opening weekend is for film," says Vincent Miller, the organization's vice president. "If a film isn't perceived to be successful in the opening weekend, it can disappear, and some Latino projects have not been supported or marketed well in their opening weekend."

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Life

Weekend

The 37,000-member organization is hoping, for instance, to get young Latinos interested in seeing *Glory*. To lure them, the club has set up screenings for high school students and is sending out about a million e-mails to college students across the country.

The group could become an important marketing player; New Latin Pictures and Screen Gems have talked to the club about getting involved with marketing their upcoming pictures, according to Miller.

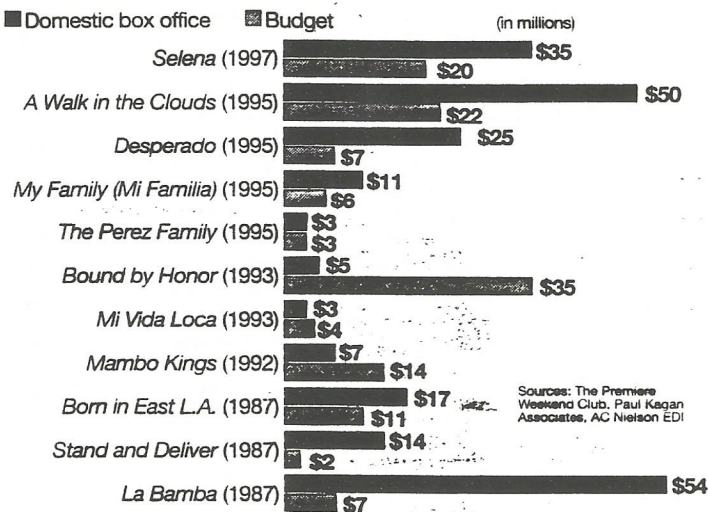
But enticing Hispanics to Latino-themed films isn't easy.

In a recent study, fewer than 40% of Latinos surveyed said they go to movies because of a Latino community focus. And, "when asked about

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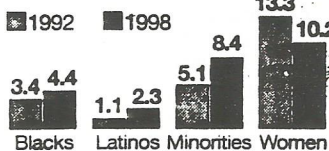
Latino-themed films stand and deliver

A sampling of English-language films focusing on Latinos during the past 15 years indicates that — with a couple of notable exceptions — more movies about that ethnic group succeed than fail.



Directing

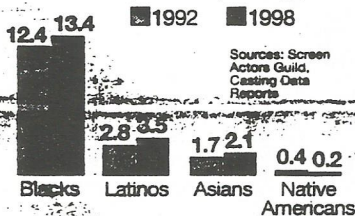
The Directors Guild breaks down the number of hours worked on a set. Percentage of overall days worked by minorities and women on film and TV productions:



Source: Directors Guild of America

Acting

Breakdown of roles in TV and theatrical releases for minorities: (numbers in percentage)



Sources: Screen Actors Guild, Casting Data Reports

By Quin Tian, USA TODAY

the most important reason for selecting a film, few respondents said they based their decisions on explicitly ethnic considerations," says the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute report.

Reaching the "Latino community" also can be difficult because Latinos of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican or Central and South American descent have cultural differences, and their moviegoing reflects that.

"When New Line released (the Mexican-American themed) *Mi Familia*, we did very well in the Southwest and West, but we had no degree of interest in the film's story in (Cuban-American heavy) Florida," says Mitch Goldman, a former New Line executive who is dis-

tributing the Mexican movie *The Other Conquest*. "Latinos are not as homogeneous as the black audience can be or the white community definitely is."

So his company plans to distribute the Spanish-language *Conquest*, which comes out April 19, in some 50 theaters only in California, where there is a heavy concentration of Mexican-Americans.

An added hurdle for filmmakers: Latino-themed movies have not consistently made money on video, which makes finding financing difficult, says Michael Harpster, president of worldwide marketing for distributor Providence Entertainment.

"On the one hand you look at a film

like *Selena*, which did (very well in video), but *Mi Familia* (didn't do as well)," he says. "We are lacking for data because there haven't been a lot of Latino films, and, without data, finance people are leery."

Harpster says that Providence, best known for releasing the surprisingly profitable religious-themed *The Omega Code*, is still looking for the right Latino film to distribute.

Yet Santiago Pozo, founder of the Arenas Group, a company that specializes in Latino film marketing, says that the idea that his community is splintered is the talk of "amateurs." He says that Hispanics of varied backgrounds have enough in common for studios to create a cohesive Latino marketing campaign.

In fact, many of Hollywood's biggest players have taken special steps to get the support of Latinos for general audience films.

Universal, for example, ran a special promotion for *The Mummy* last year in Hispanic media. Noting that a large portion of Latinos are Catholic, Universal touted the movie with give-away trips to Jerusalem and the Middle East. The film ended up doing well among Latinos and was a surprise hit, grossing \$155.3 million.

And DreamWorks has run more than 30 preview screenings of its *The Road to El Dorado* (Review, 6E) for Latino community leaders. The studio also makes sure that press kits for all its movies are translated into Spanish for Hispanic media.

"Studios are going after the Hispanic moviegoing audience because Hollywood is ever in search of the block audience," says Rich Ingrassia, film analyst at Paul Kagan Associates. "Data shows that minority populations go to movies in blocks, and with Hispanics growing faster (as an audience) than any other demographic, they are very important."

But Latino artists are still looking forward to the day when Hollywood's biggest powers treat Latino-themed films as movies for everyone, as opposed to merely marketing general audience films especially for them.

Glory steps in that direction, with New Line marketing it not only to Latinos but also to sports enthusiasts.

"I don't think of this film as just part of the Latino community," Smits says. "Getting support from the Latino community is very important, but I firmly believe this story is an American story with a Latin heart."

And if *Glory* shows box office punch like Smits hopes, bigger studios may be ready to jump into the ring for Latino films.