

## People &amp; Places

## Film

## 'Woodpeckers' unlikely love story

## Diaz's 'Motherland' sweet and upbeat

By Dennis Harvey

In highly developed nations, the birth process is usually one dominated by medical science — perhaps overly so — with the mother in virtual quarantine conditions. But there's something to be said for a more communal approach, like the one colorfully portrayed in "Motherland." US documentarian Ramona S. Diaz's latest is a lively and engaging glimpse at a Manila maternity ward where overcrowding and limited technological resources have forced some solutions that may not be ideal, but are admirable nonetheless. The docu won a Sundance Special Jury Award for "commanding vision," a rather odd phrase for a film whose primary impression is one of charm and humor amid challenging circumstances.



Diaz

The Jose Fabella Hospital boasts what is purportedly the world's single busiest maternity unit, with as many as 100 births a day. Its patients are a microcosm of the Philippines in general: Mostly poor, Catholic, and already burdened with several children. (No doubt religion is a major factor in many women's reluctance to use birth control.) Even in the delivery rooms themselves, mothers are often crammed two or more apiece onto beds. Before and after giving birth, they stay in a ward that at first glance seems wildly noisy, cluttered, even chaotic by First World standards.

Yet there's a compensating sense of community, one that likely echoes these women's home environments, in which neighbors rely on each other to get along under economic duress. (Many live without electricity or direct water.) Some of the mothers are alarmingly young, while others have already had numerous offspring before reaching their mid-20s. Hospital staff members (which include one flamboyantly larger-than-life transgender doctor) try to encourage good habits for the babies' sakes, though sometimes their advice falls on deaf ears, as the women are accustomed to deprivation.

## Memorable

The film follows several principal subjects during their overlapping hospital stays, including one young woman who briefly can't find her baby on the ward (its ID tag is found on the floor, which is no laughing matter); the husband of another woman seldom visits because he can't raise bus fare on a weekly income of about \$10. The most memorable figure is Lerma, a salty-tongued older woman who finally consents to a tubal ligation after seven children. But the sudden sense of responsibility that suggests is undone when she insists on leaving the hospital despite doctors' advice, her new baby still suffering from pneumonia.

Indeed, there seem to be frequent health complications for the newborns. Because Fabella Hospital lacks funding for incubators, women are encouraged to "incubate" babies themselves via Kangaroo Mother Care, in which they (and sometimes their husbands) use tube tops to press infants against their own bodies for heat — ideally 24/7 until the baby's weight, temperature, and other vitals have stabilized.

If all this sounds rather bleak, that does a disservice to "Motherland," which overall is perhaps surprisingly sweet and upbeat — closer to Thomas Balme's 2010 "Babies" than a grim report on Third World privation. Rather, the emphasis here is on institutional success at coping with adversity; protagonists' positive attitudes are not always well-informed, but they're nonetheless preferable to miserable defeatism. The women certainly leave better-informed than they came in, and you can't accuse the medical professionals (who often deliver slightly haranguing messages over the hospital loudspeaker) for a lack of valiant effort. There's also a tangible parental camaraderie that may not extend past the discharging of patients, but is so pervasive that when one new father hands his baby off to a total stranger while searching for a taxi home, you accept his casual trust rather than suspiciously expecting the worst, as one might elsewhere.

There's an ease of intimacy to Diaz's observations that suggests her crew was embedded for some time in the ward. The camerawork is crisp and bright, the editorial assembly likewise effortlessly engaging, capturing a sense of lives revealed in the everyday workings of the hospital.

Prison movies — even prison movies shot in real prisons with actual prisoners — are no novelty anymore, and haven't been for a long time. But **Jose Maria Cabral's** "Carpinteros" does come up with an interesting hook based on an actual custom at the Dominican Republic facility where it was shot: It chronicles a fictional heterosexual romance between convicts at adjacent male and female institutions, one lived almost entirely long-distance through elaborate sign-language communication. (The title, which translates as "Woodpeckers," comes from male prisoners' practice of perching on windowsills and "pecking" messages with their hands to women several hundred feet away.)

It's a conceit interesting enough to give the writer-director a leg up in drawing audiences into an inherently unlikely love story. Cabral's debut film, "Check Mate," was his country's 2012 Oscar submission for foreign-language film. But while "Carpinteros" is strong enough in atmosphere and assembly, it's limited by characters who aren't developed with great complexity, and a climax that pours on a little too much credulity-stretching hyperbole. The result is a drama that, while OK, falls short of being truly memorable.

