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SPOTLIGHT FILM

Queer Queens Isn't Just Sex; Gay Life On Film At Cinemarosa

by Laura McCandlish

Growing up in Jamaica, Queens, Viva Ruiz constantly watched telenovelas in her Ecuadorian-American home. As a child, she saw her first "trannie" at the Key Food on Hillside Avenue. And as a young adult, she went on her first girl date at a lesbian bar on Queens Boulevard.

Now Ruiz, a filmmaker and go-go dancer in her 30s, has written, directed and starred in her own autobiographical, queer telenovela, "Rosa Negra."

"What I'm making is a reflection of one foot in the Catholic Latina sensibilities, with traditional gender roles," Ruiz said. Like her heroine, Rosa, she transcends the labels of gay and straight. "But then you also have the ultra new, first-generation New Yorker who is radical, off-the-wall, cutting edge on so many artistic fronts."

On May 15th, Cinemarosa—Queens' only queer film series—will screen her film at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows Park, where Ruiz used to watch soccer games with her father.

Since February, Cinemarosa has presented monthly Sunday screenings with gay themes at the QMA. To showcase the films and directors of queer independent cinema, Hector Canonge, a Latino film and new media artist, launched the series in Jackson Heights in May 2004.

The Cinemarosa moved to the Queens Pride House in Woodside before finally finding its home at the QMA early this year. Canonge independently runs the program with his own money, although the Queens Museum donates space and equipment.

"There's a great queer population in Queens," Canonge said. "It's visible and out there, but in terms of a cultural hub for queer artists, there's nothing like that. One of my goals is to create that hub, a center where gay people can come watch films and interact

with artists and directors, in a safe space."

Canonge first discovered the Queens Pride House while working on a performance documentary in 2003. There he met with its director of programming and pitched the idea of the monthly queer film series.

Before Cinemarosa moved to QMA, Canonge's wireless multimedia exhibit, Ciudad Transmóvil, debuted there last winter in the Queens International 2004 biennial. He also presented an online version of the show in Hamburg, Germany. Now, Canonge teaches new media, in addition to cultural studies and comparative literature at the CUNY campuses of City College and Brooklyn College.

At Cinemarosa's April screening, approximately 35 people saw the the documentary films, "One Man Show: A Musical Documentary" and "Laughing Matters," at the museum. "One Man Show," directed by Ira Rosensweig, portrayed the transformation of a once-struggling, gay Puerto Rican performance artist who won the New York lottery in 1999. In "Laughing Matters," directed by Andrea Meyerson, four famous lesbian comedians humorously explored their role in the traditionally sexist, homophobic comedy circuit.

The Senior Action in a Gay Environment Queens, a program at the Forest Hills Community House, brought a group of 15 gay and lesbian senior citizens out for the April screening. "It's important that we build bridges so the gay and lesbian communities feel welcome at our cultural institutions, not just in sort of a ghettoized place where only gay people go to be safe," said Karen Taylor, the director of SAGE Queens.

SAGE member, Rick Gordon, 59, a Flushing resident who is active in the gay Jewish community, told Canonge the Cinemarosa films represented "real cinema verite." They demonstrate, "we can and should be who we want to be, without holding back on ourselves."

The men's group at SAGE Queens also plans to attend the May screenings of "Rosa Negra" and "On



"On the Down Low" screens at Cinemarosa.

the Down Low," directed by Tadeo Garcia. "Rosa Negra" is a queer soap opera in Spanish, showcasing Ruiz's misadventures and heartbreak in the search for love in New York City.

"A gay transsexual is a totally normal character in my story," said Ruiz of her film. "But we're doing the opposite of camp, which would have been easier. The melodrama is high, but it's still believable. This is real, but like living in a big comic book."

The Cinemarosa series began at the QMA in February, with a film about the life of a drag queen coming alive amid the juxtaposition of homophobia and southern hospitality in rural North Carolina. The film, "Dixie Queen," was directed by Astoria resident Miles Christian Daniels.

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Cinemarosa

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Although Daniels works in the gay-centric neighborhood of Chelsea, he prefers the authentic nature of the gay community in Queens. "The magic of Cinemarosa is a lineup that really depicts a thriving, colorful gay community that exists just across the bridge from Manhattan."

The Cinemarosa series also offers a gay alternative to the visible bar scene of Jackson Heights. "Cinemarosa provides a safe environment for queer youth," added Gonzalo Casals, who is in charge of production and development

for the series."

For the Queens Pride festival in June, Canonge and the QMA are also presenting Queer in Queens, an arts collaboration that will showcase music, poetry, dance, short films and new media. In the future, Canonge hopes Cinemarosa will gain non-profit status, to accept donations to run workshops and perhaps even purchase its own space.

"Cinemarosa is designed to show the diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered experience in a positive light," Canonge said. "I hope it helps people to understand we're not just in clubs and bars. Not all gay and lesbian things deal with sex, sex, sex." □