We learn very little about lanky, bearded new fish Julian (**Jean Jean**) save that he's been incarcerated for robbery (though he hasn't actually been sentenced yet), and has some money to make his time at Najayo Prison a little better. That's fortunate, because sans cash, prisoners are left to sleep on a corridor floor, among other hardships. Julian soon forges an uneasy alliance, exchanging favors with musclebound, hot-tempered fixer Manauary (**Ramon Emilio Candelario**).

When Manauary is moved to another unit as punishment for fighting, he can no longer communicate visually with his girlfriend in the female prison next door, red-haired live-wire Yanelly (**Judith Rodriguez**). But Julian can, so Manauary arm-twists him into learning "pecker-talking" — a system not unlike sign languages for the deaf, albeit much more improvised — so that Julian can relay Manauary's messages to her.

Yanelly doesn't really want to hear from Manauary, however, because when she was last stuck in solitary — she, too, is inclined to fly off the handle and pick fights — Manauary "cheated" on her by flirting long-distance with another female inmate. (RTRS)



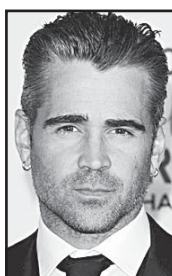
Iranian actress Shaghayeh Farahani poses for a photo as she arrives for a screening during the 35th edition of the Fajr Film Festival at Milad Tower in Tehran on Jan 31, 2017. (AFP)



Indian Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan (right), carries his son Abram after paying respects at the Golden Temple in Amritsar on Jan 31, 2017. Khan visited the city to attend a promotional event for the Bollywood film 'Raees'. (AFP)



Depp



Farrell

## Variety

**LOS ANGELES:** Johnny Depp's lavish spending — including \$3 million to blast author **Hunter S. Thompson's** ashes from a cannon — led him to the brink of financial ruin, according to an explosive lawsuit filed Tuesday.

Over the best part of two decades, the 53-year-old actor has been spending \$2 million a month, according to The Management Group (TMG), which is suing the star in Los Angeles for an unpaid loan.

The "Pirates of the Caribbean" actor is alleged to have forked out \$75 million on 14 homes, including a 45-acre (18-hectare) French chateau, a chain of Bahaman islands, several Hollywood homes, penthouse lofts in downtown LA and a horse farm in Kentucky.

Since 2000, the Oscar-nominated actor has spent \$18 million on a yacht, bought 45 luxury cars and shelled out almost \$700,000 a month on private planes and a staff of 40 people, according to the lawsuit.

Beverly Hills-based TMG says Depp has accrued more than 200 artworks by Warhol, Klimt and other masters, 70 collectible guitars and a Hollywood memorabilia collection so extensive it is stored in 12 locations. (AFP)

**LOS ANGELES:** Colin Farrell is in negotiations to co-star with **Denzel Washington** in the legal drama "Inner City" from "Nightcrawler" director and scribe **Dan Gilroy**.

Sony recently acquired the package that Gilroy wrote and will helm. Cross Creek will co-finance the film under its Sony deal, along with **Charles King's** Macro and **Lone Star Capital**. **Jennifer Fox** is producing with **Escape Artists' Todd Black** and **Cross Creek's Brian Oliver**.

Washington plays a hard-nosed liberal lawyer named Roman J. Israel, who's been fighting the good fight while others take the credit. When his partner has a heart attack, Israel suddenly takes on the role of the firm's frontman. He soon uncovers details about the crusading law firm's history that run afoul of his values of helping the poor and dispossessed, and finds himself in an existential crisis that leads to extreme action. (RTRS)

## Film

## Docu details HK teen's fight with superpower

## Joshua taking on might of China

**LOS ANGELES, Feb 1, (AFP):** A scrawny millennial with gaunt features and a studious frown, Joshua Wong looks like he'd struggle to take on a large steak, let alone the might of Communist China.

Yet the bespectacled activist is the unlikely hero to a generation in Hong Kong, where he led a movement inspiring hundreds of thousands to join his cause for elections free from Beijing's interference.

At the age of just 17, he spearheaded mass blockades that brought parts of the Asian financial center to a standstill in 2014, sparked by restrictions from Beijing on how Hong Kong's next leader will be chosen.

Hailed as one of the world's most influential figures by Time, Fortune and Foreign Policy magazines, he is now the focus of an award-winning Netflix documentary due for release later this year.

"We hope people around the world recognize that social movements can make things happen. They can make things change," Wong, now 20, told AFP by telephone from Hong Kong.

"People may be depressed or downhearted with the political situation in their own country, but it's still optimistic to see hope and seek change by street activism."

"Joshua: Teenager vs Superpower" tells the story of how Wong became one of China's most notorious dissidents after the mainland Communist Party backtracked on its promise of autonomy to Hong Kong.

Critics say the 79-minute documentary could not have picked a better moment, with political engagement piqued in the West as protesters take to the streets to decry the policies of new US leader Donald Trump.

"You have a lone teenager taking on China and it's one of the things that attracted me to the story. The odds don't get much bigger. Talk about David and Goliath," Los Angeles-based director Joe Piscatella said in an interview.

At the age of just 14, Wong campaigned successfully for Hong Kong

to drop a pro-China "National Education" program, rallying a crowd of 120,000 to his cause.

## Handover

He was one of the 78 people arrested in September 2014 during another giant pro-democracy protest after China reneged on a pledge made during the handover to give Hong Kongers the right to choose their next leader.

Umbrellas were used to shield activists from waves of police pepper spray, giving the nascent "Umbrella Movement" its banal yet iconic symbol of resistance.

Galvanized by Wong's passion, the Umbrella Movement made headlines around the world, but was ultimately unable to shake up Hong Kong politics after weeks of protest.

Wong continues to campaign under the banner of a new political party, Demosisto, for a referendum to determine who will rule Hong Kong after the "one party, two systems" principle codified in Chinese agreements with Britain expires in 30 years.

"I'm still hopeful for the young generation here. In Hong Kong, more young people may be legislators in the future. I would say that this is just a starting point," Wong said.

Born to middle class Christian parents Grace and Roger Wong in 1996, Wong began his life of activism at age 13 with a protest against plans for a high-speed rail link between Hong Kong and the mainland.

It was here that Piscatella's producer, documentary filmmaker Matthew Torne, first encountered Wong and, seeing something extraordinary in the youngster, started his camera rolling.

"The first time I met Joshua, I was in awe... He's kind of a conundrum in that, when he walks into a room, he's not somebody you notice right away," Piscatella said.

"You give him a microphone and a bullhorn and there's a change in him where suddenly he just becomes this other person where he's passionate and

has this ability to connect with a large group of people."

"Joshua: Teenager vs Superpower" was picked up by Netflix and awarded the audience prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival, where Wong attended screenings, describing the support for the film as "unbelievable."

Since the end of the Umbrella Movement, Wong has been denied entry into Malaysia and Thailand, attacked in the street and abused by pro-China protesters in Taiwan. But he takes it all in his stride.

"That's my life," he shrugs, describing the drawbacks of his high profile, with a quiet insouciance, as "inconvenient" and vowing to fight on.

"We didn't win in the last battle," he said, "but I'm still optimistic for winning in the final war."

## Also:

**LOS ANGELES:** Two of the most influential unions in US filmmaking spoke out Tuesday to denounce President **Donald Trump's** ban on immigrants from seven Muslim-majority nations.

The criticism follows a White House decree on Friday suspending the US refugee program and banning migrants from Syria, while calling a 90-day halt on entries from **Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen**.

"The DGA strongly believes that artists — regardless of their national origin, faith, or gender — should be able to come to the **United States** to showcase their work," the Directors Guild of America said in a statement.

"Policies that prevent this, without due consideration, should be of concern to all who care about art and cinema. The open exchange of art is core to who we are, it's what motion pictures and television are increasingly about — drawing humanity together, transcending borders and cultures."

SAG-AFTRA, which represents some 160,000 performers, echoed the criticism, avowing "equality of opportunity regardless of race, gender, creed, disability, sexual orientation or country of birth."

and **Rob Cowan** are executive producing. "Aquaman" is based on the DC Comics character who's king of Atlantis, born half-human as **Arthur Curry** and half-Atlantean. Aquaman's mother is Atlanna, who has escaped the underwater kingdom and had a son with a lighthouse keeper.

Kidman was nominated for an Academy Award in the best supporting actress category for her work in "Lion." She's also starring in and executive producing HBO's series "Big Little Lies." (RTRS)

**LOS ANGELES:** Sound engineer **Richard Portman**, who received 11 Academy Award nominations and won for his work on **Michael Cimino's** "The Deer Hunter," died on Saturday at his home in Tallahassee, Fla. He was 82.

"He was an icon of his craft of motion picture sound re-recording, recognized with the highest honors of his field," his daughter **Jennifer Portman** wrote on her Facebook page. "He was eccentric, irreverent, and real." Portman worked on nearly 200 movies and mixed the sound for **George Lucas's** "Star Wars."

Portman received two Oscar sound nominations in 1973 for **Francis Ford Coppola's** "The Godfather" and **Michael Ritchie's** "The Candidate." He was also double-nominated in 1974 for **Peter Bogdanovich's** "Paper Moon" and **Mike Nichols's** "The Day of the Dolphin." (RTRS)



This file photo taken on Jan 8, 2017 shows Hong Kong politician Joshua Wong attending a political forum hosted by Taiwan's grassroots New Power Party (NPP) in Taipei. (AFP)